

Depiction of Women in Literature: A Reading of Indian Literary Texts under Gender Theory

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ABSTRACT: Within this complex spectrum of ‘culture’ Indian Literature has represented accurate sufferings of numerous characters. Identity and our skirmish in finding its appropriate nature, has often pressurized the psychic nature of humans, particularly women. To be precise the struggling of marginalized identities is more toilsome in comparison to the ‘centered’ identities. In this phallogentric Indian society, the ‘white-cis-phallus’ is the centre and the remaining becomes the ‘other’. Marginalization can be considered as a chain of events taking place in a society to create certain restrictions for few and power for the rest. Gender, class and caste are further divided into layers, creating a stratified structure where power dynamics moulds and produces identities, not for recognition but for marginalization, oppression. Within this marginalized ‘remaining’ the identity of women and their effort to break the imposed roles of Woman/Wife/Mother is somewhere trapped between the supposed links between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ which then is to be inherently related and ‘culturally’ bound. Therefore my paper would focus on politicized children’s literature- Brave Rajputs by Anant Pai, and presentation of Tilo in Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni’s The Mistress of Spices, gender-power dynamics in Mahasweta Devi’s Breast Stories, Jhumpa Lahiri’s Lowland, and Khaleid Hosseini’s A Thousand Splendid Suns.

KEYWORD: women, literature, identity politics, gender.

Introduction

The History of Feminism has drawn three prominent waves which further included many fragmented definitions and political standpoint(s), like when initially the black women protested saying that their journey can be partially or no where similar to the journey or the struggles of ‘white-women’; hence, the world was presented with Black-Feminism. Feminism assisted in diagnosing the pathologies of culture which if described as a complex social apparatus dices the norms and regulations and is a stratified concept with hues that light up the disillusionment and dissent. Multiculturalism indeed has appreciated the difference in cultures but has also made avenues accessible to analyze it from queer perspectives. Over the first, second and third wave of Feminism, few crucial comprehensions of ‘deconstruction and post-structuralism’ enhanced the understanding of ‘identity and politics’ in simultaneity. As the plurality of Feminism was now utilized based on required privileges, and the advantage of a particular group of people resulted in overlooking the disadvantageous position of the remaining. It therefore becomes immensely necessary to adopt the lens of gender theory while studying and visualizing both literary and socio-political framework of any culture and important to apply the same in everyday life and not just limit to educational sphere, because then only we can sensitize people that gender is performance rather than essentialisation, and how within the

mainstream literature application of Gender studies assists in understanding the ‘re-presentation’ of the marginalized identities, where presentation just remains an illusion. Politically, Gender is molded as a device to regulate and control bodies/identities, to conveniently maintain the “nude-makeup” like social structure of our society. Both Diasporic and Dalit Literature has enhanced and elevated the presentation of heterogenous cultures dwelling in Indian geographic dimension. In these stated literary domains, the subject ‘women’ has been juxtaposed with fragmented cultural subjugation threaded intricately with norms and regulations. Within this complex spectrum of ‘culture’ Diasporic Literature has represented accurate sufferings of numerous characters. Identity and our skirmish in finding its appropriate nature, has often pressurized the psychic nature of humans, particularly women. Considering Dalit Literature, which again depicts the subjugation of voices within a completely separate yet interlinked area of power operation on bodies? The term ‘Dalit’ literary refers to the “untouchables”; within India Caste is immensely a branch of identity politics and device of suppression; it is the power to ‘reclaim’ the culture; while simultaneously a boxed category of the four Varna Systems in our Culture, where the lowest and “filthiest professions” and designations are bestowed to them.

Women and Literary Spheres

Sara Raasch in her work *Snow Like Ashes* (2014) said- “That’s why Literature is so fascinating. It’s always up for interpretation, and could be a hundred different things to hundred different people. It’s never the same thing twice” (Raasch, 2014, 10). Literary theory and its interestingly fluid usage in literary texts even till date has made the field of Literature intersectional, reflective, interpretative and hence a spectrum, a sequence of thoughts, a journey through which the reader are able to make the ‘illusive’ world associated with reality. Gender and sexuality are the two more complex terms, culturally constructed and ambiguously related, in the spectrum of feminism which considers “sex” an operational term to theorize its perspectives on cultural deconstruction. In accordance to Stevie Jackson and Jackie Jones article- *Contemporary Feminist Theory*, which can be related here, states that, “The concepts of gender and sexuality as a highly ambiguous term, as a point of reference” (Jackson, 1998, 131). Helene Cixous notes in “Laugh of Medusa” that men and women, as identities and bodies, enter the symbolic order during a different way and therefore the subject position hospitable either sex is different. Cixous’s understanding that the centre of the symbolic order is ‘phallus’ and every-body surrounding it stands within the periphery making women (without intersectionality), the victim of this phallogocentric society. To thin, ‘gender and sexuality’ as an inherently, unquestionable connection, then it only results in constructive understanding that henceforth becomes an oppressive tool of marginalization, that keeps getting filtered as per geo-locations; the dichotomy of ‘penis/vagina’ over years has linked itself to male/female understanding of bodies. The complexities created on and around ‘a body’ get an immediate deconstruction when Judith Butler said in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), ‘body is just a word’, and that it is strategically used under artificial rules for the convenience of ‘power’ to work, which in turn has become a “norm” to attach one’s sexuality with their Gender and establish that as “naturally built”. The natural and the inherent link that has been associated with the body of a women from the archaic to present times, where the ‘pens’ have narrated the identities of women keeping in association with theses “natural links” has brought about a crisis, as to ‘what a woman is’!

Children Literature- Brave Rajputs

The reason of selecting children’s book lies in the fact that they are most politicized ones! Amidst the fun, moral lessons, structured, “normal” projection of human society, deconstructive studies revealed with various hermeneutical devices that these children’s book are indeed at times product of our patriarchal culture! For instance, *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling or even the most thrilling, amazing favorites of many- *Harry Potter* by J.K Rowling can be viewed as books which are heteronormative, where ‘phallus’ is the ‘centre’ and every other character revolves around it! Similarly the book I selected to present the family relations is *Brave*

Rajputs by Anant Pai- a children's textbook but it reveals many unsaid hues. This book is completely perfect to present how relations are 'marketed', because it sexists in return of something which is the same in the case of Gauri's. From the given five stories in this book, I would focus and analyze the story of Rani Durgavati. First I would like to start with the cover picture which is very heteronormative, the 'compulsory' link of a female and male. To move onto the second fact of the book is that only one 'her-story'- Rani Durgavati, is presented among the four 'histories'. Now focusing on the relations of these Rajput royalties after clearly depicting the tribal family and kinship ties, we see majority of Rajputs married their daughters in return of alliance as was Durgavati. The relationships were merely engrossed with and desired for the need of power and security. Marriage can be seen as a necessary evil in any culture for which humans named as women are treated in almost every possible derogatory ways. In this book the story of Rani Durgavati as a 'brave Rajputani' who fought for her honour and sacrificed her life maybe is just for the kids to know. A deep reading only reflects how relationships are 'marketed'! She only survived to fulfill her role as a daughter, wife and a mother and when it came to herself, her individuality which should have been separated while analyzing the rest roles she performed as a 'Rani', she stabbed herself to protect her honour as a "true" Rajputani. As the 'self' always remained in conflict with the 'other' created by the society, we sacrifice the 'self' to maintain the 'other', particularly women!!! A culture- '*sabhyata*', as we regard is something to be respected and followed regardless of any obstruction, but from the spectrum of theories what gets highlighted is -'flaws', 'fractures'! Somewhere in this field of multiculturalism that veils India, each and every subculture remains ruthlessly in competition with each other, as all of them are similar in their disinheritance and dispossession.

Power and Women in The Mistress of Spices

Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* is an exuberant novel where Divakaruni builds an enchanting story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and community, Tilo's arrogance of her own precocious ability of knowledge regarding the magical properties of spices and her understanding that she has to live for others and not herself, that she must not pursue love, perhaps, which eventually takes place! Despite the fact, that Devakaruni focused on immigrant experience and tried to negotiate between the needs of each under the earth moving stress of desire, what's highlighted in her narration is Tilo's realization of abandoning her own desires to maintain the magical powers she possesses on 'spices' through which she aids others who visits her shop in Oakland. Devakaruni did not presented Tilo as a strong human here just by giving her the magical powers, rather she made her a cramped character like our social definition of what a woman should be! Even with powers Tilo is powerless when it comes to desire and love. The woman should select to live for others, which Tilo did from her childhood and became the source of income for her parents. As she has to live for others, Tilo's character is given power, which will only remain if she abandons her desire, which eventually she does until she breaks through all the chains of magic and makes love. But the interesting fact is why a woman has to choose; her character could both have power and desire. Gita Rajan in her article - "The Mistress of Spices: Deploying Mystical Realism" considers the "transitional apace a subject occupies when shifting from a "solid" to "liquid modernity" and therefore she refuses to flee to an "earthly paradise" (Rajan, 2002, 336) with Raven at the end. She insists, instead, on returning to earthquake-ravaged Oakland" (Rajan, 2002, 226). The attempt of writers trying to portray women as 'superhuman' reflects how women are considered from a sub-human perspective. That is why Tilo wants to re-build her apprentice again in the destructed area to reflect her great humanity, principles and ethics. With all superhuman powers somewhere the basic requirements of a woman to be happy is obliterated from the social definition of what a woman should, hence Divakaruni's simple plot that she tried to shoot in an extraordinary manner fumbles at patriarchal threshold.

Gender and Diasporic Literature in Lahiri's Lowland

From the perspective of multiculturalism and Diaspora, Gauri's journey can be visualized. Liberty is when we have "A Room of Ours Own", when we treat humans beyond categorized identities and stop expecting them to respond in accordance to the expected or demanded social roles! The journey of one's identity, particularly a Woman's is somewhere static and is not enjoyed by the surroundings if it grows and undoubtedly Gauri grew in 'migrating' from Kolkata to America beyond the roles of a wife, a mother, and only desired to become a human whose life and identity can be a beautiful journey of 'delicate chaos'! The eventual and gradual experiences of her in America, did not make her feel disoriented from her inner self, rather was an avenue to leave the imposed roles on her body and become someone she wants to be. Her desire to not become what her newly married husband/ prior brother-in-law wanted her to become again, gets mirrored when she compares her 'pregnant' body with other "women's" body in her surrounding, while taking her classes in the University campus- "...She put on her winter coat over her sari...She saw students going in and out...women n in dark tights and short wool coats..." (Lahiri, 157). Shubhash, married Gauri to give the child of his dead brother (Udayan) a name-"I'll make it mine, I've promised you that" (Lahiri, 164), to give a proper shelter and "freed" atmosphere to Gauri in comparison to Kolkata. But amidst, all such providing mentality Shubhash expected Gauri to become and play those roles of which she was somewhat weary of; therefore, when Gauri did not effectuate those roles, Shubhash was disappointed even when she tried to adopt a new physical appearance-

A few minutes later he heard her key in the lock...hair hung bluntly along her jaw bone dramatically altering her face...The clothes covered her skin but they accentuated the contours of her breasts, the firm swell of her stomach...exposed...He watched as she went into the bedroom, not apologizing for the spectacular mess she has made, just putting away the new clothes she'd bought, then throwing the old things into garbage bags (Lahiri, 169).

Shubhash was aware that he has "inherited his brother's wife" (Lahiri, 169), but somewhere hoped that after the birth of the child (Udayan's) the unconscious difference between them will become less. Eventually, after the child's birth both of them made love, slept together, caressed the child together, but along with it stood an uninterrupted silence; Shubhash's questioning that whether he did the right thing in marrying Gauri; Gauri's innate feelings of responsibility towards her child Bela (the father of who, is no longer alive) made her experience a sense of separateness from that little body; moreover, her complex feelings of perceiving Shubhash as his dead husband's brother and then her present husband also made her semblance that- "an act intended to express love could have nothing to do with it. That her heart and her body were different things" (Lahiri, 194). Here, a comparison can be drawn between Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works *The Vine of Desire* (2002), a sequel to *Sister of My Heart* (1999). In the sequel, Sudha's making love with Sunil (her sister's husband) also made Sudha felt the same detachments of heart and body while being under Sunil (Who desired her from the moment he saw her). We can see how the woman characters in all these literary texts are always presented as the 'object' of desire, the object to the gaze, and not the subjects who can control their anatomies. Literature has possibly been that arena where hypothetical realities are spaciouly celebrated. The character of woman is never separated from the identity of motherhood; it keeps surrounding woman as the ultimate destination. In comparing these two texts, we can very clearly see, both Gauri and Sudha were with children; the fond men has is towards the anatomies who are associated with the 'eternal concept of motherhood'; whereas, Anju (anjali), a woman who has been presented as straightforwardly path-breaking was not admired neither loved, for Sudha always had the admirers t her back. In presenting the life stories of women through literary narratives, which also try to depicts the cultures, histories, politics of a particular time somewhere veils the identity of woman and motherhood as inseparable, and men admiring the same as adequately "ideal" and appreciable.

Shubhash surmised that having a child with him may make Gauri feel a little less separate from these individuals who surrounded her- Bela and Shubhash. But Gauri did not wanted to become a mother/wife again. The sense of ‘uncanny’ where among the close ones; an ‘unhomely’ feeling evolves and separates the individual from the rest. Gauri faced the same excitability and again a comparison can be drawn between Nora of *A Doll’s House* (1879) by Henrik Ibsen, where the ‘mistrust of her husband whom she bore three children made her think of what she is, her identity was questioned, her place and treatment as a “doll” by her husband was reflected and hence she left the marriage to explore [her] self. Quite similar is Gauri’s experience as she was shocked by Udayan’s betrayal, realized how she was just used by him for his own activities, how she does not deserves the pain and loneliness, he forced her into, and how Bela and her marriage with Shubhash only reminds her the layers that stripped her carefree self under burden of darkness where she is unknown and is submerging in the hues of ‘undeserving’ from which she needs to save herself. This instantaneous realization and thinking of which over years with them made her decide to leave for better. This silent and distanced skirmish of Gauri with time resulted in her leaving both Bela and Shubhash to survive and exist as her own self, a self which no longer desires to repeat the same husband-wife game of Kolkata in America- “I have not made this decision in haste...Tell her whatever you think will be least painful for her to hear...My address is uncertain...Good luck, Shubhash, and good-bye. In exchange for all you have done for me, I leave Bela to you” (Lahiri, 257). Gauri’s abandoning of her constructed identity assisted her to explore a newer self where she met different shades; different experiences grew her into a person who was now open to the surprises of life.

Devis’ portrayal of Reverse Discourse through a Dalit and Brahmin Woman

Cultural construction of identities and designations are perilous to combat with, as culture acts as ‘destiny in excuse’! In Mahasweta Devi’s narration of the life-story of Jashodha in *Breast Stories*, few crucial concepts that Breasts could possibly depict as the ‘giver’- motherhood as profession, body and breast as the universal shelter- The Milking Cow, “auspicious faithful woman”, and breast as objects signifying reverse power discourse. The presentation of Jashodha here can be linked or related to the Hindu mythological character- Yashodhara, who was profoundly known as Yashodha Maa, who was a famous Hindu figure of chastity and purity recognized as the Mother of Krishna.. This identity of women as mothers is emphasized to such an extent that without the function of motherhood and ability to become a mother, one is considered as a woman. This political analogy of presenting and intermingling these two identities- women and mothers, is somewhere to regulate the very fact that ‘sex’ as an act of pleasure is ignoble; while if that act is procreative and produces products (of capitalism, as Michel Foucault regarded in *History of Sexuality*, 1976), then the act is “pure” and in this process the chastity and femininity and the “ultimate” identity of women is sustained, a reason for which heterosexuality became a benchmark! In the presentation of Jashodha as the Milk Mother of the Halder house, she recurs and succumbs to the very historical reality of how the identity of woman is culturally constructed- “Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood. Each man the Holy Child and each woman the Divine Mother” (Devi, 42). The creation of woman as mother was implemented and conditioned in Jashodha when she was ready to become a professional mother agreeing to feed and allow the children of Halder House suckle her nipples as the rule of the house was any man of the house can “bring a second wife only of the first wife completes producing twenty children” (Devi, 49), but all the wives stopped after twelve or thirteen, and the mistress of the house was worried that since-

Daughter-in-laws will be mothers. When they are mothers, they will suckle their children. Since they will be mothers as long as it’s possible-progressive suckling will ruin their shape. Then if the sons look outside, or harass the maidservants, she won’t have a voice to object. Going out because they can’t get it at home- this is just (Devi, 45).

Hence, they hired the ‘suckling-mothers’ for the infants of Halder House, and eventually became the Mother of the World! Jashodha accepted as she wanted to serve her husband who lost his legs and had no other work and her own children (which by her age of fifty-five was twenty in number), so considering her breasts as the “most precious objects” (Devi, 45), Jashodha was ready to become a professional mother. This entire practice reflects how by elevating woman to the position of ‘divinity’ they were sexually exploited as baby producing machines. Simone De Beauvoir’s stated the binary constructed- mind/body binary, where men is the mind and women the body, is getting clearly reflected for the girls/wives/mothers in the situation of Bengal as presented by Devi. The wives are nothing but objects of attraction where their beauty and body is the only thing in demand for “use”; hence their shapes are important to keep the phalluses (husbands) attached to them, and so Jashodha was the only option. Eventually in this profession of being a mother Jashodha was formulated by the only duty her body is able to perform, and at the end she suffered from breast cancer in her process of maintaining the ultimate identity of a woman- Mother. The story concludes with a reverberant notion that Jashodha’s death was the death of God, because she was treated god that saved bodies and lives, and all because of her breast; however, the identity of ‘mother’ gets a question mark here because her husband who abandoned her when she ‘lost her glory’, said that the idea of a mother is “hair in a huge topknot, blindingly white clothes, a strong personality. The person lying in the hospital is someone else, not Mother” (Devi, 67). This statement from a man clearly shows how the creation of identity is done based on the needs and conveniences of a phallus in this phallogocentric society. This statement proves Jashoda’s entire life and struggles as a lie, for the person who is lying on the bed has been the Mother to numerous lips and minds, and she dies being a mother only, but the comment of Kangalicharan (her husband) is a crucial word-play and ambiguously syntactical construction of the creation and regulation of the identity – women. The modulation of the identity of a woman with supposed natural links and inheritance (which are fixed by social practices) thus marginalizes a body in stratified layers, where the personal only objectified to patriarchal consumption.

Mariam and Gender Struggles in A Thousand Splendid Suns

Khaled Hosseini’s work clearly presents the deplorable and cramped culture of the Muslim community specifically Afghans! The suffering of women is clearly portrayed in his work. Though in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini amalgamated the crucial war time and family suffering and made a breathtaking story set against the volatile events of Afghanistan's last thirty years - from the Soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban to post-Taliban rebuilding - that puts the violence, fear, hope, and faith of this country in intimate, human terms yet what gets highlighted is the objectification of women, “unconsensual” sex, marital rape and physical abuse. It is a tale of two generations of characters brought jarringly together by the tragic sweep of war, where personal lives - the struggle to survive, raise a family, find happiness - are inextricable from the history playing out around them, perhaps which only reflects the incomplete fact of the novel. Although Hosseini tried to create the unflagging hope, strength and toughness of human spirit, the tragic character of Mariam gets more focused. In hope to reunite with her father, she loses her mother at an early age, her father being a coward never accepts her and then she realizes what her mother said that she has no one in the world except her mother and that her ‘illicit’ father tell her lies. When she realizes this fact, it’s too late, for she is then married off to an aged man- Rasheed, who turns out to be a despicable brute, tormenting and torturing her as she was not able to give birth to a boy. Even the fact that she was not ready to have ‘sex’ did not matter to him. Then she saw her husband marrying another woman- Laila, who loses everything due to the attack of Taliban and the bomb blast, except her unborn child and to save whom she agrees to marry Rasheed, who then torments Laila immensely because she was losing her “beauty” as Rasheed said that he married a “pari” and Laila now has turned to “old-corpse”. Mariam kills Rasheed, one night to stop him from killing Laila. The ‘sexual objectification’ of women, oppression, betrayal and tremendous psychological tormentation shows how important it is to view any situation from ‘queer’ perspectives and not just with

91	<p>ISSN 2690-9626 (online), Published by “Global Research Network LLC” under Volume: 4 Issue: 1 in Jan-2023 https://globalresearchnetwork.us/index.php/ajshr</p>
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‘cultural’ ideations. Within the complex fabricated network of multiculturalism, it is important to make culture liberal so that humans get the deserved respect. Queer studies has somewhat helped us to borrow a lens through which the objectification of women only as sexual objects can be magnificently presented to the hypocrite world.

Conclusion

Majorly, in literary spheres we can demonstrate plethora of presentations and re-presentations, productions and reproductions of identities. It is very difficult for people to believe that Literature is true, just as it is simple to make the heads believe history is the truth; however, literary depictions of lives are not fictitious; they are very much the realistic re-reading of identities with the educational and political framework of narrative and power discourse. Thus the texts selected here ranges from children literature to multi-cultural phenomena; from subaltern discourse to Afghan’s war struggles and reality. Therefore, gender theory and its application along with post-structuralist feminism has ensured to showcase the layered oppressive domains of Women in each cultural context and how they are thus identified as the ‘objective subjects’ voicing for themselves.

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