



JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)

An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THREE RESISTANT DISCOURSES THROUGH THE INTERSECTIONAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das, Jamaica Kincaid and Rita Dove's poems, fascinate us not only for the seemingly effortless ways in which they breakthrough the rhetorics of the stereotypes in these poems but also for countless ways in which they illumine unfair edicts of the predominantly patriarchal structures embedded in the colonial as well as everyday discourses. The selected three short poems by these women poets from across the world deftly negotiate the realms of inequality, subjugation, powerlessness, gender politics and injustices resisting the designs of the dominant discourse upon them. These resistant discourses wrestle out a critical space for their multiple subjectivities. Intersectionality gives a distinct perspective to their lived experiences and brings into its purview the various factors that operate upon an individual either in isolation or in combination and purposefully or inadvertently devalues them and denies them the right to live with dignity. Despite the lessons taught by history, these exclusions, disparities, injustices and a lack of sensitivity towards fellow human beings continue to plague the post-colonial world. There are many ways in which the oral, literary and electronic representations of the marginalized and the excluded get consumed and persist in circulating biased images that tend to create a long-lasting impression on the recipient's minds. These representations have been revisited and portrayed in a counter canonical fashion by the three poets taken up for our present study.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Resistant, Discourses, Power

INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to recognise some of the deep inequities that surface on a close reading of the counter discourses of the excluded, the oppressed and the disadvantaged as seen in the select poems of Kamala Das, Jamaica Kincaid and Rita Dove.

The poets locate the crises within the frames of intersectionality. In this way, it seeks to offer better insights into those structures that are instrumental in facilitating and promoting dominion over the decentered and the underprivileged on account of their gender, habitus, race, class, culture, religion, powerlessness, language and identities.

Kamala Das is a modern Indian poet in English as well as in the vernacular tongue Malayalam who carved out a special place for herself in the confessional genre. Das's poem 'Punishment in Kindergarten' narrates an incident from her younger days while at the kindergarten. The ironic refrain 'No need to remember' serves to emphasise the painful experience and the difficulty she had in liberating herself from the impact of the pain even though she claims in the poem

"Today the world is a little more my own.

No need to remember the pain"

The day was honey-coloured and the children at the kindergarten were taken out for a picnic. The 'Blue-frosted' teacher notes that the young child was standing alone while her schoolmates were merrymaking, sipping sugarcane. The teacher, instead of gently leading the child to the rest of the schoolmates, rebukes her harshly for being apart from the rest, for standing lonely. The violent and bitter diatribe against her coupled with her schoolmates reaction to the teacher's scolding make the experience of exclusion doubly unendurable for the child.

"Children are funny things, they laugh

In mirth at other's tears, I buried

My face in the sun-warmed hedge"

And smelt the flowers and the pain.

The traumatic childhood experience which made her identify herself as different from the rest of her schoolmates makes a deep impact on her psyche.

"Why don't you join the others, what

A peculiar child you are!"

That the recurrent memories of the exclusion, punishment and disciplining haunts the poet even as an adult quite contrary to her claims is evident in the lines

"My mind has found

An adult peace. No need to remember

That picnic day when I lay hidden

By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun

Standing lonely in the sky.”

When the child was rebuked by the teacher and mocked at by her schoolmates, she still found solace in the “sun-warmed hedges”. Only the brute violence unleashed from the blue-frocked woman’s mouth

“throwing

Words at me like pots and pans, to drain

That honey-coloured day of peace”

makes her describe the sun in terms of the “scalding” experience

the steel-white sun

Standing lonely in the sky.

Disciplining is only one of the ways in which power is exercised in the any discourse. The child completely withdraws herself from the rest not comprehending the rationale for being chastised thus. Her act of not abiding by the authority ignited the teacher’s anxiety and rage. The authoritative figure interpellates her as “peculiar”. The child internalizes the labelling and the picnic day changes how she perceives herself, her cognition of the ‘self’.

Unable to connect and engage in meaningful communication with those around her, she is silenced into further social exclusion. Did it have serious consequences on the poet’s health and emotional well-being as well as academic achievements? The poet tells us

“The words are muffled now, the laughing

Faces only a blur. The years have
Sped along, stopping briefly
At beloved halts and moving
Sadly on. My mind has found
An adult peace.”

Ever so subtly, the poet subverts the patriarchal stereotyping, choosing to break out of its expectations, and affirms her claim on her individuality. The pain that haunted her was made palpable through the intersectionality of gender, power and identity. Yet, her ‘self-construal’ as an adult turns the tables on all the oppressive structures and she finds peace with her individuality which is impervious to any effort towards stereotyping by an external agency.

Formal education is one of the most powerful arenas for cultivating the young minds and moulding their mindset. Ngugi Wa Thiong’O once said while critiquing colonialization that the Kenyan system of education was intervened with such policies by the colonisers that the native students in Kenya graduated with a hatred of their own native cultures, value systems, and their vernacular languages. This was ensured through the discipline and punish regime that the colonial administration took pains to enforce. For instance, the slightest inclination on the part of the native students to use mother tongue in the premises would be met with an agonizing sequence of disciplining and punishment. The ‘offenders’ would be belittled, insulted, humiliated and paraded around in the hot sun with a metal plate labelling them in dehumanizing ways. Kamala Das also confronts the patriarchal structures in a similar arena

successfully interrogating the embedded structures of oppression in a seemingly effortless style.

‘Education affects a domination by consent ,’ said Antonio Gramsci.

Among the informal ways in which education takes place, within the domestic realms of the Caribbean, the maternal rhetoric has received much priority in Jamaica Kincaid’s writings.

Jamaica Kincaid is the nom de plume of the celebrated Professor of the African and the African-American Studies in Residence at Harvard University. She considers the conflicts featuring strong maternal figures and colonial and neo-colonial figures of prime significance in carving out a niche for the African-American as well as those building “the brave new world”, to use a phrase from Derek Walcott.

In the prose-poem “Girl” Jamaica Kincaid, explores the possibilities of using palimpsestic technique to look into the deep implications of the practices prevalent in the indigenous cultures and traditions. “Girl” is also about a new idiom, a new genre, a coming of age of ‘finding oneself’ and not waiting for anyone or any institution to endorse that creative power and confidence. At the same time it is all about sculpting out the contours of gender-in-the-making in the erstwhile colonized Caribbean society within the post-colonial context. It is perforce borne out of the need to critique the gendering of the female in the post-independent political scenario that boasts of freedom and equality. The poem is an oral artefact reminiscent of the gendered education of the female in the colonized West-Indian cultures.

What characterizes the persuasive power of the rhetoric and is probably the most successful technique is the sufficient assertion and insistence with which the advice is given in an authentic voice.

on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow

The listener has no choice but to follow the advice and learn the practicalities on arriving there. The speaker and the listener are the crucial players in the continuation of the folk wisdom. It contains lessons on identity, culture, civilization, and most important of all, a treatise on everyday knowledge essential for the grooming of, a ‘Girl’ in the Caribbean through a powerful monologue with an element of drama. We can almost hear the Girl’s protest when she is mildly warned against things she should not be doing.

but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school;

The poem is at once a literary site where the authentic Black, female experiences of the colonized Caribbean are presented as well as questioned.

It is a mirroring of their own sense of lack of agency, what they are supposed to be, their threatened fragile selves, their anger, their self-definitions. It is precisely on these ‘lacks’ that Jamaica Kincaid draws upon to counter the dominant discourses with its distorted representations.

be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don’t squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don’t pick people’s flowers—you might catch something; don’t throw stones at blackbirds
Very skillfully, by ‘simultaneously conforming to and subverting the patriarchal literary standards’, she shows us how the gendered discourses are created in the simple unassuming everyday act of handing down advice. The mother-figure is exploring the possibilities of passing down the wisdom of the collective consciousness in a top-down hierarchical mode,

mindful of the possible chasms in the younger girl's comprehension, yet, leaving no room for any interception or negotiation on behalf of the listener.

this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming;

These underlying contradictions...the anger, the impatience, the verbalized conflicts contained in the representations, and the obliging silences on the listener's part characterizes the palimpsestic resistant discourse which lays bare the 'unbending' nature of the power that sustains the discourse. It is, most likely, derived from the vestiges of the colonial discursive practices that the indigenous folk have been subjected to since the beginning of colonization. On the surface, the poet gives us the apparent impression of subscribing to the patriarchal norms reserved for women, while a close reading immediately reveals the palimpsestic nature of her style. Jamaica Kincaid thus effectively achieves an authority over her work by simultaneously conforming to and subverting the dominant male literary standards.

Rita Dove is an Afro-American poet and essayist, the first Afro-American to have been appointed as Poet Laureate consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress and the third Afro-American to receive Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

'Rosa Parks' is a poetic tribute by Rita Dove to one of the 20 most iconic figures of the twentieth century, 'first lady of civil rights', 'an international icon of resistance to racial segregation' and the 'trailblazer Black activist' of the American Civil Rights Movement. Non-Conformity and the 'obverse' of the 'eternal feminine' form the key concepts of the resistance staged by 'Rosa Parks'.

Through a simple non-violent act of defiance Rosa Parks sparked off the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott movement that eventually led to the abolition of racial segregation in public transports, public facilities and retail stores. Rosa Parks, until then, was an ordinary seamstress in a department store. One evening after a long day's work, with a bag of grocery in one hand, Rosa Parks got into the bus and sat in the seat reserved for the Blacks. The unspoken rule was that, should all the seats be filled, the Blacks should get up and volunteer their seat to the white person who had just boarded the bus and found no vacant seats in the place reserved either for the whites or the Blacks. When the bus driver, James F Blakes, a white, took stock of the situation and demanded of her to vacate her seat, Rosa Parks just continued sitting there rejecting his orders. Her fearlessness challenged the existing dominant racial, patriarchal structures. Much later, in an interview she would recall the incident, "*When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt*

a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night and I refused to give up my seat". Though Rosa Parks was not the first one to originate the idea of protesting segregation with a bus sit-in, her arrest on the grounds of civil disobedience for violating Alabama segregation laws triggered the Black community under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy and Edgar Nixon to boycott buses in Montgomery and fight for the rights of the black to lead a dignified life.

Rita Dove refrains herself from narrating the entire story. She is a master craftswoman, the duplicitous artist who chooses to 'invert' her subject to reveal the raw truth, choosing not to avoid responsibility for what had happened on that day in the year 1955. The intersectionality of various categories in the small act of defiance by Rosa Parks, which proved a giant milestone in the history of anti-apartheid movement, brings to light the gross injustices suffered by the Blacks around the world in the name of the colour discrimination.

In the poem, Dove writes,

'Doing nothing was the doing'

to speak of the 'act' for which she was arrested and punished and penalized. The simplicity, the majesty of Rosa Park's ordinariness, the amazing calm she exhibited unfazed by the conflicts, undeterred by the skewed politics is all admirably brought to life by Dove's 'deft wordplay and an excellent dramatic sense and an ability to choose the right fragment of experience and expose it to the correct amount of light'(Arnold Rampersad)

How she sat there,

the time right inside a place

so wrong it was ready.

Rita Dove's palimpsestic style allows us to carefully scrutinize and glean from the archives the otherwise inaccessible and distorted histories. It is indeed interesting to note that Dove wrote the poem on Rosa Parks in 1992, nearly three and a half decades after the event when the inequities were still the reality in the civilian world of the Americans. The word 'dream' in the lines

its dream of a bench

rightly resonates with Martin Luther King's famous speech 'I have a dream' The word 'bench', of course, is a reference to the bench of judges in whose hands the politics of Law has vested inordinate powers, such as can only be dreamed of by the Blacks living in an unfair unjust and discriminating society.

That trim name with

its dream of a bench

to rest on. Her sensible coat.

'Coat' rhymes with the word 'court' where all the eyes have been turned to for a verdict in favour of the Blacks to whom justice has been denied for so long, senselessly. Rosa Parks was guilty of nothing. Her innocence, her non-violence made sense to the court. The spectacle of

disciplining, dragging her through the institutions of power, for simply sitting in, not giving up, for standing up against the dehumanizing practices indeed made the humanity rally around her until she procured for them the dream verdict. To quote Dove,
Doing nothing was the doing:

the clean flame of her gaze

carved by a camera flash

The eye of the camera, the ‘panopticon’, carves the clean flame of her gaze and is symbolic of the hardships endured by her since and before her arrest for her mind is opaque to their insistent probings and therefore exasperating. Dove’s visual tactile imagery is at its best in these descriptions. Rosa Parks maintained her dignity throughout the ordeal. She was also unjustly fined (Dove mentions ‘purse’) for ‘doing nothing’ as she registered her protest against the unjust practices and unequal treatment meted out to fellow Americans in the name of colour, gender and power.

How she stood up

when they bent down to retrieve

her purse. That courtesy.

To the Blacks as well as to all those who continue to fight against such injustices, it has been more important to “free Rosa Parks not only from the blind authorities but from the discourses that helped to put her there in the first place.” For all those who believed in the timid, docile, selfless nature of the female, she was the proverbial ‘iconoclast’ who refused to be selfless, who acted on her own initiative and she was the one who had a story to tell ...in her own voice drawing upon the injustices suffered, the indignities heaped upon them, the self-determination to counter the dominant discourse and Rita Dove captured all of these in her poem Rosa Parks.

The genre of resistance accomplishes the difficult task of extinguishing the fear of getting trapped in false images and inauthentic roles, and intersectionality allows them to probe into the processes of denying, disempowering and dehumanizing the lives of the ‘silenced’, the ‘altered’, the ‘labelled’ and the ‘inarticulate’. All the three poets revise, reconstruct and deconstruct the representations of those bracketed in the above categories, particularly, women. A cross-sectional reading of these resistant discourses at once brings to the surface the subliminal politics of representation. This article makes an effort to present the perspectives of those lived experiences which have seldom been taken into account within the parameters of intersectionality.

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