

Patriarchy and Women: Similarity Across Border and Time

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Abstract

When the issue of gender equality enters literature the feminists get activated to search how a woman has been treated in a particular text written by male or female writers. They identify gender biases of literature and thus help both women and men defeat these biases by reading against them. Feminism in literature provides historical, social and literary context seen and understood from gender's perspective. Feminism is a political perception based on two premises, firstly, gender difference is due to inequality between men and women by which women suffer social injustice and secondly, it is produced by cultural construction and not biological necessity. This paper is based on the review of two texts of two different eras and places with a feministic approach. They are George Eliot's "Middlemarch" of 19th century England and Arundhati Roy's "God of Small Things" of 20th century India. Sex-difference (the notion of woman as reproducer) sanctions gender-difference (the notion that a woman must set up a family as her chief priority) which in turn requires punishment. The society is harsh to Dorthea (Middlemarch) and Ammu (God of small Things) because they refused to conform. Unlike men non-conformity to social norms is a punishable act for women. This paper tries to bring out the fact that when we compare women's condition from the past to the present, we certainly find noticeable improvement, but overall somewhere the picture remains the same irrespective of time and place.

Introduction

At present the vast majority of the world's poor are women. Two thirds of the world's illiterates are female. Of the millions of school age children not going to school are girls. And today HIV AIDS is rapidly becoming a woman's disease. Women bear almost all responsibility for meeting basic needs of the family, yet are denied the resources, information and freedom of action they

need to fulfill this responsibility. Studies show that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Their family are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short communities become more resilient. Moreover, women are not fundamentally different from men in their psychological needs and outlooks. However, socially constructed roles often thwart the potential of girls and women. Discrimination denies them health care and education. It robs girls and women of the power to make decisions to earn leaving and to be free from violence abuse and exploitation. Often it deprives them of any legal protection. The gender discrimination led to the origination of the term 'gender equality' to meet the goal of the equality of the genders. Gender equality embodies a vast field including political, social and economic areas. The activists (can be either men or women) who started voicing the right of women and looked at any art or incident from women's perspectives came to be known as feminists. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's rights, such as in contract, property and voting etc. while also promoting women's rights to bodily integrity and autonomy and reproductive rights. They have opposed domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault. In economics they have advocated for workplace rights, including equal pay and opportunities for careers and to start business.

It is a well known fact that literature often reflect the cultural assumptions and attitudes of its period and that of course includes attitudes towards women: their status, their roles, their expectations, etc. So feminist literary theory deals with an analysis of representations of women in male authored texts or the ways all texts, including those written by men, are marked by gender and explorations of how racial, sexual and class differences among women expand previous models of gender reading and writing. Virginia Woolf in her essay 'Profession for Women' complained that women's social obligations hindered a writing career. Simone De Beauvoir in 'The Second Sex' documented the ways legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

In nineteenth century the concept of feminism had begun yet in the work of women novelists of the period we don't find this aspect. Though some of them tried to give a different outlook with all means to emphasize on equality to their female characters but they all ended up showing their disaster for acting differently. When we review George Eliot's *Middlemarch* we find patriarchal structures controlling the choices available to women.

Dorthea in *Middlemarch* is a character unlike the ordinary woman of the period. She is a lady with noble aspirations. She wants to lead a higher life, to achieve something noble. She seeks an outlet for her higher aspirations in doing humanitarian work. Thus she makes plans and projects to improve the living conditions of the tenants on the estate of a Baronet. She is different from other young ladies of her age and this difference is stressed by contrasting her with her sister Celia. Celia is an ordinary girl with a girlish fondness for jewellery and fine clothes. Dorothea looks down upon such feminine frivolities. Celia dislikes Cuasabon for his age and looks whereas Dorothea is oblivious to his physical details. She sees in him a reflection of Locke or Milton and accepts him as her husband in preference to young and handsome Sir Chettam for she thinks that through marriage with a scholar like him, she would be able to achieve her aspirations. According to this it seems that George Eliot was sympathetic to the plight of aspiring women who could fulfill their ambitions through the agency of men. This is something which the feminists could not digest about the novel that a woman's ambition or aspirations is depended on men. Perhaps this might be the reason that Eliot later in the story presents Dorothea's marriage as a failure proving that such thought is incorrect and Dorothea could have been successful without marrying Causabon. The readers accepts Dorothea as carved against the traditional mould into which the other female characters are formed. This delusion is, however, soon demolished when we witness her failure in life for not acting like her sister. Eliot paints her as lofty, idealistic, straightforward and honest but at the end presents her as self-deluded and self-deceived. Her marriage to Causabon proves to be a

failure and her second marriage to Ladislaw is a compromise with reality. It is a climb down from her lofty idealism.

We have Dorothea who is portrayed as saintly in the first place with her vivid and unquenched desire to help everyone in need. However, she rebels at the end shouting to her sister, “I only want not to have my feelings checked every time.” In this phrase we find the powerful desire of women for the right to decide and act for themselves. In contrast to Dorothea we have her sister, Celia, who is the conventional picture of a woman. She tells her sister, “why must you always do what is uncomfortable to others” and adds, “men know best”. Her traditional mindset cannot allow her to think of women as independent entities or who can think beyond marriage. She is the woman who submits to society only caring for appearances and social rank, an attitude common during the time Eliot’s story takes place. Rosamond is another character who looks at marriage as a way to move in aristocratic circle, that is, to have money and rich social circle. Upper middle class and upper class Victorian women were expected to “marry money”, stay at home to raise the family and be responsible for the management of domestic affairs. As result women who lacked the opportunity for the kind of education men had were praised chiefly for their ability to act properly towards their husbands. However, unfortunately, such an attitude has not disappeared during 21st century either.

George Eliot has been often criticized for not preparing the ground for radical shifts in gender or social relations. It is questioned that a writer who herself defied tradition could not provide the same options to her female characters. In this novel women are denied the constructive and active roles in society. At the surface level the society in *Middlemarch* may appear balanced, but when seen from the perspective of Dorothea there is no accord. The period saw emphasis on England for special moral influence of woman. The 1850s was the period of The Married Woman’s Property Bill and in 1860s there was an emphasis on women’s education. The question is that when the period was going through so many changes for equality of women why Eliot was quiet in her work. The fate which she made Dorothea face shows the irony of such women who opt for high unconventional ideas for living. Dorothea’s character is coloured with unconventionality, but at the same time she is aware of the fact that she can only achieve her goal by marrying a man with the same aim in life. And this was her mistake which took its toll. I see the reason for

her frustration in failure of her choice of a husband. She was happy with her humanitarian work, but after marriage she lost all the connections with poor tenants and she remained a slave of her husband, Mr. Causabon. Yes, I would say a slave because that is what is proved when gradually her sole objective of life was to make him happy and pine for one gentle look from him. What actually does George Eliot try to show here? Does she want to show that a young woman is not fit to make her own choice? I think marriage was a pressure for Dorothea and she married the first scholar that she met since the other options available to her would never agree to her dreams. What she forgot was that the society in which she lived hardly had a man who could think for women's aspirations. Eliot, according to me, did not choose to write against the wind and instead showed what the majority in the period thought about women and this is where the feminists disagree with her. They cannot accept the fact that an untraditional girl like Dorothea would meet an ironical end for acting differently.

Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*

This section deals with another century and the other part of the world with completely different culture and society, but unfortunately with no different condition of women. This is 20th century India. India is a country which got Independent very late and so could not develop at the same pace as the other countries of the world. As a result the different activities related to equality of gender did not reach here. In India, too, as was the view in nineteenth century England, the role of women was limited to the domestic arena. A girl was considered her father's property before marriage and a husband's after marriage. It cannot be denied that this view has not completely vanished from our society. Arundhati Roy in her novel has shown the plight of a similar woman who refused to consent to the traditional idea of a woman.

Ammu in *God of Small of Things* is a beautiful and sardonic woman who has been victimized first by her father and then by her husband. While raising her children she has become tense and repressed. The anger and rebellious nature because of such a long suppression is evident in all her actions throughout the novel. Ammu grows up in Delhi but, because her father says that college is an unnecessary expense for a girl, is

forced to live with her parents when they move to Kearla. This is the fate of most of the women in India and the subcontinent where education is still denied to them. Ammu cannot remain at home. Her nature would not permit her to. She becomes desperate to escape her ill-tempered father and bitter long suffering mother. She makes an excuse of living with an aunt and goes to Kolkata. There she meets her future husband at a wedding reception and gets married to him without her father's permission. This revolutionary act of marrying a man of a different religion could not be tolerated by her father as a girl in India is expected to marry according to her parents' choice. Like Dorothea, Ammu also goes through a failure of marriage because of her wrong choice of a man. Her husband beats her and attempts to prostitute her to his boss so that he can keep his job. She leaves him and returns to her father's place with her twin children.

Ammu is the transgressor. Her transgression lies in her defiance of society's rule, in not just one aspect, but in variety of aspects. She defies her family's expectations by getting married out of their religion. As a wife she is expected to defer to her husband's wishes which she again defies. Her final revolt is her affair with an untouchable, Velutha, a worker at the pickle factory, owned by her mother. This comes as a severe blow to her family as according to them she has defied family name by such an act. Here again we see the gender biasness as her brother Chako is allowed to have liaisons with other women, irrespective of caste or religion, secretly at night at the house with an obvious explanation by her mother that it is necessary for men to have such engagements. Moreover, no one opposes his marriage to a foreigner. Ammu had to dearly pay for her conduct. She had to leave the house as well as the children and she finally dies in a cheap hotel while searching for a job. The thing which irks us is why Arundhati Roy did not come out with a positive end for a revolutionary woman like Ammu. The men like Chako and Ammu's father always get away with whatever they want. It is the woman who is penalized for giving a free rein to her dreams or desires. The character of Ammu has not received the poetic justice. She is made to suffer for doing her own will. The feminists would question why Ms. Roy could not bring out a successful end for Ammu. She, being a completely unconventional Indian woman, could have given more worth to the character of Ammu than leaving the feminists frustrated at Ammu's plight.

Conclusion

This issue is quite debatable: why women writers show revolutionary women in their novels facing a disastrous end, even though they have been part of the feminist revolution. In other words they prove that their being different will not be ultimately accepted by the society, which ultimately decides their destiny. There is no denying the fact that women are often punished by society for not submitting to the social norms, but simultaneously things are changing too and this change is expected to be brought up by the female or male writers. It has been noticed that most of the nineteenth and twentieth century female novelists have portrayed the same submissive or unsuccessful revolutionary characters. It is true that society takes time to accept any change, but changes are being made and are in the long run accepted also. However, this also remains a fact that today also we have several Ammus and Dorotheas in society who still needs the crutches of marriage to fulfill their dreams. It has to be thought aloud whether such writers are really wrong in presenting the unsuccessful stories of unconventional women. They are not discouraging the women with independent thought, but just emphasizing the idea that it is still not an easy task and wrong choices will not be easily pardoned.

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