

Pain and Resilience: Understanding Women Writers through Joan Riley

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Abstract: Presentation/representation of women in literature and media has given rise to many stereotypes. These stereotypes have serious repercussions on the actual life of women who are everyday fighting a battle for recognition and acknowledgement of their humanity and difference. Man still being at the helm of affairs dictates terms and present women in the mould which suits him and which caters to the egoistic demands of patriarchy. Conscious women have always been vigilant against serious implications of such warped (re)presentations. Their alertness has taken varied forms of protest and resultant denouncement of these insidious stereotypes. Women's writing is one such attempt at bringing the things in order which the power intoxicated men have messed up to suit their interests. Women writers try to rectify the mistakes of literary history which too had callously overlooked and grossly misunderstood women and had therefore not allowed the voices of women writers to enter the sacred pantheon of their (patriarchal) canon. Asserting their difference these women writers have constantly been trying to rescue the image of woman from the clutches of man and his ideology. Instead of focusing on how women are different from men, women writers' rather endeavour to drive home the point how women differ from what men think they are.

Keywords: Women writing, gynocriticism, representation, gender, stereotype

Women's writing implies that women in some sense constitute a group, however diverse, who share a position of difference based on gender. One question which often glares us in face at such junctures is whether it is right and justified to hold women writers as a separate entity. Criticism of women writers spearhead from the notion of their being gender obsessed. These critics contend that focus on gender of the writer subsumes the text into a sexually defined personality of its author and thereby obliterates its literarity. Feminist literary criticism has appropriately responded to such contentions. They argue that women's writing form a subculture within the literary tradition which has its own distinct characteristics and to understand how women's writing differ from the dominant male literature, we require a critical reading that is appropriate to these differences. Only a gender specific analysis of women's writings would be sensitive to its motivations and expressions. They contend that no

literary text is apolitical and to talk about neutral reading or innocent approach is a mere illusion. A gender conscious reading is not an invitation for uncouth censure and paranoid generated allegations or applauding of a particular gender. It is an attempt to analyze how a text comprehends one's being a man or a woman. This focus on gender has its roots in a long history of rejection and derision of women writers. Feminist literary critics like Elaine Showalter and Kate Millet have repeatedly made the criterion of defining classic novels to stand a trial and have thereby exposed the artificiality and subjectivity of the seemingly objective value-judgments that surround literary analysis. Women writers whilst expounding the agenda of gynocriticism are trying to free themselves from the linear absolutes of male literary tradition and are progressing towards a new world of female culture. They are in the words of Virginia Woolf writing a "woman's sentence". Showalter says,

In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (131)

Women writers had before them myriad challenges which required a stiff resistance and dauntless confrontation, if these writers were to carve an exclusive niche for themselves in the literary pantheon. Women's writing has traversed a long path to reach its present stage. Elaine Showalter has traced the development of an independent female writer and has lucidly put across this journey by dividing it into three phases i.e. Feminine phase (1840-1880), Feminist phase (1880-1920) and Female phase (1920 onwards).

In the first phase women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male writers and hence internalized their assumptions about female nature. Their feminine concerns were oblique and subversive. To ensure that their writings reach the masses they had to disguise themselves under a male pseudonym. In the second phase women formulated specifically female demands and protests. Women artist's responsibility and role in voicing and protesting against the prevalent condition of women underwent a change during this phase. In the third phase women rejected both imitation and protest as they thought both of these to be the forms of dependency and instead channelized their energies to explore female experience as the source of autonomous art. This phase is marked by self discovery. This phase prepared the grounds for the inception of gynocriticism. Angry or loving fixation on male literature is left behind to focus on the construction of a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and to develop new models based on the study of female experience. Women's writing is an assertion, a demand for re-writing of the canon of literature.

Issue of women's writing vis-a-vis feminism has further been problematized with the advent of postcolonial and diaspora studies. The issue has acquired a new tinge with the contention of Black women writers that their experiences can never be appropriately deciphered by White feminists. They put forward the point that white women are ill equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature

embodies the realization that the politics of sex, race and class are crucial factors for interpreting the works of Black women writers. In our times Black women writers have gained much prominence and the pronounced difference of their writings which their socio-political, cultural, economic and racial circumstances have generated has been acknowledged by both readers and critics alike.

Black women have constantly reiterated the fact that white woman does not have the first hand experience of racism. Only black woman can address the issues of black sisterhood because they have borne the brunt of sexism, racism and classism on their souls and psyches. Echoing the cliché that only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches they assert that only a black woman can authentically record the experiences and responses of their kind and can thus appropriately register their protest against the oppressor. They want the world to see through their writings that the gashes which have lacerated their bodies and souls are not just sexist but racist too. Their being black and female has put them on a plane altogether different from white women. Their agenda is not to assert their equality among men only but among white men and women. They have to demolish the stereotypes which equate whiteness with culture and superiority and blackness with savagery and inferiority. Joan Riley's novels also record the palpitations and silenced rebellions of black women's hearts as they try to make sense of the new world around them which has left both her and her male counterpart anchorless and disillusioned. What makes a woman's sense of rootlessness more piquant has been presented by Riley with a formidable veracity.

Joan Riley's novels *Waiting in the twilight* (1987), and *Romance* (1988) are taken up to analyze how Riley has rendered black woman's experience in her novels. In Riley's novels, women are seen to be reduced to their basic biological functions, to be used and discarded but never to be treated as equals by either their men or the members of the white society among whom they find themselves living. Riley's contention suggests that it is her gender that makes the black woman a matter of scorn for both white men who are either curious or disgusted by her and black men who make use of her body with little thought of her as a feeling and thinking being. The proposed paper will put the circumstances, experiences, motivations and responses of Riley's characters under a critical scanner. The focus will remain on analyzing Desiree's attempts to be in sync with shifting gears of diasporic life in *Romance* and as Adella's tastes the bitter rejection of both Black and callous White Western Male in *Waiting in the twilight*.

This paper seeks to explore the varied nuances, intricacies and motivations of women's writing whilst trying to understand the trauma and challenges of dislocation as experienced by Third World women in diaspora. Joan Riley's novels are taken up for analysis to understand the mutations which a woman's life undergoes in foreign shores. It is pertinent to understand why people opt to leave their homeland and why do they pine for it once they have reached their dream destinations. When a homeland is perceived to have exhausted its scope and opportunities generating sources than natives start looking elsewhere for greener pastures. It is such a perception of homeland that from times immemorial has stimulated in the natives' mind and heart a desire to embark on new shores in search of opportunities, wealth and recognition. Nurturing the dreams of paradise, these travelers however are left flabbergasted when they encounter a world which refuses to give them a warm and humane

reception. They are constantly made to bit a crust of humility and are assigned a place on the margins of society, thus denying them any active and willed participation in the events of the host nation. Fred D'Aguiar defines the diasporic experience as a sense of "unbelonging" as the immigrants get caught between a community left behind and a new community which doesn't accept them. The discord between expectation and perception is essentially a disconnection between individual's perceived identity and how one is perceived by the community.

It is often assumed that females adapt better than men to their new homes. All such assumptions have their genesis in complacency of patriarchy which has always promoted adaption, compromise, submissiveness and assimilation as an integral part of woman's life. Women too have internalized these as jewels to embellish their personae. A more considered approach however reveals that the degree of assimilation for women depends on several factors: her status within the immigrant community, how she is perceived in the larger i.e. white, dominant community; her position within a patriarchal familial system; her relationship to her children, if she has any, and her level of acceptance and encouragement of how those children are developing/faring in the new "home". All these factors shape a woman's identity, and determine how readily she accepts or refutes the dominant culture.

Black women are in a unique position to tell their versions of diasporic experience. A long history of oppression and resistance has pushed them to a vantage point from where their retelling of how terrible it is to be black in a white society acquires new contours. They awaken the world to the fact that along with men large numbers of women were also arriving on new shores. Narratives in the immigrant woman's voice are important not only because her experience as an immigrant is different from the man's chiefly because of her gender, but because she is facing a set of different expectations, ones that are influenced by her place within her immediate family/community and the larger dominant, white, male English society.

Riley's novel *Romance* unfolds the story of Desiree and how she gathers courage to come out of her cocoon of domesticity. Desiree can be any other black woman who crosses the sea to make a home of her dreams on a new land which seems to be full of promise and happiness. Desiree typically embraces the prescribed notions of "woman" in the belief that she is somehow benefitting from the cultural division of gender i.e. her husband provides for her and the children and she in return keeps his home. She has internalized this conventional role demand and her dominating husband John is more than happy with this arrangement. Ironically enough Desiree is never allowed to voice her desires openly leave aside their fulfillment. She wishes to complete her high school and help her husband financially but this is perceived as a transgression of domestic boundaries and male authority by John. Education entails betterment of the self and for John this would spell trouble since the wife who is under his thumb will then try to find her feet. Even the thought of such a situation is unbearable to him because it would be a challenge to his masculine authority over his wife. John's apprehensions do turn true when Desiree crosses the culturally specified threshold. Beaten psychologically into inferiority, compliance and submission, Desiree finally rips apart the garb of coy femininity and John loses his submissive wife to an assertive woman who knows her desires and seeks to accomplish them. Her sister Verona and friend Mara become the catalyst of change. Besides other things Riley like Alice Walker stresses upon the need of female solidarity.

Desiree's journey towards self-realization is a fictional rendering of the life of millions of women who seek solace in their "womanly" roles. Desiree balks at the thought of subverting her husband's wishes chiefly because she loves him and cares for him. She knows just too well that her husband is battling against and is being battered by discrimination in a White man's country. Constantly being made to taste the crust of humility, this man needed some reassurance of his worth and Desiree like Leila of *The Final Passage* takes this responsibility upon herself. To keep his sense of a strong and superior self intact, she is ready to sacrifice her real self. Bounty looted by racism can at least be compensated if not reclaimed by masculinity. Desiree attempts to preserve her marriage by willfully becoming the scapegoat. What is worth noticing is that the woman's selfless love, concern and compassion are seldom reciprocated by man. Entrapped in their ego, men like John generally fail or simply refuse to gauge the loss which their gains have done to women. Riley is emphasizing the need for the institution of marriage to be more just and based on equality. Desiree's tale is a clamour call for women all over the world to steal away time from the din and bustle of domesticity and to listen to murmurings of their self which is in the danger of losing its essence.

Waiting in the twilight bespeaks the plight of Adella. She is an old black woman who is living the last days of her life and has only one wish i.e. to be respected. Adella life had been a constant struggle. Her being black and a woman has proved for her a double whammy. She has been used and then discarded by both blacks and the whites. Waiting for the death to embrace her, she desperately seeks respect for herself but the fate of this black woman refuses to show mercy. Adella had come to England with bright hopes after tasting betrayal at the hands of men back home in Jamaica. Adella was once an attractive young woman who could make men fantasize about her but her attractiveness did not ensure respect for her. In fact it took her into a morass of men's lust where she was only an object to satisfy men's physical needs. Her own emotional needs were callously overlooked and derided. Burdened with the responsibility of children born out of these liaisons, she had to deliberately get deeper into this quagmire of lust and humiliation. With advancing age, Adella can no longer attract a man's "protection" and lacking options she works double shifts as a cleaner where the young white office workers show her no respect. She ultimately loses at all ends: her blackness blocks all chances of her being respected by whites, black men refuse to give her respect and she loses respect of her children as well. This lack of respect both in her native home and then in adoptive home has been a constant source of pain for her. The lack of respect in England underscores the cultural disparity between her native Jamaica and adoptive home in England because in Jamaica her age would have at least earned her token respect. Away from homeland trying to earn a livelihood, Adella bits the crust of humility because she knows that she can never demand consideration or respect because she cannot afford to lose her job and so lives out the twilight of her life as an undesirable. Riley has imbued the character of Adella with poignancy and she seems to be resenting her lack of status both as a woman and as a black immigrant. Through Adella's life story, Riley has shown the repercussions on the psychology of the people who are mined for use until they are used up and stripped of dignity. Adella's story brings to fore many issues. Chief among them is the definition of beauty. Like all other things the nexus of power and knowledge is at work here also. White west being in the power dictates and promotes the concept of beauty being white, fair and rosy. This autocratic and

dehumanizing concept of the white being beautiful has consistently been challenged and subverted by black women writers. Lorraine Hansberry through the character of Bertha in *A Raisin in the Sun* has voiced black woman's protest against the white hegemony. Bertha is a reassertion of the blacks demand for respect and appreciation. In other words, a reassertion that black is beautiful. Michel Foucault's theorization of discourse can help us understand the politics behind the western made definitions of beauty. Foucault contends that discourse is principally organized around practices of exclusion. Whilst what it is possible to say seems self-evident and natural, this naturalness is a result of what has been excluded. Such discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our identity. The functioning of such discourses is evident everywhere, an instance however is the advertisements promoting fairness creams where every nameable quality of a woman is shown to be worthless until and unless she has a fair complexion and a beautiful face. Discourses however do not exist in isolation but are sites of struggle; they are not fixed but are site of constant contestation of meaning. Thus the definition of beauty is challenged by slogans like "black is beautiful" but again the challenge is appropriated and we witness beauty pageants where again the White and the Black become contested categories and the verdict depends on superficial knowledge of the beauty queens and the flimsy parameters of the judges. Woman again is only a body, an object to be looked at and assessed according to her physical attributes. Through Adella, Riley has tried to reclaim the positive definitions of beauty for black but her attempt is equally focused upon winning for women the respect which they deserve as human beings. They are not to be treated merely as bodies to be liked or hated for their physical attributes but they are thinking and feeling human beings who crave to be loved and respected for what they are and not for how they look.

A peep into Joan Riley's novels clearly shows her concerns as a writer. She voices the pain, frustration and insecurities of black women in diaspora with such a veracity that leaves an indelible mark on the minds and hearts of the readers. She is beyond doubt a writer to be studied and analysed in order to understand the palpitations of a woman's heart. Through the story and struggle of Desiree and Adella, the writer has tried to bring to fore the experiences of women in diaspora. Women's experience of diaspora is different from men because their cultural rootlessness gets accentuated by emotional drain out and also because they bear the double brunt of both racism and sexism. Her writing proves the cliché, that only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.

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