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Women in two select novels- ‘The Guide’ by R.K. Narayan and ‘Things Fall Apart’ by Chinua Achebe.

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is study the portrayal of women in R.K.Narayan’s ‘The Guide’ and Chinua Achebe’s ‘Things Fall Apart’ Literature is often said to be a reflection of society. So based on the theory of social realism, a study is done on the realistic portrayal of women in the above mentioned works. It is necessary to also identify the conditions, the factors in the environment that affects the characters. A study has been made upon the women seen in the novel and an attempt to comprehend why they behave the way they do. Steps are taken to identify the conditions prevalent and the expectations of society in regard to women. An insight has also made into the empowerment factor of these women.

Keywords

Women, education, beliefs, story teller, empowerment

Introduction

Social realism is a depiction of art found in poetry, novels, movies and other fine arts. It describes the daily lives of people as they are. Social realist artists try to show people and their lives in a realistic way. Social realism art does not belong to one period of history but has been the style of artists in different centuries of time. Social realism with roots in European realism became an important art movement during the great depression in the 1930's. In England, Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe and Sir Walter Scott are some of the novelists who portrayed the social realism. Indian novels began as novels of social realism. It reflected the social, political and economic condition of the country. Some of the Indian social realists are Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan.

Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Iyer Narayanaswami (R.K.Narayan), is a leading Indian author of early Indian literature in English along with Raja Rao and Mulk Rak Anand. R.K. Narayan is known for his works set in the fictional town of Malgudi. The novel *The Guide* written in 1958 was based in Malgudi, the fictional town in South India. In the novel, *The Guide*, there are two main women characters-Raju, the protagonist's mother and Rosie, the Archeologist's Marco's wife along with a minor female character-Velan's half sister. Being a social realistic, the author, R.K. Narayan, the town of malgudi created characters, situations and problems that one could encounter in daily life. "It focused on ordinary people, reminding the reader of next-door neighbors, cousins and the like, thereby providing a greater ability to relate to the topic"(Paolo,2).

In the beginning of the novel itself, in chapter one, we get to hear of Velan's half sister. When Raju, has just come out of jail and has taken shelter in the ruins of a temple close to the bank of the river, Velan approaches him mistaking him to be a Sage. Velan seems to be disturbed about his half sister who seems reluctant to get married to the person chosen by the family. He tells Raju that she ran away from home and they had to go, find her and bring her back. Yet she seemed unconcerned of the family's efforts and seemed to do nothing but sulk all day. The next day Velan brings his half sister to meet Raju. Raju though seemed disinterested to speak to them takes time to tell her that what is to happen will be bound to happen. She decides to get married and things change at home. There is happiness and joy at her decision. In the case of Velan's half sister, one can catch a glimpse of a woman whose one decision brings about a change in the household. It's almost as if a miracle has taken place. In fact they hurry up with the rituals of the wedding in fear that she would go back on her decision.

Raju's mother is the typical Indian woman who prioritizes her husband and children over everything else. "The mother of Raju is a symbol of Indian tradition, one who has lived her life in a hide-bound manner" (Pushpanathan, 190) She oversees the functioning of the family in a smooth manner. She is a storehouse of wisdom and knowledge almost like the African women who were pioneers of oral tradition. Both Indian and African women were great story tellers. Through the means of a story they were able to entertain as well as instruct. They told these stories so well that Raju, in *The Guide* and the African Children in *Things Fall Apart* remember the story as well as the moral conveyed through the stories. In the novel *The Guide*, the protagonist Raju says that he would ask his mother for a story as they awaited the return of his father at night.

Typical of women in Indian society, Raju seeks comfort in the company and presence of his mother. At times when Raju was sent to bring his father home who loved spending time talking to his friend for long hours, he would be sent back with a message to keep milk and food aside for him which he would have when he returned home later.

Raju says that on his way back he had to pass through dark alleys that gave him a cold sweat and he imagined the presence of wild animals and supernatural beings around. Raju says that he would run back home and once inside, his mother would sit with him and her very presence was very comforting to him. She would ask for a story and she would immediately commence telling him one.

As an Indian woman who is uneducated and unemployed she is probably totally depended upon her father, husband or her son, R.K Narayan says in *My Days: A Memoirs*:

"From times immemorial, man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, her status and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances"(119)

Though her husband may be the only earning member in the family, she looks into the expenses of the family and sees to it that every penny is spent wisely. When the railways are introduced and the station building is completed Raju's father who has a shop at the station, starts making more sales in a day. Both Police guards and people flock to the shop and in fact they have record sales in one day. The regular running of the trains brings in more prosperity and Raju's father buys a horse and carriage. His mother being more cautious about the expenditure and savings of

the family is quite skeptical about this purchase. When they become the talk of the town, she tells her husband that it has been vain. When Raju's father does not use the horse on a regular basis, she openly berate him which is typical of Indian women and wives who are concerned about the money and the need to use the money earned in a wise manner. Moreover when Raju spends a lot of his time with the tourists and neglects the shop leaving it under the care of the porter's son, he is reprimanded by his mother. When Rosie comes to Raju's house to seek shelter, Raju's mother allows her to stay as a guest. However when she hears people talk in the village, she reflects the typical Indian tradition and tells Raju that Rosie's rightful place is with her husband.

The second woman character in the novel is Rosie. Rosie is the wife of the archeologist Marco She is described as a dusky girl with a gorgeous and lovely figure. She follows her husband, a day later to Malgudi. Typical of one community in India, she belongs to the community of dancers who generally perform during religious ceremonies. She comes from a "family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers" (The Guide, 75). Rosie epitomizes an Indian woman oscillating between tradition and modernity but she is quite successful aesthetically, personally and socially in her dancing. (Jeya,1)

Women from this particular community had no respect in society and they led difficult lives. Rosie belonging to this community knew that there were no opportunities for her in society apart from dance. So when she comes across a matrimonial advertisement seeking an educated, beautiful woman for a rich man. She immediately responds to the advertisement and gets married to Marco. She represents the emerging new woman of new India who looks for new opportunities and attempts to take a bold step forward. She admits that she got married for the money and defends her choice of marriage since it was a step of upward mobility towards being accepted in a very traditional and conservative society.

Rosie looks for love in marriage. But the relationship between her and Marco seems to be strained. Both of them need different things in life. Marco spends days in caves, which keep him engrossed in his study of his findings while Rosie loves to spend time amidst nature. When Raju asks her "What's your interest?" She replies "Anything except cold stone walls" (The Guide, 120) She tells Raju Her first wish was to see a snake dance to the flute. However when her husband chides her, she remains silent. She is typical of the Indian woman caught between two worlds- the world of

tradition and the world of modernity. Jennet P. Gemmill says, it is: “a broad based an dynamic concept involving an awareness of time, the will to revitalize traditions, a craving for novelty and variety, exploitation of the social conditions for the fulfillment of human personality and a struggle for progress”(287). The customs, tradition of the place of her birth confines her yet her education motivates her to choose a different path.

As the emerging new Indian woman, Rosie changes her name for a new career. She adopts a stage name Nalini for her dance shows. There is a tremendous success on stage When Raju is imprisoned for a forgery case, Rosie tries to pawn every bit of her possessions and get out of their debt. She also decides that she out to part ways. Emerging from the ashes, she is able to take bold and strong decisions without the help of any man in her life.

Looking at Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, The society of the Igbo community is polygamous in nature. A man could have any number of wives and children. The protagonist, Okonkwo has three wives and eight children. “The greatness of a man in this society is measured in terms of his muscle power, wealth, titles and number of wives.”(Reddy 30). Most of the women are silent beings. They follow the norms and traditions expected of them. He first instance that comes to light about women is that sometimes they are treated as commodities. “Woman is the man’s possession, as wives and other possession like yam barns, and title” (Mundi.42). One woman is given in exchange for another. When someone from the village of Mbaino murdered the wife of an Umoufia tribesman, an emissary was sent to Mbaino asking for a virgin and a young boy in exchange for the woman who was murdered. The village of Mbaino agreed and sent a young girl and a boy called Ikefuna. The elders of the village decided that she would become Ogbuofi Udo’s wife and it was followed.

Women were considered to be weak unlike the brave warrior men of Umoufia. A man who didn’t accomplish much in life or someone who was not successful and did not take a title was also called *agbala* meaning a woman. ‘Unoka, Okonkwo’s father is considered an untitled man, connoting feminity’(20) When Okonkwo was a boy, he heard one of his friends call Unouka, his father as *agbala*. Okonkwo disliked the trait of weakness because it was associated with his father and with women. Therefore he was constantly demanding of his family and already has a dislike for his twelve year old son Nwoye who he thinks is lazy and constantly beats and nag him to prevent him from becoming like his father Unoka.

Women were not permitted to question anything; they were merely expected to follow what is told to them. “Women do not have a say in any important matter. The idea of masculinity puts women on a remote margin. They are excluded from political, economic and judicial matters of the community. They are confined to the domestic sphere only” (Sumabal.314) Her prime role is to take care of her family even before herself. When the village of Umoufia decided that Ikemufuna, the boy sent from Mabanta would stay with Okonkwo for the time being, Okonkwo immediately called his first wife and handed the boy over to her. When she asks her husband how long he would be staying, Okonkwo just yelled at her asking ‘From when did you become one of the elders of the village. Do as you are told.’ (TFA.10) The eldest wife quietly told him under her fold for the time being. Once during the week of peace, Okonkwo notices that his younger wife. Although it was not proper for anyone to indulge in any form of violence during the week of peace, Okonkwo disregard the significance of the week and beats up his wife.

However we do find empowered women in the novel too. Okonkwo’s third wife, Ekwefi ran away from her husband to marry Okonkwo. When she saw Okonkwo win again Amazi the Cat, she gave her heart away to him and came to his hut and has not gone back to her husband. She was the only one among the three wives who had the courage to speak back to Okonkwo. During the Feast of the New Yam, with nothing much to do Okonkwo gets angry and finds a reason to beat up his wife . “In keeping with the Ibo view of female nature, they allowed wife beating” After venting out his anger, he takes his gun to go hunting but Ekwefi passes a comment about ‘a gun that never fires’(TFA.35) for which Okonkwo in a fit of anger comes back and fires at her but he misses the target.

Another empowered woman seen in the novel is Chielo who is the village priestess of Agbala, the oracle of the Hills and the Caves. Chielo in her role as a priestess fulfills everything that is called for. When Ezinma is called Agbala, the oracle of the hills and caves, she immediately comes to Ezinma’s hut to carry the child to the cave. Although Ekwefi is hesitant and fears her daughter’s safety, Chielo assures her that Ezinma is a daughter to her too and carry her on her back to the cave of Agbala. The speed and purpose with which she moves makes Ekwefi and Okonkwo is she was the same woman who shared a shed with Ekwefi in the market place.

Women are seen as perpetuators of the African culture with oral tradition of passing on stories, song and proverbs. Ikemefuna though from Mbanta is seen repeating the stories to Nwoye and others, the many stories that his mother and sister told him when he was with them. Ekwefi bond with her daughter Ezinma is also strengthened through story

telling late into the night. Achebe in fact on one of his interviews says that he still preferred the stories told by his elder sister over the stories her learnt in school.

Conclusion

To conclude one important aspect of women which is common to both African and Indian society is 'Mother is Supreme' When Okonkwo's gun accidentally goes off that kills Ezeudu's sixteen year old son, it is considered a grave crime. Killing one's own clansman is a crime against the earth goddess itself. So Okonkwo can only atone for it by taking himself and his family into exile for seven years. He is supposed to leave the village and seek shelter for seven years in the place of his mother's birth. Okonkwo's friend Oberika himself is one of the members of the group sent to cleanse the land of bloodshed. They destroy his hut and kill his domestic animals. Okonkwo goes along with his three wives and children to Mbanta, his mother's village. Okonkwo is grief stricken at the loss of everything, his property and possessions for which he had worked so hard and gained. However when he goes to Mbanta, Uchendu, his uncle, his mother's brother welcome them with open arms. His mother's people help him build his hut and lend him seeds to start a farm. In fact he calls all his children and addresses them saying

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his father when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. (Achebe 122).

Similarly, in the novel *The Guide*, Raju's mother permitted Rosie to stay at her place. Although she knows that Rosie is a married woman, when she has nowhere to go she permits her to stay with them. When her brother comes to instruct Raju that what he is doing is not right in the eyes of society, Raju is stubborn and does not listen to his mother nor his uncle. The mother tries to drive sense into her son but when he does not seem to pay attention, she leaves her house and all her belongings to her son and goes away with her brother.

Thus it can be seen in both the novels, *The Guide* and *Things Fall Apart* that women can be traditional as well modern both in terms of appearance as well as their thinking. Some just abide by the norms of society while some take bold steps forward. Either with the empowerment of education or cruel life experiences makes them move away

from the expected norms. Some have no other way forward so they are forced to break away from the chains that confine women.

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