

Locating Women in the Patriarchal Society Through the lens of Feminist Theory and Criticism

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Abstract

Literature being a microcosm of society is a very powerful and empowering tool. It reflects the socio-political conditions and the existing relations of power in the society. However, it also has power to change the dynamics and destabilize the existing status quo. Literature in this context then, is not only a great tool to educate the masses but also a propagandist tool. Literature through its mesmerising use of language can either make or break a society and this is where literary theory comes in. This paper seeks to examine the role of literary theory in probing, critiquing, unmasking and subverting the constitutive relations between power and forms of discourses. Using feminist theory, the paper seeks to strip patriarchy of its hypocrisy and highlight the marginalised position of women in society so as to critique the so-called 'normative' patriarchal society by examining Sadat Hasan Manto's short story 'Open it' and Eunice De Souza's poem 'Marriages are made'. The role of education in uplifting women from the shackles of patriarchy plays an important role in subverting the power structures. In light of this, the paper will examine the importance of including texts written by women in literary curriculum and most importantly, how language can be used by women to defy the power structures to resist patriarchy and liberate themselves.

Keywords: *Literature, Language, Literary theory, Feminist theory, Gender, Women and education, Partition studies*

Literature is a microcosm of society. It reflects the socio-political conditions and the existing relations of power in the society. The beauty of literature is that it can use language in peculiar ways. The eighteenth century England, just recovering from a bloody civil war, used literature to unite the raw middle

classes with the ruling aristocracy, to inculcate habits of 'refined' taste and common cultural norms. Literature was thereby used to educate the masses, for if the “masses are not thrown a few novels, they may react by throwing up a few barricades” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 21). However, if literature is used to educate the masses, it also acts as an agent of propaganda, and this is where theory comes in. This paper seeks to examine the role of literary theory in probing, critiquing, unmasking and subverting the constitutive relations between power and forms of discourses. Using feminist theory, the paper seeks to strip patriarchy of its hypocrisy and highlight the marginalised position of women in society so as to critique the so-called 'normative' patriarchal society by examining Sadat Hasan Manto's short story “Open it” and Eunice De Souza's poem “Marriages are made”. The role of education in uplifting women from the shackles of patriarchy plays an important role in subverting the power structures. In light of this, the paper will examine the importance of including texts written by women in literary curriculum and most importantly, how language can be used by women to defy the power structures to resist patriarchy and liberate themselves.

Synthesis of Literature and Literary Theory

Literature, as Terry Eagleton (1996) says is “an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power” (pp. 19-20). Through its powerful use of language, literature can either make or break a society. Language is not just a mere means of communication. Language also restrains and constraints us by using the power of ideology. Ideologies are beliefs or set of beliefs that have come down to be regarded as natural and normal. Ideology carries forward the power of a dominant group and thereby helps to maintain its hegemony. This is where literary theory comes in. Literary theory helps us to understand structures and decode them. Circulation and production of knowledge is related to structures but question arises as to who controls and defines those structures. This is what is known as politics of language and structure and by applying theory and reading strategies like Post-colonialism, Feminism, Marxism, Postmodernism and so on to literary texts, many of these power structures have already been decoded and the process still continues. Case in point being that Indians and most colonized subjects have been taught Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Austen and so on to foster the idea of 'universal' man, 'modern' man and inculcate in the colonized subject the values of European/Western society. But what a white European man wants vis-à-vis what a black man wants is completely different. The idea of edifice of a

'universal' man then stands exposed. Shakespeare is a celebrated playwright and his plays are taught across universities but when we sit down to analyse his writings, we can actually decode them by applying theories of post-colonialism, feminism and so on. Shakespeare's play 'The Tempest' for instance, when studied by applying post-colonial theory opens up new discussions. Prospero enslaving Caliban and usurping his island, who is in fact the original inhabitant of that island, can be critically read as Europeans colonizing foreign lands.

Literary theory thus, can be applied anywhere as it seeks to delve into the realm of problematic spaces to investigate ideological and cultural implications. In seeking to probe the complex nature of power then, theory travels beyond the simple assumption of literature as an act of creativity whose sole purpose is to entertain people. Theory instead, strips literature of its claims and critiques and unmasks the structures of power governing society. By applying theory to texts, hegemonic structures thus can be exposed and subverted.

Feminist Theory and its Application

Feminist theory is one such literary discourse that exposes hegemonic power structures. In seeking to understand and highlight the nature of gender inequality, feminist theory examines the cultural baggage accompanying the sexes. It examines the complex machinations of gender power and in doing so it highlights the marginalised position of women in a society governed by patriarchy. Feminist literary criticism is a product of the feminist movement of 1960s. However even before that, texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), where Beauvoir famously states that one is not born a woman but instead becomes one, highlight the problem of gender inequality and the unequal treatment given to women seeking education, which is considered as a gateway to independence. The feminist literary criticism of today owes it to the women's movement of the 1960s as the movement realised "the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence" (Barry, 2012, p. 116). Literature as previously highlighted also acts as an agent of propaganda. The representation of women in literature was considered important forms of conditioning and socialisation. Acting as the mouthpiece of patriarchy, literature thereby propagated ideas of 'ideal' womanhood, acceptable feminine behaviour and "legitimate feminine goals and aspirations" (Barry, 2012, p. 117). Take for instance, *Manusmriti*

which preaches on the virtues of women and the standard 'proper' conduct of a woman. Girls, as Manu writes in the book, should be in the sole custody of her father before her marriage, under the custody of her husband after marriage and under the custody of her son if she is a widow. He prescribes a woman's head to be shaved off or her two fingers cut off and is to be made to ride on a donkey if she tears the hymen of her vagina. *Manusmriti* thus, codified and systematized the subordinate status of women, enshrined its preaching as 'the' rules that a virtuous woman needs to follow obediently and situated a woman's place firmly within the home. Like *Manusmriti*, the *Vedas*, *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have greatly influenced in shaping "attitudes to women and of women themselves. It is not surprising, therefore, that Indians extol the Vedic age as the golden age of Hindu womanhood" (Chanda, 2008, p. 26).

Purity and chastity is considered thus the greatest virtue of a woman. Her body thereby, is sacred. However, feminist criticism points out that the woman's sacred and vulnerable body is a site where patriarchy wrestles and asserts its power. A feminist reading of Partition studies show that amidst the conflation of woman and nation, women became the site of national identity, where men fought their power hungry battles. Purshottam Agarwal (1995) points out that "violence in general and sexual violence in particular, has always been an integral part of any authoritarian world view" (p. 30). He further argues that rape is not just mere sexual lust but an assertion of power over the 'sacred' body.

Gender violence during Partition

The Partition as the harbinger of death, not only killed innocents but also brought out the worst impulses of men. Gender violence committed during Partition led to lifelong traumatic scars in the women survivors. Manto's story 'Open it' (1948), is a brilliant reflection of the havoc that accompanied Partition. The story opens with the lines: "The special train left Amritsar at two in the afternoon, taking eight hours to reach Mughalpura. Quite a few passengers were killed along the way, several received injuries, and some just wandered off to God knows where" (p. 74). Sirajuddin, the central character, is searching for his daughter, Sakina who got left behind in Amritsar. He asks a group of eight men in a refugee camp in Pakistan to help him find his daughter. The 'social workers' later find her, rape her and abandon her. She was found unconscious near the railway tracks and brought to the refugee camp in Pakistan. Later, when the doctor checks her pulse and pointing to the window says, "Open it!" (p. 76), Sakina like a battered animal unknots her waistband

and pulls her salwar down. Her story is one of the many stories of women who had to bear the brunt of Partition at the cost of their female bodies. Partition for women like Sakina then, is not just a mutilation of land but a mutilation of their bodies too. As Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2005) says:

...it was in the systematic rape of women that trauma and the body were most obviously linked. Women were raped and mutilated during the mayhem of partition because their female bodies provided a 'space over which the competitive games of men were played out', whereby Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim men sought to humiliate and annihilate the 'other' while imprinting their own identity on the bearer of future generations. (p. 179)

Decoding and Exposing Patriarchal Language

Women's body like the nation is something over which men play their petty politics. In this set-up then, the patriarchal society, which has always been the dominant group not only controls and contests over women's bodies but regulates and maintains their language too. In describing the ideal woman, the patriarchal society highlights how a girl should always be polite and refine in her speech and language. Women are advised not to 'speak up'; they need to 'adjust'. Speaking of their experiences (largely consisting of abuse, harassment, marginalization by the patriarchal society) would bring shame to the girl and her family. Men silence women in a variety of ways as Cavalcanti (2000) points out:

... [by] strongly regulated forms of address and turn-taking; enforced use of formulaic or contrived speech...prohibition of access to public speech, reading and/or writing, especially creative writing; denial of representation in political forums; or, more effectively, the cutting out of women's tongues. All these expose the interweaving of linguistic manipulation and dominant patriarchal ideologies in the dystopic spaces..." (p. 152)

Thus, what a man's language is, a woman's language is not. There is thereby a historical silencing of women. Feminist criticism and reading strategies thereby lays out bare the hypocritical machinations of patriarchy.

Women and Education

Feminist criticism exposes the dystopic patriarchal structure and the subservient status of women in the society. In this context however, it needs to be stressed that although feminist criticism and theory can be applied to any

text but, when applied to texts written by women, a vivid experience ensues. Books written by women project the real experiences of women which involves inequality, lack of access to education and opportunities, sexual assault, humiliation and marginalisation at the hands of patriarchy. Reading of such female experiences then fosters a common bond and makes more and more women aware of the patriarchal atrocities on them. Education has always played a key role in securing independence and creating for oneself a niche space in society. In this context then, the question arises as to why women were denied education and if at all they managed to gain access to it, why weren't women writers included in the literary curriculum as Elaine Showalter highlights in her essay 'Women and the literary curriculum' (1971). Showalter in the essay points out that in the twenty-one courses offered by the English department of the college where she attended as an undergraduate, the literary curriculum had “313 male writers, including such luminaries as William Shenstone, James Barrie and Dion Boucicault; and seventeen women writers: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Anne Bradstreet...and Djuna Barnes” (p. 856). Female students thus are studying the long tradition of literary misogyny whereby they are devoid of and estranged from their own experience. They in fact start their education and involvement in society with the view that “masculine viewpoint is considered normative, and the feminine viewpoint divergent” (p. 856). The society in general and women in particular will hardly get to know the female experience; society will hardly get to know what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society because “they do not see it mirrored and given resonance by literature. Instead they are expected to identify as readers with a masculine experience and perspective, which is presented as the human one” (p. 856). The experience of education for men and women in this context then is completely different when instead, the ideal for education has been to treat students equally and teach the curriculum in the same way to everybody.

Women writers' contribution to literary history has been ignored. Feminine novelist, as Showalter points out in 'The female tradition' (1977), were portrayed as “vain, publicity-seeking, and self-assertive” (p. 130). The concept of Women's Studies thus is a refreshing step in acknowledging the contribution of women writers and by including texts written by women, their experiences, their understanding of womanhood, their relationship to other women, to men, how the marginalised status of women in status affect their lives and career- all these issues can be examined and critically studied. It is only by highlighting the

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faults of the society, can change be ushered in.

Eunice De Souza in her poem 'Marriages are made' brilliantly captures the faults of the patriarchal society when it comes to the issue of women and marriage. The narrator of the poem talks about the impending marriage of her cousin, Elena. Elena's family history has been examined "for T.B and madness...her father declared solvent" (p. 99). The patriarchal society which has already constructed its reality and fixed norms deems it fit to examine the soon-to-be bride before the marriage. The so-called examination is almost a ritual that every woman has to go through:

her eyes examined for squints
her teeth for cavities
her stools for the possible
non-Brahmin worm. (p. 99)

Elena is not "tall" and "full" enough but her fair complexion would compensate for it. The patriarchal society's obsession with fair woman is another low blow to the already existing unjust codes fixed by patriarchy. Such kind of a raw and brutal female experience hence needs to be projected by including texts written by women in school and university curriculums. This is also important because it will make women aware of the patriarchal atrocities and create in them a collective consciousness to raise their voice against the atrocities and unjust practices. And herein comes the image of a modern woman.

Language and the Modern Woman

A modern woman, like the modern man is sceptical. She will ask questions, raise her voice and empower other women to raise their voices and concerns too. It is in this context that language comes to the rescue. Women have been made to stay silent since ages. It is high time then, women speak up and flout the linguistic practices used by men to dominate and suppress women's voices.

Women novelists have been using the power of language to voice their concerns and expose the unjust power structures. Writing, is a "subversive activity especially in patriarchal societies and this 'ultimate transgression' can render them homeless" (Chanda, 2008, p. 8). By writing then, women novelists have already subverted and destabilised the power structures. Texts like '*Open it*' and '*Marriages are made*' then, highlight the politics of patriarchy and linguistics tensions and project the liberating potential of language to resist male

domination.

Conclusion

Words indeed, are all we have as Samuel Beckett famously said. It is through language, through narration then women can express their struggle and resistance. The recent 'Me Too' movement is a scintillating testimony to it which has not only exposed the cracks of today's polarized society but has also given women a platform to speak out against sexual assault and harassment. Famous personalities like Angelina Jolie, Gwyneth Paltrow, Rose McGowan, Tanushree Dutta, Sona Mahapatra and Kangana Ranaut have publicly shared their 'Me Too' stories thereby giving a ray of hope to other women to 'speak up' against male atrocities. By depicting such experiences in their works, women novelists have explored and defined 'womanhood' which stands in sharp contrast to the patriarchal definition of womanhood and in "their rejection of self-sacrifice, and even in their outspoken hostility to men, the feminist writers represented an important stage, a declaration of independence, in the female tradition" (Showalter, 1977, p. 139). Feminist reading of texts thereby acquaint us with the marginalised and subservient status of women in the society and allows us to interrogate the power structures so carefully created and placed by patriarchy. In the process of enlightenment then, feminist reading strategies helps us to destabilize those structures and use our voice to fight for our rights.

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