



Gender As Anisosthenic Archetype : Images of Acquiescence and Remonstrance

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ABSTRACT

The ecumenical quest for equality in the realm of gender, has indubitably ushered momentous change, but has yielded exiguous gains. The continuation of male supremacy and female subservience, its perpetuation owing to socio-cultural suppositions, interpretations of gender as anisosthenic archetype using feminist and sociological theories and its negotiation through strategies of acquiescence and remonstrance shall constitute the scope of this article. The aforementioned aspects shall be analysed vis-à-vis two gynocentric narratives from literature- *Medea* by Euripedes and *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The article shall focus on emulative traits of characters on the literary canvas, which in turn can inspire women to negotiate the stranglehold of patriarchy.

Key words : Gender, anisosthenic archetype, acquiescence, remonstrance.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, gender as a vocabulary has evolved to encompass within its ambit of purport- a triad, instead of the conventional binary- male and female. The incorporation of the third gender has no doubt created a semblance of inclusivity in principle. However notwithstanding the presence or absence of the third gender, the dynamics between male and female has since eons been fraught with inequality. The established hierarchy privileging the male, relegating the female to the fringes of the societal edifice has created a power structure where men signify strength and women weakness. This appalling reality has found its ubiquitous manifestation in the accrescence of gender discrimination and its atrocious domino effects, plaguing contemporary society. The prevalence of such an oppressive system frames the context for placing in perspective, gender as anisosthenic archetype. This article is an attempt to analyse the insidious incarnations of gender imperialism in ancient and modern cultures through the narratives of a classical and contemporary work of literature.

The Greek tragedy *Medea* by Euripedes and *Before We Visit the Goddess* authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shall be the frames of reference for evaluating the representation of gender in its diverse forms, in literature. The rationale behind the choice of a drama and a novel set in culturally distinct backgrounds is the truism which finds its expression in Martha Nussbaum's asseveration that "male dominance is universal and universally experienced by all women". In the literary texts chosen for analysis, this essay shall explore images of acquiescence and remonstrance, within the framework of theoretical perspectives on gender inequality, Butler's concept of "gender performativity" and the theory of intersectionality. The applicability of the concept of constructivism, as to how art can contribute to everyday life is also an area which the paper shall focus on.

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The approach to emphasise sexism, stereotypes and subjugation is, to locate intersections that impede the lives of female protagonists and assay their response of subservience and defiance to “gender stratification” (Berger,4).

The eponymous character Medea, in the Greek tragedy finds herself bereft of “assigned kinship” (Cherlin,1) with her decision to marry Jason, prince of Iolcus. She helps Jason to acquire the golden fleece with her power of sorcery, indulges in fratricide, leaves her homeland, bears Jason two sons, only to be abandoned by him for another princess. Medea’s disempowered status as a woman can be aptly explained in terms of intersectionality. According to cultural historian Nancy Jouwe:

Intersectionality refers to categories of difference that we embody simultaneously (race, class, gender, sexuality, level of abledness and so on) and how these categories interact with each other on an individual, institutional and symbolic level. The outcomes of these interactions create different power positions, which means we all inhabit different levels of privilege and discrimination (1).

Medea’s miscegenation, and her “patrilocality”(Cherlin,2) make her a racial alien (race),she is stripped of her royalty (class) when she lands seeking refuge along with her family in the kingdom of Corinth, whose princess her husband decides to marry. Medea’s gender as a woman ordains passivity to the ignominy she has suffered. The interaction of these multiple categories-race, class and gender, with her diverse identities as an individual, as a daughter, wife and mother at the institutional level and as a persona of feminine virtue espousing self-abnegation at the symbolic level places her at “different levels of privilege and discrimination”(Jouwe,1). The “axes of oppression”(Crenshaw,140) push her into despondency, desiring death. “MEDEA. Oh, I wish/ That lightning from heaven would split my head open./ Oh, what use have I now for life?/ And leave hateful existence behind me. (6) Medea’s position as a dispossessed woman, can also be substantiated through conflict theory which views “gender inequality as a form of social stratification in which men dominate women”(Berger,22). Humiliated and helpless, she chooses to take recourse to a category of difference she embodies, while being trapped in her vortex of intersections. Medea utilizes her “abledness” (Jouwe,1), her incantatory prowess as a sorceress to avenge her disgraceful “fungibility”(Nussbaum), that is, her treatment as an object which could be substituted. “MEDEA. For in other ways a woman/ Is full of fear, defenseless, dreads the sight of cold/ Steel; but, when once she is wronged in the matter of love/ No other soul can hold so many thoughts of blood. (9)

She sends a poisoned dress and a fire spewing “golden diadem” (30), as gifts to her husband’s new bride, through her children. The princess along with her father, king Creon who had banished Medea and her children from Corinth perish in flames. Determined to inflict intolerable pain on Jason, Medea eschews her femininity and embraces masculinity. She slays her sons seeking to exterminate filial love from Jason’s life. Her deed which is demonic , from a patriarchal standpoint, is only “ performativity of gender” (Butler,xv), a change of stance from passivity to activity, from feminine subservience to masculine defiance. The demonstration of how “rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times” (Gauntlett,1).

In the denouement, Medea leaves in an aerial chariot, laden with the corpses of her sons, as a distraught Jason watches helplessly. She thus challenges her victimhood and asserts her preference for an “independent” rather than an “institutional” marriage (Cherlin,3).

A gender specific aphorism sets the tenor of the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*. “Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family’s name. Wicked daughters are

firebrands, blackening the family's name”(205). The intergenerational saga of the lives of four women is woven into the tapestry of the novel. Durga leads a life of penury in one of the rural hinterlands of Bengal. Performing her role as a wife and mother, she must also take on the responsibility of providing for her family to keep them from starving. Among other intersecting factors like gender, sex and class, caste is a significant enabling and disabling denominator in the Indian social milieu. Durga's brahminical caste affiliation precludes her chances of being employed as a maid. Illiterate and unemployable, she relies on her culinary skills to eke out a living. She seeks to end the bequeathing of her legacy of illiteracy and poverty to her daughter Sabitri. Durga's act of perspicacity, seeking her rich customer's benevolence to send her brilliant daughter to pursue college education in Kolkata, defying all their relatives is affirmed by the theory of symbolic interaction, which “sees gender inequality as transmitted from generation to generation through gender role socialization” (Berger,22). Cautioned by her relatives that “she was sending the girl to her ruination” (11), Durga reminds Sabitri that “good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name” (11), before setting her on the path towards empowerment through education.

Sabitri as a young girl faces gender bias in her college where “professors addressed only the men” (9), an attitude reiterating conflict theory of gender discrimination. Nevertheless her diligence helps her to keep pace with her studies, till she falls in love with her wealthy patron's son. Sabitri is cast into the female archetypal role of a “temptress”, resulting in her expulsion from her benefactor's residence. She manages to complete her education with the help of her maths lecturer, whom she marries. Losing her husband in an accidental fire in an oil field in Assam, Sabitri's education empowers her to sue the oil company seeking compensation. In her lone, successful, legal battle against the company, Sabitri shatters the stereotype of a powerless widow and is acclaimed for her courage, with newspapers featuring her story. As a token of gratitude to her mother Durga, she establishes “Durga Sweets”, employing her culinary expertise to entrepreneurial endeavour, creating a legion of connoisseurs. In her role as a single mother she works hard to provide a comfortable life for her daughter Bela.

Bela betrays her mother, discontinues her education and travels to America, to join her lover who is a political refugee. After a few years of “companionate love” (Cherlin, 2), Bela finds herself a destitute, divorced by her husband and abandoned by her daughter Tara. Bela's gender and race, coupled with her dismal employability quotient, places her in an oppressive matrix. She is penitent of her choices in life and seeks her mother's help to dissuade Tara from dropping out of college. Bela's gastronomic dexterity helps her to turn a new leaf in her life, when a friend motivates her to host cookery sessions and start her blog “Bela's Kitchen”(137).

Tara asserts her independence, rebels against stereotypes, undergoes an abortion, disowns her father she had always adored, when he divorces her mother and refrains from encashing the cheques he sends her. Her visit to a temple of goddess Meenakshi in Pearl and, as a visiting Indian professor's chauffeur and a prayer offered in her name for the first time in her life by the professor, helps Tara to begin overcoming the negativities with which she had envenomed herself. She goes back to college and completes her education. The secret of enduring happiness and sense of fulfillment in life is revealed to Tara, when she reads her grandmother Sabitri's letter addressed to her. Before her death, Sabitri had written to her grand daughter, whom she had never met, about her agonies and ecstasies in life and the “conch-shaped dessert”(208), she had crafted. “Satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone. No one could take it away. That's what I want for you, my Tara, my Bela. That's what it really means to be a fortunate lamp” (208).

Hence the fictional world of *Before We Visit the Goddess*, chronicling the transgenerational lives of women conveys a puissant message that life is all about recrudescence by reining in recalcitrance

CONCLUSION

The narratives delineating the trials, tribulations and triumphs of women embody a constructive prospect, in motivating women to infuse into themselves the trait of indomitability inherent in the literary characters, propelling them to seek freedom from the adamant feters of patriarchy. This can also inspire women to identify regressive socio-cultural mores of suppression and negotiate the patriarchal labyrinth to create a space and identity of their own.

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