

Marginalization of Feminism in Literature studies

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Abstract

This is an attempt to study and see how female characters in various literatures of the world are marginalized and have no say in their worlds from where they come. They are mere puppets at the hands of the counterparts who are the whole sole in charge of their females. They take the decisions on behalf of their womenfolk, who also willingly submit themselves to their husbands. The paper is divided into three parts women in epics, women as witches and role of women in children's literature to understand it in a better way.

Keywords: Treatment of women in epics, women as witches, and women in children's literature.

Marginalization of Feminism in Literature Studies

This is an abstract paper which tries to study how Marginality and Feminist Studies are inter-related and how literature had always marginalized female characters, voices, and their writings. This is the time to rethink about it seriously as to whether both the genders are equal and that both the genders should be treated equally.

Feminism is a word that evokes different images for different people, some of which are completely contrary to the point and aim of feminist ideology. And marginality from a scientific perspective is understood as deviance from the norm. It means of relating to, located at or constituting a margin, a border or an edge.

Women's role in pre-colonial social structures and women's role in them reveal that feminism was theorized differently in the country like India than in the western world. This has happened because of India being colonized by the Britishers. As per the "Indian culture" and reconstruction of Indian

womanhood which is the epitome of this culture has undergone social reform movements which resulted in political theorization in the form of nationalism rather than as feminism alone.

Historical circumstances and values in India make women's issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. The idea of women as "powerful" is accommodated into the system of patriarchy, it is only through culture and religion. This has retained visibility in all sections of society; by providing women power with traditional "cultural spaces". Another consideration is that whereas in the West the notion of "self" rests in competitive word known as an individual where people are described as "born free yet everywhere in chains", by contrast in India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of the larger social group, dependent for its survival upon co-existence with others and denial of oneself for the greater good.

Indian feminist scholars and activists have to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India. They define feminism in terms of space and time in order to avoid the criticism of aping the west. Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes - like the dowry, bearing sons etc. - Kinship, community, caste, village, market and the country or the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nairs of Kerala, People of North east certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest women rather than the oldest man. Even Sikhs are regarded as gender neutral.

The heterogeneity of Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies and so also there are multiple feminisms. Hence feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women and women as a group. The widely used definition is "An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation". (Bhasin and Khan 1986). Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to challenge and eliminate it is the need. Deconstructing the notions mutually of both femininity and masculinity as determined biologically opens the way towards an equitable society for both men and women.

The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated Social Reform Movements against various social Evils. Patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies. Relational hierarchies between women within the

same family are more adverse. Here women are pitted against one another. Not all women are powerless at all times. Caste-community identities intensify all other hierarchies.

According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later (approximately 500 B.C.), the status of women began to decline with the Smritis (especially Manusmriti) and with the invasion of Islamic people like Babur and the other Mughal empire and later Christianity curtailed women's freedom and rights.

The Indian woman's position in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period when traditions like sati, child marriages and a ban on widow remarriages became an essential part of social life in India. The Muslim rulers brought in India the practice of purdah along with them. Even among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, Jauhar was widely prevalent. In some parts of south India, the tradition of Devadasis or the temple women was practiced where women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practiced esp. among the Hindu Kshatriya rulers. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to Zenana areas. Let us have a look into the various traditions and culture that were practiced only on women.

Sati

Sati is an old, largely defunct custom, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre.

Jauhar

refers to the practice of the voluntary immolation of all the wives and daughters of defeated warriors, in order to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. The practice was followed by the wives of defeated Rajput rulers, who were known to place a high premium on honour.

Purdah

Purdah is the practice of requiring women to cover their bodies so as to cover their skin and conceal their form. It imposes restrictions on the mobility of women, it curtails their right to freely and it is a symbol of the subordination of women. It does not reflect the religious teachings of either Hinduism or Islam, contrary to common belief, although misconception has occurred due to the ignorance and prejudices of religious leaders of both faiths.

Devadasis

Devadasi is a religious practice in some parts of southern India, in which women are "married" to a deity or temple. The ritual was well established by the 10th century A.D. In the later period, the illegitimate sexual exploitation of the devadasi's became a norm in some parts of India. Thus, we can see that in different cultures and traditions how women were given treated and how she faced different ordeals throughout her lifetime in the name of religion or culture.

Let us now see through some examples the role of women in our Epics.

Sita in Ramayana

Ramayan is about "male-dominance" and women being treated badly throughout. Sending a pregnant Sita to the forest shows Rama as a weak husband. The whole story about the washer man sounds apocryphal. The opposition to Sita being the queen in Ayodhya, due to the Ravan episode is again a problematic issue. A lot of people doubt the veracity of the Agnipraves test. So evidently there were a lot of people who did not like Sita being the queen. This would have got worse when Sita became pregnant. Till today for millions of people in India Sita still remains the ideal female who symbolizes love, devotion and a submissive wife.

One of the few other things that would make feminists take umbrage is the treatment of Shurpanakha by Lakshman. Well chopping of a woman's nose isn't something that you can really justify. There are instances in the Ramayan that talk about Vishwamitra taking Ram around to kill Rakshasas, women included. About killing rakshasa women folk, the Ramayan is pretty clear. Ram does hesitate before killing women. Its Vishwamitra who urges him to do that. The moral that he points is that these women are not just women but have a political angle as well. Since they lead groups opposed to the vedic civilization, they are to be treated as political opponents and need to be conquered.

The treatment of Shurpanakha is also very strange. The sequence is something like this. She asks Ram to marry her. Rama refuses, says he is in love with Sita, sends her off to Lakshman, who in turn refuses, send her back to Rama, who again refuses, till she tries to attack Sita. Lakshman gets enraged and wants to kill her, but Ram gets him to just chop her nose and her breasts. This shows a cruel jest towards her by both the brothers. Since she was to take her leadership after her brother, they thought by doing this they will take away her leadership role, as nobody would want to follow a woman or a man with nose and breasts chopped. For both of them she is the 'other', the non-human. Is it justified to kill the women and the mother in her? She represents a class of females who are treated on the basis of colour, class, language

and gender. Even now a big insult is referred to as "naak katna" in north India. One wonder if this was the beginning of the term?

In retelling the Ramayana the reader is again and again reminded of the cruelty of the battle by pointing to the fierce scenes of destruction, mothers' wails, and children's cries. Sita represents all suffering and humiliation a women can go through even if she is of Aryan virility. Rama's wisdom propriety, honesty, and integrity are strongly questioned from a women's point of view. Shurpanakha the rakshashi is also humiliated and mutilated. Both had suffered at the hands of men. Sita as an Aryan women and Shurpanakha as an ethnic tribal where Sita is a colonizer and Shurpanakha the colonized.

Draupadi In Mahabharat

The game of dice is the central episode in the Mahabharat. The orchestration, choreography and the script that builds up, sustains and establishes the game of dice is totally conceived, executed and dictated by patriarchy. After that whatever happens is seen as part of "the divine plan". Duryodhana escapes the responsibility of his action by saying "one and only one governs all actions and the script of governance is in place even before the human being is born. It is He whose commands I am following". Draupadi's vastra-haran in the court in full view of everyone present is the worst violation of human rights imaginable. Draupadi stands for no more than a 'symbol' or a 'commodity' of honour of the Pandavas, her body is a blank page on which scripts of revenge and humiliation, men fighting like dogs are written. When she raises a question whether a lady of the royal family deserves this treatment Duryodhana says, she deserves this treatment precisely because she is a lady from the royal family. She has to be humiliated because she is the 'women of the enemy'. She is denied all agency and individuality. Another example from the same epic is 'Hidimbi' who is a Rakshashi. She met Bhima while he was travelling in the forest with his Pandava brothers and mother Kunti. After fleeing a burning palace at Varanavat, which was set up by their cousin Duryodhana to burn them alive; the Pandavas were wandering in the deep woods at night. Hidimbi's brother, Hidimba, an alleged cannibal, had sent her to bring him man flesh, but when she saw the handsome prince Bhima sitting in the glade she fell in love with him and could not bring herself to kill him. She transformed into a tall, dark-skinned and immensely beautiful woman dressed in ornaments and garlands and approached him. When Hidimbi was late, Hidimba came to kill Bhima himself. He tried to attack Hidimbi but she was protected by Bhima, who killed Hidimba after a good fight. Hidimbi then asked Bhima to marry her, at which he was reluctant initially but finally ensued after being repeatedly insisted. He agreed to spend the time from dawn to dusk with her on the condition that

during the dark hours he would remain with his brothers, and this would continue till they had a son. She eventually bore Bhima a son, Ghatotkacha. When the Pandavas left the forest, Bhima had to leave her as they were on a war campaign. It isn't clear whether they ever met again. How can Bhima ignore her? Did he not have the courage to take her along with him?

Let's take a look at woman treated as witches.

Women as witches.

The common "witch" that is thought of when one hears the word involves an ugly woman riding a broom, casting spells of misfortune upon people that are around her. This witch is truly viewed as a monster. You get this idea from childhood stories that we grew up hearing, movies, and even history books. This misconception led to the death of thousands of people, starting in the early thirteenth century.

Originally, the idea of witches dated back to early antiquity when Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were thought to be the only magical thing around. The idea of a witch was actually considered a sign of good fortune because the gods had looked kindly down upon you and granted you with the gift of magic. Over the years though, this "gift" began to be looked upon as heresy to the church and as a satanic religion. When the witch-hunt craze started, it is questionable whether there were really any real witches around anymore. Most of the accusations branched from family feuds, jealousy, greed, and people looking for a source of their misfortunes. It is questionable whether witches really existed until the twentieth century. A recent news appeared in The Hindustan Times journalist Kishwar Desai felt there is not enough being said about gender issues in art or in media. Her first work of fiction 'Witness the Night' talks about abuse of women. It is based on a real incident where a young girl is accused of murdering 13 members of her family. Even today even in this 21st century women are made victims in so many ways, it is not really surprising if one of them expresses rage. Sushila Devi and four other women, mostly widows, were beaten, paraded naked and forced to eat excreta in Jharkhand on October 17, 2009. They were accused of being dayans. Even the death of an animal becomes a trigger for condemning some poor woman as a dayan. Often it is an excuse to grab property or settle scores with someone.

Let us see the role of women in **Children's literature**:

When we talk about this literature we come to know that many of the stories or rhymes are only related to the male or boy character who is needed to rescue their counter parts.e.g Snowwhite, Cinderella, Harry

Potter, etc. For instance if we see the poem Jack and Jill the end line says and Jill came tumbling after. It is only after Jack that Jill comes. Even in Baa, Baa, Black Sheep the wool is first for the master and then for the dame. Hot cross buns in this rhyme it says “if you have no daughters, give it to your sons. In another poem “Rain rain” it says that little Johnny wants to play or in “Christmas bells” its time for toys that please all boys.

Thus, after contemplating on the above few examples we notice that let it be traditional narratives, jingle rhymes or witches, women are humiliated and torn apart both psychologically and physically by ambitious men. It is a tragedy of power, a conflict between love and violence between harmony and force. The price is always paid by the women as it is an unwritten law that anything untoward has to be borne, it is borne by the women only. This situation is a serious threat for our children. If they discriminate between tribals as ugly and Aryans as the desired race, or women as weaker as compared to men how will the future be? If literature differentiates between man and woman it is our responsibility to educate the mass and reduce these differences.

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