

The Portrayal of Development of the Self in the Selected Women Writings

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Abstract

Literature reflects the society and it has been since ages an essential means of portrayal of the developing self of women. This paper deals with an in-depth study of texts of different cultural backgrounds, mingling facts and fiction to portray realities of life of a section of society at the margins. The texts selected for study and comparison are American writers, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Joyce Carol Oates' *Marya: A Life*, and Pakistani writer, Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*. The selected texts chosen for study are essentially social realist and feminist in nature. The female protagonists achieve transformation not by reforming patriarchal systems, but by being creative and re-appropriating their own identities in the unfavourable and antagonistic systems. By the end of the texts, they have achieved a measure of fulfillment and a strong sense of identity which is quite encouraging for the readers. These books give an insight into the journey of their life from a troublesome childhood, struggling to cope, in the heart of their religious families, to confidence and self-dependence.

Key words: Literature, marginalized, feminist, self-dependence, transformation

It is widely acknowledged that literature is the reflection of the society. Literature reflects the perceptions and attitudes of the society. It portrays human life through characters, by their words and deeds convey message for the purpose of instruction, information and delight. It is not wrong to say that literature is witness to evolution of women through ages. The changing role of women in literature from the past to present indicates the evolution of women and women empowerment.

Since ages literature shows women adhere to the narrow roles of wives, mothers. It is apparent from medieval literature restrictions placed on women underwent significant changes, As the period went on, women gradually began to express more of her opinions and had equal role in society.

Over the last 150 years, novelists, whether male or female, have explored the psychology and social roles of women with increasing depth. Transformation was a common thread in the lives of the people of twentieth and twenty first century. There was a constant engagement with self discovery as a repercussions of the unrest that was taking place since the ages.

There has been much opposition to women's education from certain parts of society, mostly based on a form of strict religious doctrine, which led to the spread of ignorance and illiteracy. In addition, women were constrained by numerous social restrictions that contributed to the decline of their social role; however, these obstacles did not stop women from performing various roles in society.

Women's issues constitute the theme of many fictional and non-fictional writings. Discussing the image of women in the realist novel, the critic Mohammed al-Shin.i (2004,p.425) observes: "With regards to the female character in the realist novel in this stage, she is mostly characterised positively. Novelists give her a great deal of attention, and track her progress".

The paper therefore contributes to the movement towards a greater recognition of women's crucial, catalytic function in the achievement of social development and delineates these authors' expressed awareness of many women's actual direct involvement in the struggle against all forms of discrimination in society. This research paper has been undertaken as an opportunity to investigate the different qualities and types of conduct attributed to female characters in the selected novels of the transition, on the assumption that the texts reflect something of the way women are perceived and are playing new roles in a changing society.

Women's issues will continue to dominate novels as long as women continue to be marginalized. Noting the attention given to women's issues as a theme in Saudi narrative discourse, Khalida Sa.id (1991) attributes this attention to the large number of problems that beset women:

Until there is full equality in legislation and in reality, as long as people have preconceived ideas about women that have been formed over the ages, from myths and illogical perceptions, as long as society is unwilling to accept women's freedom with respect for her humanity, free from discrimination on the grounds of gender or race, according to the Convention of Human Rights, as long as these issues remain unresolved, this case stays open. (69)

For study, two American literary texts i.e. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983), Joyce Carol Oates' *Marya: A Life* (1986); and one Pakistani text i.e. Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* (1994) have been selected. The central themes of these writings are built on the well-known feminist concepts of separatism and self-empowerment, which are characteristics of female community and female culture.

Many a times, the change comes from within, i.e. the innate desire to improve yourself. While the other times, change is directly the result of outside influences such as a significant event or inspiration from other individuals or role models. The latter is the case in Alice Walker's novel. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* is an authentic fusion of transformations of people. The play between opposites, light and shadow marks the life of the protagonist, Celie. In the novel, Walker uses the inspiration and influence of other strong female characters to act as the change stimulants in the journey of Celie's transformation.

The novel is the journey of self discovery for Celie and for other characters. Celie starts the novel as a latent, calm young person, confounded by her own particular pregnancy, by her assault on account of Pa, and her sick treatment by Mr. _____. Highly inspired and influenced by Sophia, Celie is able to establish her independence from her abusive husband. Celie understands the fact that she is manipulated and controlled by Mr. ____ and acknowledges this when she

”think ’bout how every time (she) jump when Mr. ____ call(her)” (*The Color Purple* 38) we can justify Celie’s weakness considering that male domination has always been a part of her life. However, when she witnesses the relationship between Sophia and her son-in-law, Harpo, makes Celie realize that such abuse is not necessary and the desire to stand up for herself crops up. This is evident in the jealousy she has of Sophia’s strength, "I say it because I'm jealous of you. I say it because you do what I can't" (*The Color Purple* 42).

Celie longs for the courage that she finds in Sophia. Years of physical and emotional abuse made her feel that she cannot assert her own independence, and that she is powerless against her husband's manipulating ways. This desire to improve, coupled with the encouragement of Sophia, encourages Celie to assert herself. Sophia persuades Celie to stand up for herself; "You ought to bash Mr. ____ head open, she say. Think about heaven later" (*The Color Purple* 44). She explains Celie that she needs to start caring about the life she is presently living and that she need not get scared of Mr. ____.

Gradually, in the wake of gathering Shug and seeing her sister flee, Celie develops practical skills: she is a hard laborer in the fields, she figures out how to manage a house and raise children, and she meets other inspiring ladies, including Sofia, who has dependably needed to battle the men throughout her life. Celie's fortunes starts to transform: she inherits her organic father's domain, permitting her more noteworthy budgetary flexibility, and she manages to repair her association with Mr. ____ and make a sort of family with Mr. ____ Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Squeak, Nettie, and her own particular children.

Celie’s sister Nettie's arc is likewise one of self-discovery. Nettie received a greater number of years of schooling than did Celie, and Nettie has seen the world, working as a preacher in Africa, and eventually marrying a kind and wise man. Anyhow Nettie additionally understands that she can adjust her independence, and her desire to work, with an adoring married life that likewise incorporates two stepchildren—Celie's children, Olivia and Adam. Without a doubt, it is the landing of this extended family on Celie's territory at the end of the novel that indicates the last stage in both Celie's and Nettie's adventure of self-discovery. The sisters have discovered one another.

Throughout *The Color Purple*, Walker portrays female friendships as a means for women to summon the courage to tell stories. In turn, these stories allow women to resist oppression and dominance. Relationships among women form a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence.

Female ties take many forms: some are motherly or sisterly, some are in the form of mentor and pupil, some are sexual, and some are simply friendships. Sofia claims that her ability to fight comes from her strong relationships with her sisters. Nettie’s relationship with Celie anchors her through years of living in the unfamiliar culture of Africa.

Another eminent American writer, Joyce Carol Oates’s literary output is remarkable for its volume and breadth. She has been busy pursuing her reading and writing for more than four decades without any let up. The valuable substance that issues from such writings is Oates’s celebration of female community and woman culture. It is also her record of the expression of female individual identity and development through her protagonists.

Among her many literary achievements, is *Marya: A Life*, portraying the American society of the 1980s. It is an exceptionally forceful piece of fiction tracing the advancement of

an abandoned girl from a hard-bitten immigrant community. This novel, named after the female protagonist Marya, analyzes her life experiences and her several irksome relationships with men and women. The theme of *Marya: A Life* is rooted in separatism and sisterhood. The crux of the novel is Oates's intention of validating symbiotic bonding. Oates creates Marya Knauer as a woman who, beginning at an early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society cares to allow her.

American society, every family is androcentric and women are degraded and oppressed. Every law and custom of the family relationship is arranged from the masculine viewpoint, which spawns the dictum that the woman shall serve the man. Being so kept under the clutches of man, she cannot develop humanly, as he has, through social contract, social service, true social life. Amidst these sordid conditions, woman is treated as a servant. Marya, in *Marya: A Life*, is treated as a servant by her parents. Oates creates her as a bold woman who challenges this dispensation and moulds herself as a new woman who achieves freedom.

Oates's portrayal of Marya covers a long span of her life—more than three decades. During this period, she faces a lot of impediments posed by men as well as women. The period of her life is classified as childhood in the domestic domain, adolescence in the institutional domain, and adulthood in the professional domain. In these three domains, she strives hard to establish her female identity and to attain the liberation of her self. To achieve this goal, she resorts to separatism. To sustain the achievement, she follows the matriarchal vision—mother-daughter bonding. The system of mother-daughter bonding is also recognized as sisterhood.

Her father has been cruelly murdered by some unidentified strangers. Immediately after her husband's death, Vera takes her children to a town, leaves them there and disappears. At the age of eight, Marya's life of hard and grim experiences begins. Adopted by uncle Everard and aunt Wilma, Marya faces several difficulties and challenges in her life in her uncle's house. Marya's twelve year-old cousin, Lee, as a patriarchal representative, unconsciously, and without purpose, troubles Marya. But, as a tough and bold girl, she challenges him and takes revenge on him. After a few years, Lee gets a driver's job and leaves the family. Marya's aunt Wilma loathes her presence at home and imposes heavy domestic chores on her. As an adjustable, talented girl, Marya endures all these troubles.

In her article, "Stories that Define Me," Oates describes a similar predicament in her own life. The protected environment of the schoolroom is the beginning of Marya's gradual liberation from the limitations of her origins through the help of male mentors. Marya repeatedly makes a spectacle of herself in a community with very different expectations from women. She is boastful, vain, sarcastic, theatrical, experimentally flirtatious and daringly provocative. She boldly flings back dirty words at crude boys.

Marya shuns marriage and adopts the notion of separatism in order to give birth to a new self through academic study and scholarship. Marya is a "new woman" who feels free from traditional binding. So, she declares that she feels "inviolable—autonomous—entirely self-sufficient" (*Marya: A Life* 207).

Marya's voracious reading of the works of great authors provides her with new experiences and kindles her spirit of creative writing. She feels that "the experience of reading was electrifying, utterly mesmerizing, beyond anything she could recall from the past" (*Marya:*

A Life 134-35). Her self-sufficiency offers her spiritual strength. She begins to write stories. Two of her stories are accepted for publication.

Oates dramatizes Marya's personal relationship with professional men. In her adolescent period at school and college, she is very cautious and careful in maintaining her virginity. She is never caught or trapped sexually, either consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or accidentally.

Marya has a lot of merit-testimonials. She has published a well-received scholarly book and articles and reviews in her field. She has a very good reputation of being a dedicated and diligent teacher. She has learned how to succeed within the standards defined by the academic committee and to keep her inner creative part well-hidden. During the three phases of her life, Marya has nurtured her thought of her mother in her inner mind. She finally finds her mother.

Tehmina Durrani is an illustrious controversial writer catapulted to fame with the publication of her autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*, (1991). It won Italy's prestigious Marissa Bellasario Prize and has been translated into twenty two languages. In this book, she has written about her trauma and torture during her life with her husband, Gulam Mustafa Khar, the founder of the Pakistan People's Party. She occupies a prominent place amongst those contemporary Pakistani women writers who are constantly engaged in raising their voices against the ruthless marginalization of women, and also against the murderous patriarchal social structures.

Tehmina Durrani belongs to the renowned family of Pakistan which traces its ancestry to Afghanistan. She is the daughter of the former governor of the state of Pakistan and former chairman of Pakistan International Airlines, S.U. Durrani. She grew up in the high society of Lahore, Pakistan, but soon learnt to criticize the lifestyle of the fashionable ladies with whom she mingled. Her feminist activist responsibilities often bring her to the doorsteps of women below her class and status. Durrani left Pakistan and spent nine years in London when her ex-husband Mustafa Khar was sent into exile. Durrani was also married to the former chief minister of Punjab and the president of the Pakistan Muslim League Mian Shahbaz Sharif. All these occurrences and incidents in her life had directly influenced her creative perceptions of the precarious conditions of Pakistan and more especially the precarious conditions Pakistani women were inevitably confronted with. The socio-political and cultural situations also had posed a formidable question of a woman's identity.

Durrani identifies herself as a Pakistani writer; she has earned admiration as a strong woman of purpose and determination. Her aim is to identify the wife's body as the locus of masculine power in different social, economic and historical settings. Her work provides innumerable instances of traditionally orchestrated institutional discourses and practices that maintain the oppression and regulation of a wife's body irrespective of age, education, location, class and caste.

She believes that the act of writing for a woman is, an opportunity to break her silence of ages because the patriarchal set up has repressed her and the racial society has taught her to be culturally silent. *My Feudal Lord* describes Durrani's traumatic marital life with Gulam Mustafa Khar, an important politician in the Zulfequr Ali Bhutto government, who later became the Chief Minister of Punjab. Professionally a charismatic champion of democracy but on personal front he was an invertebrate wife abuser. *My Feudal Lord* is divided into three parts entitled – 'Lion of Punjab', 'Law of Jungle' and 'Lioness'. Throughout the novel one can map the progress of

Tehmina from an ordinary elitist housewife to an emancipated human being contesting for equal rights and women's empowerment.

The first part of *My Feudal Lord* depicts Mustafa as a man who revels in the total subjugation, repression and oppression of his female counterpart. Tehmina's conventional upbringing conditioned by her patriarchal social environment in which she lived made her accept her husband's physical assaults and sexual brutality, enduring these attacks as a part of her destiny. That was the social ethos which finds reflection in her persona. Her mother's comment aptly illustrates this: If a husband behaves in a strange or unreasonable manner, you should treat him like a sick human being, like someone who needs medical care and treatment. Deal with him like a psychiatrist. (*My Feudal Lord* 130) When she files for divorce. Her father tells her: You can only leave his home in a coffin. (*My Feudal Lord* 126).

The novel stands as a testimony to the developments of the writer from the status of an ordinary house wife exploited in real life but regarded as elite by everyone to that of an author giving vent to her feeling of anguish and gradually into a woman emancipated and struggling for her own identity. She also fights for her own rights as well as for those of other women. For thirteen years she lived that fear as the battered sixth wife of a feudal landlord from Punjab.

Walker and Oates portray that in the androcentric American culture, the male sensitivity is destructive and hostile to women. Tehmina Durrani offers a different version of women's predicament in a cultural context characterized by imposition of religious and superstitious beliefs. The female protagonists of these novels attempt to achieve autonomy and aim at establishing their female individual identity.

So true transformation in this sense is not only the recognition of the external change but the change in making of choices in the light of those changes that affect the track and route of one's life. As women gained equality, the female leading characters in the literature kept on changing. By studying these changes in literature, it is observed that not only do the characters embody the female identity, but also the heroines transform into the new figures that actual women aspire to be.

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