

## A Feminist Reading of Rukmini Bhaya Nair's Poems

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### Abstract

Rukmini Bhaya Nair is an award winning poet, writer, critic and a Professor of Linguistics in IIT, Delhi. This paper attempts to provide a feminist reading of the poem entitled "Margins, ma(i)nstream", "Blocking off the Light", "Reasons, Ltd." from Nair's oeuvre which gives the pleasure of reading poetry beyond the pure transcendental experience and certainly exposes the crucial belief system that works underneath any *Ecriture* feminine. The paper further elucidates her standpoint which is manifested through this poem that nullifies the prevalent patriarchal symbolic order and boldly urges for a new language.

**Keywords:** Language, Carnavalesque, Marginalisation, Norms, lack.

The idea of being without the borders/ boundaries of walls/ brackets/ room/ purdahs is a radical feminine desire that defies the patriarchal order which sets up rules to subjugate women's writings through centuries. Rejecting the male penmanship, Nair in her poem entitled 'Margins, ma(i)nstream' quests for a new language to command sentences which would inscribe her own bold and powerful standpoint as a writer. In this poem Nair locates the difference in the marginal status of women through its title. The title indicates the objective shift of the subjective 'I' in the word 'ma(i)nstream', thus, signifying the marginal position of a woman. Within the system outlined by traditional psychoanalysis, a woman is denied subjectivity (passive desire) of her own, positioned as she is the enabling (m)other to the formation of male subjectivity ( active desire being a properly masculine attribute).

The very structures of the language system exclude women. It can function only through the silencing of women and the repressing the subjective feminine. Rukmini Bhaya Nair consciously rejects the position of a woman in between the brackets and metaphorically rejects the patriarchal structured parenthesis – 'brackets, comma, semi-colon'. She desires to break up the hold of

constrictive structures that only considers woman as a ‘thing apart’. She claims that in the structured symbolic order of language the position of the female is as:

“A woman is a thing apart.

She is bracketed off, a

Comma, semi-colon, at most

A lower-case letter, lost” (194)

The notion of a unique separate entity of a woman is thus deconstructed by the sentence ‘A lower-case letter, lost’.

Bakhtin’s notion of ‘Carnavalesque’ can here be associated with the term ‘literate circus’ as penned down by Rukmini Bhaya Nair to characterize the writing of only the male writers which depicts the destabilization of reversal of power structures. But the patriarchal orders criticize the carnival mode of a woman’s writing as a ‘striptease/ Artist’ overruled from the status of dignity. She claims that the determinants of the ‘literate circus’ nullifies the concept of writing bodily which is associated with feminine writing. Nair asserts this by writing:

“In the literate circus

She is just a striptease

Artist.....” (194)

Rukmini Baya Nair asserts that the female body as open, blank, full of gaps and lacuna that ‘speak louder than words’ as observed by Irigaray and Cixous. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar too asserts in their essay entitled “Sexual Linguistics” that “the female subject is not necessarily alienated from the words she writes and speaks (516). As assumed the position of a woman as a ‘thing apart’, ‘a lower case letter, lost’ by the patriarchal structures, it therefore becomes hard to consume the words spoken by a woman which Nair writes as:

“Artist, but when she speaks

Her poems bite, ferocious” (194)

The ambitious nature of the female Artist is very much evident with the use and choice of words such as ‘bite’ and ‘ferocious’ which can never be associated with traditional and conventional nature and attitudes attributed to a female.

Nair considers ‘rhyme and shape’ of a work of art as a ‘primitive beasts’ signifying it as an age old male creation lacking the motherly nurture and care. She metaphorically determines that the ambitions of the female artist are recognizable by the shape and the rhythmic strains that flow through the creation of a female artist.

The polyphonic literary style mingled with verbal energy and ingenuity in her poems goes beyond the idea that poetry is only a pure transcendental experience. Nair at her best tried to address the existing literary problems through her poetry. A woman objectified by the social strata still desires to renew her energies to write her own experiences that would not be subdued. Irigaray refers to this new writing as a place where she notices a need for a new 'syntax', another 'grammar' of culture is crucial and essential for women writers. Irigaray trusts that the desired language of a woman will push beyond all boundaries set up by the laws of the patriarchy. Nair too in her poem 'Margins, ma(i)nstream' demands a new language by saying:

“She wants, she badly wants  
 Not a fresh lover, strongman  
 Or clown, but a new language  
 In which to hold her own.” (194)

Nair rejects the necessity of any 'fresh lover', 'strongman', 'or clown' who could help the woman to transcend from being 'a thing apart' to an elevated level in which her words would get a liberal expression and celebrate her feminist standpoint in the literary carnival. She addresses the desire to express the position of a woman in very boldly terms by emphasizing on 'badly wants'. She desires strongly for a new language that would help her to elevate her identity from the identity of only 'a thing apart' (marginalized) to that of flowing along the mainstream.

Nair in her poem entitled "Blocking off the Light" presented a 'shattered', 'dark', 'airless room' to block a woman's desire of an 'open space'. She is trapped within a new 'room' that is blocking off the light from outside. She is not only physically blocked off from light but also her mental state assures her no possible enlightenment. Nair writes:

“They have built a room next door  
 Where last week was only veranda” (193)

Here 'veranda' signifies an airy open space or a liberal space of power which is blocked purposefully to ensure darkness.

Nair rebukes this so featured-bounded space by introducing the character of a 'watchman' who with cane strokes at four a.m. smashes the sleep of the woman indicates the control of the phallogocentric male chauvinist attitude over the suppressed.

“So when the watchman's cane at four a.m.  
 Smashes up my sleep, and morning rises

Ghostly, from the other end of the world” (193)

The male gaze (as coined by Laura Mulvey) of the watchman along with his ‘cane’ symbolizes the phallic power, order, domination towards the sleepy woman – the powerless, passive being considered as ‘a thing apart’.

The powerless, objectified and repressed entity i.e., woman accepts all these acts of suppression as ‘natural’ because the social norms always taught her to accept and tolerate all these odds.

“I try to imagine, as is only natural

The shuttered beginnings of life

Before the emergence into woman’s sex

Filling up what used to be open space” (193)

The oxymoron ‘shuttered beginnings’ used in the poem by Nair justifies the position of a woman wholly controlled by the patriarchal determinants of the society/ family. Before the emergence of the psychosomatic pleasure, her own space is filled/ ruled up by some dominant self, leaving her own space (body) as the treasure/ power unknown.

Through the word ‘shuttered’ the caged life of the woman in darkness is emphasized. Moreover, the word ‘imagine’ stresses a voiceless woman’s emotional state of being.

She is left in darkness to suffer her feminine entity. She is not only blocked off from light but also her existence is being blocked by the cultural dogma set up by society. The cultural and social normative practices has blocked off her existence from the sources of light and bounded her to stay behind the purdah system. Nair tries to bring into focus the politics of reductionism of women’s identity by forcing her to block herself from all sources of light.

“Now an airless veranda, hung about

With purdahs, blocking off the light

Being blocked off from light.” (193)

Elaine Showalter in her essay entitled ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’ writes ‘Virginia Woolf wisely observed that while it is “unpleasant to be locked out....it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in”.’ Nair’s use of phrases and words like ‘airless veranda’ and ‘purdahs’ signifies what Woolf claims to be the worst condition for any being.

Nair focuses on the feminine desire of a shift from the socially constructed notions of associating reason/rationality with male identity and that of emotions and feelings with a female identity. Nair walks through this cleavage and claims that when a woman writes with the vagrant spirit of her mind/ intellect/ reason, she pens down with all her power to surrender. Here the seasonal reference of ‘autumn’ represents the maturity of the woman writer. She urges ‘to be met’ with the unknown territories of her strength of reasoning facts. Nair writes:

“Some write to remember, others

To forget

But when the vagrant

Winds of autumn sweep

Into a woman’s mind

She writes

To surrender, she wants

To be met...” (201)

Nair projects ‘loneliness’ like dry strokes are fading as the woman writer starts writing with all the reasons that she painted with the ‘inkwells’ she stored in her heart. Her entity so far left aside is now revived and she is capable to dive deep in the inkwells of her heart to write her ‘epitaph’. Here epitaph, signifies her writing with full of emotional attachment. She writes with regret as her green ‘lustre’ of summer/ youth/ beauty fades into death until her death.

“Loneliness

Like dry strokes fading

In the inkwells of her heart

A woman

Writes her epitaph

With slow regret

While summer’s green lustre fades

Into death unto death .” (201)

The new avenues visited while the act of writing provides a scope to encounter with words that is creating a sense of pleasure and delight within her. Nair uses the term ‘prancing’ to express women’s delight. Spring the season of new life/ new beginning is stressed by the poet to intend the act of writing with her ‘mind’. So far she has only enlisted facts and effects of the causes only to remember and not to forget. But now she is delighted with the words that ‘flash’, ‘burn and dance’. Nair claims this new beginning as ‘an endless unthinking’- an act that she does randomly without much thinking. This asserts her free state of mind. Thinking considered as an activity of only male reasoning is to an extent discarded by Nair. She writes that in this free state of mind mating with words becomes a simple activity as it is not controlled by any dominant patriarchal symbolic order of language. A woman is always kept under the strict boundaries of

social, cultural domains. This follows a biblical notion of fate based on their activity. But here the poet claims that after mating with the desired language, her words revive a new reason and she no more dreams of her fate. Nair writes:

“Words delight her  
 For just one prancing spring  
 They flash  
 And burn and dance! – an endless  
 Unthinking  
 Mating is so simple then  
 That no woman dreams  
 Of fate...” (201)

Nair associates all the seasonal qualities with different attributes in a woman’s life cycle. Interestingly in the last stanza of this poem she refers to the winter season which in common parlance considered to be the season of death. Here the white flowers are symbolically used by the poet to refer the last stage of a human’s life. Metaphorically Nair claims that a woman writer’s writing emerges out late after waiting for long time from the moist strata of her body. From her productive veins she roots her meanings and germinates her syllables. Rejecting the patriarchal order of language Nair claims that a woman writes as ‘nature dictates’ her.

“The white flowers of winter  
 Open very late  
 Under moist earth they  
 Wait and they wait  
 For meanings to root and syllables  
 Germinate  
 And in the end a woman writes as  
 Nature dictates....” (201)

### Conclusion:

Rukmini Bhaya Nair in “Margins, ma(i)nstream” focused on the identity of a female artist as a condensed, reduced and at most lost being who is marginalized and objectified by the dominants of the prevalent artistic/ literate order. She boldly arrests the attention of beginning a new

language to recreate a new letter case that would help to liberate the female from conventional boundaries and assure a new space for free expression of the female artist. Nair portrays the marginalized objectified woman in the poem “Blocking of the Light”. She displays how a woman is generally blocked in rooms, which is ‘airless’ and is deliberately kept under the ‘purdahs’- a social, cultural, religious construct that would help to keep the woman under the control of some dominant other. She is away from the open space which is scheduled to be ‘as is only natural’. She is left to believe this state of being as the only natural as well as ‘shuttered beginnings’ of her life. In the poem “Reasons, Ltd.” Nair projects the suppressed individual self of a woman who is left aside to enlist only the information for the sake of remembrance and not to forget. Nair through the seasonal references displays the various stages of a woman’s life dictated by her inner emotions. The poem projects how alike nature a woman’s writing germinates syllables and waits for meanings, till the words delight her. Through her poems, she dives deep into the surfaced problems of women in the Indian society and tries to eliminate the problems from its root. Nair’s use of language and form, her selection of words is highly impressive. Her poems represent an original voice, an intellectual witty tone of acuity that takes a reader beyond the pleasure of reading poetry. She writes forcefully the inherent problems of silencing a woman in a simple language. The co-ordination of free verse combined with the format, images, unusual languages, politics, and rhythm has enriched her oeuvre and elevated the standard of Indian English poetry.

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Paramita Dasgupta is pursuing her Ph.D. from Raiganj University, West Bengal. She has worked as an English teacher in Delhi Public School, Siliguri. She has skillfully trained her students in Teaching English as a Method Subject in Pragati College of Education. She has keen interest in research in English Language and Literature. Her area of interest is Psychoanalysis, Feminist studies, Cultural studies and eco-criticism.