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The Writings of the Bound: Authorship and Empowerment of Women

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Abstract

The writings of women had always tried to reflect, not just their dreams and aspirations of but the various ways by which women have been continuously oppressed or discriminated against by the patriarchal society.

In the light of this statement, the following paper analyses the importance of such women characters who are authors as delineated by such female authors as Shashi Deshpande and Jhumpa Lahiri. The paper employs the literary theory of feminism, especially the theory of écriture feminine as propounded by Héléne Cixous; and thereafter goes on to analyse the character of Jaya from Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* and the character of Jaya from Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*; so as to illumine how these two women can successfully challenge the norms of patriarchy by their resilience to pursue education and/or a career of author.

Keywords: écriture feminine, Gauri, Jaya, authorship

Introduction

In a society that lusts after the birth of a male child in a family; in a society that legitimizes prejudices and superstitions in the name of "culture and tradition"; in a society that has perennially attached authority with masculinity; and in a society that has developed the habitual practice of worshipping the patriarch, in such a society it is only normative for the womenfolk to find themselves being subjected under the iron heels of the patriarchal norms of the society.

However, the only place where such overarching power of the phallogocentric society ceases to operate is in the world of writing. Here the woman may express herself without any fear of reproach and persecution. Their writings are filled with the tears of thwarted hopes and crushed dreams, hopes of finding true and compassionate lovers, agonies of failed marriages and oppressive in-laws, and unrealized dreams of being treated as an equal to a man; but most importantly in these writings about themselves, the women are free from the need to live up to any expectation or cater to any norms that the patriarchal

society may expect them to live up to; for here they may speak and talk as they are, allowing their wildest dreams and passions to exist side by side their most demure desires.

Since, the women author writing about women seemed to yield such a mighty power to create a free space just by the use of her pen, it was only a matter of time that it came under heavy fire from the patriarchs of the society. Not only were the women prohibited to write but their writings were also ridiculed as emotional gibberish and/or the devil's whisperings that are meant to poison other women's minds. But despitethe stiff resistance mounted by the patriarchal society, the women turned a deaf ear to these limitations; as they continued the struggle for their freedom using the pen (which in turn is another phallic symbol) as their primary ammunition. They fought fire with fire. The male phallus was now rivalled by the pen.

The following article examines in great detail this significance and importance of the writings of women and how women authors through their writings have revealed not just the autocratic subjugation of women's writings by the patriarchal forces; but also the need in allowing the women their innate agency of freely expressing their thoughts and emotions in their writings.

The article begins by arguing that the women must not be forced to write using the same stereotypical tropes as used by men in their writings in depicting women characters. Instead the women authors should choose to write keeping close to their "body". In other words, the works of the women authors must be steeped in descriptions relating to their deepest and secret emotions; their bodily cravings, functions and changes; and most importantly how they choose to see themselves ─ descriptions that would truly set the writing apart from the customary manner men have perennially sketched their women characters. In this advocacy, the article closely follows the methods and arguments as propounded by Hélène Cixous in her foundational work, "The Laugh of the Medusa".

After setting these arguments as the primary theoretical basis, the article goes on to compare and contrast two women characters drawn from the writings of two very important Indian women authors, writing in English. The article first examines the character of Jaya, the protagonist of the novel *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande. As the novel was published in 1988, it is often rightly criticised for its presentation of certain clichéd tropes of women oppression ─ such as an uncaring husband, torturous in-laws etc. ─ but the novel deserves special attention because of the fact that, it delineates how the most neglected aspect of Jaya's character ─ her ability to write and her past career as an editor for a news daily ─ comes to the rescue of both her marriage and her family when her husbandis accused of taking bribes from a client. Thus, Deshpande's novel firmly establishes the need for the women to write and continue the practice of writing; but it fails to take the revolutionary leap of making Jaya walk out of her marriage with Mohan when at last she finds a resort in her writing career.

Written, after twenty five years, Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's*The Lowland* (2013) however does not shy away when the time arrives to take a harsh decision. Imbued with the same revolutionary spirit, as in her beloved Udayan ─ the burning spirit of Naxalite

revolution against which backdrop the very novel is set ─ Gauri finding the slightest avenue to continue her post-doctoral studies in an American university, she does not hesitate to walk out of her piteous marriage with Udayan's brother, Shubash, and relegate her daughter Bela to the care of Shubash.

The article examines in clear detail how both these female authors have delineated the cause and manner of the empowerment of their respective women characters, and why there exists such a huge difference in them. The article nevertheless, abstains from going into a value judgement of who is correct and who is wrong. Instead it merely wishes to draw out a trajectory tracing the revolutionary change in which women authors now prefer to see their women characters.

I

The Concept of Écriture Feminine:

Published in 1975, Hélène Cixous' seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" presents a vituperative criticism of both phallocentrism and phallogocentrism and posits her own conceptualisation of écriture feminine (or women's writing) as its stark opposite. At the very incipient part of her essay, Cixous states pronouncedly her agenda in writing this essay. Cixous deliberately states that she is writing this tract as "a woman, toward women" and goes on to define the word "woman" as someone who is constantly engaged in a struggle against the "conventional man" and is committed to the task of uniting all "women to their senses and to their meaning in history" (Cohen and Cohen 875). Although soon enough Cixous does not fail to acknowledge the multiplicity of the implication of the word "woman", as she accords that not all women are the same, but each differ from the other only in positive terms.

Hereafter she fires her first salvo against phallocentrism by her forceful imploring of women to write, so that other women may also be inspired to come out of their closets and speak their mind without any fear or favour.

Cixous says that writing should not only be reserved for the "great men" and in tandem, writing by women should not be considered as silly; insteadshe urges women to write without anything to hold them back—such as a man, "the imbecilic capitalist missionary" which controls all publishing houses; and not even "yourself" (Cohen and Cohen 877). Cixous thus sounds a clarion call: "woman must write woman. And man, man" (Cohen and Cohen 877). According to Cixous this is important, as in the entire gamut of literature "across languages, cultures and ages" (Cohen and Cohen 878) one will find that only a handful of writings could be truly considered as inscribed in "femininity". In this regard Cixous excludes those "species of female writers", whose "workmanship is in no way different from male writing, [as it] either obscures women or reproduces theclassic representations of women (as sensitive−intuitive−dreamy, etc.)" (Cohen and Cohen 877). Cixous therefore, prompts women to begin an original trend of writing, one that would be liberated from the phallogocentric usage of language and will be written in "white ink" (Cohen and Cohen 881).

According to Cixous, the woman must write herself without alienating her body from her form of writing:

> Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naptha will spread throughout the world... that will change the rules of the old game. (Cohen and Cohen 880)

To expound in detail, as rightly pointed out by M.A.R. Habib, "the female body" has for long been "repressed historically by the apparatus of the male theology and philosophy, social systems and even psychoanalysis" (704); but now by writing close to the body, feminine writing will once again assist in "facilitating a return of the repressed, a resurrection of that which has been subordinated and treated as secondary, as dirty" (Habib 704). Furthermore, according to Cixous, writing close to the body would help the women celebrate her own bodily features (such as the differences in their shape, colour, race, religion etc.) and not come to regard it with abhorrence; and thereby in turn allowing for greater complexity and diversity of writing. In other words, for Cixous, all bodily functions and the processes that a woman undergoes in her life — her periods, her sexual desires, the pains of childbirth, the joys of motherhood, the agonies of old age — are not negative but positive forces that should no longer be shoved under the carpet but celebrated and openly discussed.

M.A.R. Habib thus rightly summarizes Cixous' connection of the body with a personalized form of writing in the following manner, as:

> an emblem of drives, the resistant particularity of experience, the uniqueness of individuals that cannot be subsumed under coercive classifications, the impossibility of abstracting the historical and the national from the personal. And the writing that writes the body refuses codification and closure, resists obeisance to the throne of reason, and insists on its living connections with the materiality of the body, its drives, the unconscious, the libido. (Habib 706)

According to Cixous, when women would achieve such a form of writing that is free from any patriarchal constraints, one would gaze upon the face of the deadly and monstrous Medusa, and not find her "deadly", but would rather see her as beautiful and observe her laughing.

II

Jaya: In Between Silence and Writing

Published in 1988 and set against the backdrop of the metropolitan Bombay of the 1970s, Shashi Desphande's *That Long Silence* is one of the most articulate narratives that seeks to describe not only the pangs and anxieties of a housewife caught within an abusive marriage but sets it in contrast with the freedoms of an author. The novel closely traces the psychological development of the character of Jaya as she grapples with the question of expression and the art of writing. However, very little critical attention has been paid to this aspect of the novel as most scholars and critics chose to analyse and

interpret the centrality of the character of Jaya and her plight as the universal correlative of the fate of all Indian married women.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan reallocating to a dingy apartment in Dadar leaving all their prized possessions of a posh home and a luxurious life in Churchgate, following an official enquiry that has been initiated against Mohan on the charges of bribery and embezzlement of funds. However, this reallocation serves a very important function of depriving Jaya of her identity as "a woman, a wife and a mother" (Bhalla 38) ─ for all of these had been invariably linked "only to the acquisition and caring for possessions and the house" (Bhalla 38) ─ and thereby gives her the requisite space to reflect upon her life and her experiences as a married woman.

Jaya accepts that in the very incipient part of their marriage, Jaya and Mohan had actually shared a great bond, but gradually they drifted apart as silence crept in. This was facilitated by the fact that Mohan being an orthodox man, he did not give Jaya "much freedom" nor did he endeavour to "understand her emotional self" (Gulia 423). Jaya is thus left with no other but to confine herself to a bounded silence that was born out of the age old indoctrination that the husband is "a sheltering tree". Nevertheless, what is interesting to note herein is that, Jaya's reflections on her married life is not bounded to her own self only but also comes to include the lives of other women (who both belong or do not belong to her family) who are oppressed not just by men but also by patriarchal women. In this vein Jaya narrates the tale of the lunatic Kusum, her paternal grandmother whom she calls "ajji", the childless Jeeja and Vanitamami "with her endless pujas and fasts" (Bhalla 42).

However, these reflections of Jaya are interspersed with a sunny recollection of her time when she could assume her alternate identity of "Seeta", the author of a newspaper daily churning out stories about a "plump, good humoured, pea brained but shrewd, devious, skimming over life" (Deshpande 149) kind of a woman. Although these stories depict the life of a vey stereotypical wife, with "recognizable traits in the travails of a middle-class bourgeois housewife", bearing great similarities with her own confessions noted in her personal diary; yet it is this small window which in turn allows Jaya her little freedom to carve out a niche for herself.

To elucidate in detail, not only does Jaya acquire fame as the creator of "Seeta" but her writing also acquaints her with Kamat ─ the old next door neighbour of their Dadar flat ─ who serves to hold up a mirror to Jaya, and lets her realise her true worth. Kamat critiques the writings of Jaya as being "too restrained" (Deshpande 147) and implores her to take up a "personal view, a personal vision" (Deshpande 147) which according to him, would set her fiction apart from the ordinary and run-off-the-mill writings. Furthermore, it is in the association of Kamat that Jaya admits:

> "With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself ─ Jaya." (Deshpande 153)

Thus Kamat is rightly ascertained to be a foil to Mohan; as Jaya is made to realise, that the superior power of writing and the agency of writing one's own self and body, does not necessarily entail setting everything in the public eye; but rather involves adopting a critical distance that allows one to make oneself the subject of evaluation.

III

Gauri: Breaking Free from the Shackles

Gauri as delineated by Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel *The Lowland* is perhaps one of the most anti-conventional delineations of an empowered woman.

Although the novel begins on the note of filial love, depicting the deep bonding the two brothers Shubash and Udayan shared between them; soon with the passage of time and in the course of the novel, both brothers drift apart from each other primarily, owing to their studies and due to the apparent rift in their ideologies ─ while nothing can interrupt Shubash from pursuing his PhD at an university in Rhode Island in America, Udayan happily gives himself over to the Naxalite movement ─ and both continue in their own paths. It is here in America, that Shubash is intimated by Udayan that he has "found a girl all by him" (Pius 104). This is the first time that the readers are acquainted with Gauri, the lady love of Udayan.

Gauri is depicted to have been born in 1948 and she hails from North Calcutta. At a very young age Gauri was sent away from her "parents' village" (Lahiri 57) to stay with her grandparents in Calcutta in the pursuit of a good education. The only relative she had in this strange city was her brother Manash, two years older than her. Manash and Udayan were both graduate students of the Physics Department at the Calcutta University. It is through Manash that Udayan came to know Gauri ─ who at that time was studying Philosophy at Presidency ─ and soon enough they had developed proximity towards each other.

In the long letter that Udayan writes about Gauri, there is a significant amount of information that helps the reader in drawing sketch of her character during her pre-wedding days. Udayan narrates that in her grandparents' house, Gauri feels most attached to the balcony for not only does it provide her a place of reclusion and contemplation but also a place where she can truly feel associated with. Furthermore, Gauri is said to be someone who greatly privileges her studies and reading of books much above petty jewels and saris (Lahiri 46). Such a mindset had prepared Gauri to be imbued with the revolutionary ideals of the Marxists-Leninsts when Udayan decided to indoctrinate her.

However, with the turn of a few pages, Gauri's life had been completely overturned with tragedy ─ following close on the heels of her marriage with Udayan, Gauri was widowed as the police shot down her husband right in front of her eyes, on false charges of sedition and treason ─ leaving her no other option but to look for a new life. The option to do so came from an unconventional quarter, as Shubash unable to bear any longer the act of blaming Gauri alone for the death of Udayan ─ who according to BijoliMitra, the mother of Shubash and Udayan, had failed as a wife to distract Udayan from his revolutionary activities which had eventually led the police to find him out and shoot him in cold blood ─had offered Gauri the option to re-allocate with him to the U.S.A and to begin her life there anew. Faced with the question that what was going to be the fate of the child that Gauri is impregnated with, Shubash had accorded that, "I'll make it mine, Gauri" (Lahiri 137). Thus, Gauri moved to Rhode Island and was quickly swept back into the flow of life once again ─ she had not only started her studies all over again,

but had gone to become the daughter-in-law of Bijoli Mitra "twice over" (Lahiri 186); while the "exact pitch and manner of speaking" (Pius 106) of Udayan was replicated in the voice of Shubash.

Soon enough Gauri found herself so much absorbed in her studies, that encouraged by her professor, Otto Weiss, she did not even once hesitate to leave her home, her responsibilities as a wife to Shubash and even desert the care of her child Bela to pursue a doctoral program in Philosophy in tandem with a teaching position in California.

Pages and pages of scholastic debates have tried to gauge the reason to such a behaviour on the part of Gauri, but none have come close to an iota of the real cause ─ Gauri is a woman who loves learning more than anything else, as time and again she herself had said that it is only studies that keep her the best company. It is imperative to note herein, that any interpretation that tries to malign Gauri as an irresponsible and selfish mother or a kind of lunatic woman is absolutely false, as none of those criticisms takes into consideration that Gauri in her youth had willingly left her parents' village to pursue studies inCalcutta; and it is therefore only natural that finding such a great opportunity to pursue doctoral studies and lead a life as a mentor to young minds would only draw her out of her cloistered life.

IV

Conclusion:

Thus to conclude, being written at a time far removed from Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri could create the best, if not the ideal representation of an empowered female in her fiction, one who does not hesitate to walk away from her family and social life in the quest to set up her own identity, with only writing and education as her means. In other words, if Jaya ─ a budding author who wilfully succumbs to the limitations of her own patriarchal society ─ is the genesis of an empowered educated female, then Gauri ─ a revolutionary woman and a scholar in making ─ is the goal to which modern feminist fiction must journey towards, in order to create truly the ideal picture of the liberated woman, empowered by nothing short of an unbridled capacity to write and speak what her mind desires.

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