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## Between the Conscious Present and the Unconscious Past: Glorifying and Stereotyping Womanhood in P. Raja's Poems

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### ABSTRACT

Discussions on womanhood have been present in our society for ages. Unlike olden days, women of modern times are empowered through education and employment. A woman has realised her potential to find her 'self', shifting from the state of the 'other'. In this changing scenario, to some extent, men also have changed their mind-set; they support women and try to acknowledge their inner spirit. UN's solidarity movement- HeForShe, for the empowerment of women and girls calls for reflection in this context.

This paper stems from an interest in understanding if and how literature reflects this shift in power politics. The earlier feminists, especially the gynocritics believed that it was not possible for a male writer to express the feelings or experiences of a woman. They tried to develop a "specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women" (Abrams, 108). But today, to a considerable extent, male writers try and succeed in identifying women and their spirit. The poems of P. Raja, a writer from Pondicherry and a prominent figure in contemporary Indian Writing in English, have traces of these ideas.

Raja's poems celebrate womanhood and for him woman's body is not a mere object of pleasure, but a source of power and inspiration. He discovers the spirit in 'her' and in 'him' through the female body. But this paper endeavours to focus on how his celebration of womanhood is shifting back to the traditional way of stereotyping woman to a domestic space. The paper tries to show how even though he tries to celebrate womanhood, it retorts to the conventional way of confining and glorifying her roles as 'submissive wife' and 'sacrificing mother'. Drawing on Carl Jung's idea of "archetypes"- which consciously or unconsciously rule the writer's mind and take an expression in his writings, this reading will show how Raja's poems go back to the traditional way of writings which constructs stereotypes such as woman, as subservient wife, self-sacrificing and nurturing mother, charming and alluring lover, etc. To facilitate such an understanding, this paper undertakes a close textual reading of his poems.

**Keywords:** Conscious, unconscious, womanhood, archetypes, stereotyping.

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Indian tradition and culture expect woman to have a dependent nature. In *Manusmriti* it is written that “day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the male (of) [...] they must kept under one’s control. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth and sons protect (her) in old age: a woman is never fit for independence” (Buhler, 56). Discussions on womanhood have been prevalent in our society for ages. In earlier writings, women were represented more as symbols and less as human beings. In early Indian writings also the representation of female characters is only in a single dimension as a sacrificing and nurturing mother, virgin heroine (*femme fatale*), dutiful daughter, redundant wife, *pativrata* (loyal wife). Zillah Eisenstein, a feminist theorist and activist calls “Literature as a repository of positive and negative values of women” (Buker, 223). Through this, male writers are creating some stock characters and try to position women in a confined domestic space, constructed on the societal norms and mores. No nation or society can claim that they have achieved gender equality fully well. India is not different from having unbending and tradition-bound society. The patterns of power in a society construct the masculine and feminine identity.

Unlike olden days, women of modern times are empowered through education and employment. A woman has realised her potential to find her ‘self’, shifting from the state of the ‘other’. In this changing scenario, to some extent, men also have changed their mind-set; they support women and try to acknowledge their inner spirit. The United Nations’ solidarity movement- HeForShe, for the empowerment of women and girls calls for reflection in this context.

The present paper stems from an interest in understanding if and how literature reflects this shift in power politics. The earlier feminists, especially the gynocritics believed that it was not possible for a male writer to express the feelings or experiences of a woman. They tried to develop a “specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women” (Abrams, 108). But today, to a considerable extent, male writers try and succeed in identifying women and their spirit. The poems of P. Raja, a writer from Pondicherry and a prominent figure in contemporary Indian Writing in English, have traces of these ideas.

P. Raja is a creative writer, a critic and a translator. Both in India and abroad, he has published many poems, short stories, one act plays, articles, reviews, skits and features in more than three hundred and fifty newspapers and magazines. His poems are generally focussed on the themes of love, death and nature. Most of his poems are simple and small, but the way he conveys certain powerful messages makes him different from other poets. In most of his poems, he uses metaphysical conceits and hyperboles.

Raja’s poems celebrate womanhood and for him woman’s body is not a mere object of pleasure, but a source of power and inspiration. He discovers the spirit in ‘her’ and in ‘him’ through the female body. But this paper endeavours to focus on how his celebration of womanhood is shifting back to the traditional way of stereotyping woman to a domestic space. The paper attempts to show how even though he intends to glorify womanhood, his writings retort to the conventional way of confining and glorifying her roles as ‘submissive wife’ and ‘sacrificial mother’. Drawing on Carl Jung’s idea of “archetypes” which consciously or unconsciously rule the writer’s mind and take an expression in his writings, this reading will show how Raja’s poems go back to the traditional way of writings which construct stereotypes such as woman, as subservient wife, self-sacrificing and nurturing mother, charming and alluring lover, etc. Archetypes in literary criticism refers to “recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even social rituals” (Abrams, 23). To facilitate such an understanding, this paper undertakes a close textual reading of some of his selected poems.

As a progressive writer Raja tries to celebrate womanhood and understands, and admits the power of woman, in some of his poems. In his poem ‘The Woman Behind’, the poet talks about the enduring influence of a woman in his life or in the life of everyman. The poem shows

how the arrival of his beloved transformed the pettiness of his world and brought together new definitions of space and opened out new spirit in him. He calls her “dawn”, which stands for a new beginning with all its freshness. It also represents renewable and rebirth as well as strength after undergoing through hardships. When his inner growth takes place he progresses towards self-realisation. It is very difficult for a human being to find their ‘self’, but here through a woman the poet identifies himself. He says,

The struggle was long  
to know myself.  
Now I know who I am.  
You are the discoverer. (9-12)

At the end of the poem, he acknowledges her for helping him to cast his new identity. He declares that “Behind my sure success / You’ll be the woman.”(17-20). Here the poet pays much respect to the woman by adding an article ‘the’ before woman.

The poems, ‘History Repeats’, and ‘The Child’ celebrate womanhood and glorify the power of woman. ‘History Repeats’ demonstrates the pain that a woman bears while giving birth to a child. Here the poet glorifies the state of motherhood. A woman has only received the gift of giving a life. In his most controversial poem “13 Different Ways of Looking at the Breasts Not Yet Manhandled’, he celebrates the state of motherhood. He describes breasts that holds “wine of life/solidified,/ ready to melt/ at the touch of magic wand.”(16-19). In ‘The Child’, along with a child Raja brings both the theist and the atheist to the milieu. The child asks them a question “Who is God?”(1). The theist replies that,

“He is the one who  
created fish in the sea  
and in the river” (5-7).

And the atheist replies that,

“He is the one who  
invented net and  
fishing rod”.(10-12)

The child gets puzzled and goes to his mother. In ‘mother’ the child sees the God. The poet concludes his poem by telling that the child saw “God in his mother” (23). Here the poet

celebrates the divinity of motherhood. He thinks that no one can explain who God is, one can only feel the presence of God through mother. He celebrates the “grace and love” in her.

Raja celebrates womanhood in some other poems too. But the readers can perceive he is unconsciously retorting his writings to the traditional way of writing, where women are cornered to a domestic space. Every culture is influenced by the myths prevailing in that society. Both the Western and the Eastern myths are male centred. These myths also play an important role in gender construction. Myths and history project woman for restricting them to some domestic roles. With the myth of woman as motherland, she is symbolised as nationhood- ‘custodian of culture’. These myths and stories create archetypes, which is the part of one’s ‘collective unconscious’. Karen Horney, points out that the male writers were governed by the general notion that a “woman is innately weak, emotional, enjoys dependence, is limited in capacities for work” (Barrett, 49). They are constructed as the epitomes of virtue and beauty, which is not real. This statement gets reflected in the poem ‘Women Power’. In this poem, the poet uses a female narrator and shows how she derives her identity through a man and escapes from “a vegetable life”. He draws the biblical story of Adam and Eve to the context. This shows how to some extent the author is influenced by the male- centred myths and how these myths acts as archetypes in his collective unconscious. He seeks an expression of this archetypes through his writing. By using a woman narrator the poet tries to express the feelings experienced by a woman. But here arises the apprehension expressed by the gynocritics, that a man cannot express the feelings and emotions of a woman. Even if the poet is using a woman narrator for his poem, he and his conscious and unconscious caught in between the present progression and past myth, give voice to that narration. The woman narrator praises the man for helping her to identify herself. She says that without man she wouldn’t have ever known “the pleasures of motherhood”. It is he who turned here “sleepy womb” into “throb of life”. She adores him for guiding her at every stage of life. At the end of the poem the narrator says,

For divulging my woman power  
O my man  
I will forever remain  
your prized possession. (20-24)

Here the readers can clearly perceive the poet's chauvinistic mindset that reflects Horney's words and making woman as a "prized possession" of man. Here she is portrayed as an object of possession. Possessing something shows the dominance and the right of the owner over the possessed thing.

In 'When She is Gone' the poet speaks about the loneliness he feels when his beloved is not there. With the title and the first stanza, the readers feel that he is a writer who believes in the mutual co-existence of man and woman in a society. When he thinks about the absence of the beloved he feels alone. The very existence of the writer is questioned by the absence of his beloved. But the following stanzas reflect how he is caught in the traditional way of portraying woman and stereotyping her. The poet positions her to the domestic space and the poem clearly demonstrates how a typical wife should be. She is merely reduced to the domestic space; to "kitchen" and "the window-pane", which symbolises her restricted freedom. He thinks that when she departs from him he has to cook his food and "scratch my back". He says he will miss her "charming, shining face/ pressing against the window-pane/awaiting my return home." (11-13). Here also one can see the general attitude of man over his wife, a wife faithfully waiting and praying for her husband's return.

In 'My Wife is a Scientist', he confines her position to the domestic space- kitchen. He says that his wife is a scientist and her laboratory is kitchen. Throughout the poem he uses the images that stand for domesticity like cups, jugs, crockery, saucepans, etc. and explains her actions re-counting domesticity as "She minces; she chops;/ she bakes; she broils;/ she serves ; O she serves!" (16-18). Her importance is reduced to cooking and comforting her husband. Along with this poem, 'A place of My Own', Raja places man and woman in two isolated and clearly demarcated spaces. In the former one he places woman in the domestic space and mundane - kitchen. In the latter one he places himself in an intellectual space- a library with "the stink of soiled and moth-eaten books" (9) and "spine-broken and unshapely books" (14). 'A Journalist's Life' also confines her to the position of a caring and loving wife, again to the constructed space, who redefines the pressures of time and work to him. The poet describes himself as a man who works hard "to make both ends meet" (1).

Both in media and literature, there will be stock characters like Dame Van Winkle, who irritates her husband with her clamour. This is another kind of stereotyping to Indian woman, as

‘nagging wife’. Raja also cannot escape from this kind of stereotyping. His poem ‘My Critic’ reflects this. He calls his wife a critic and says that basically she is “always nagging and discouraging” (5). Her care and concern for him disturbs him. ‘The Hungry Gecko’ also reflects the power politics, that woman is always weak and inferior to man. He personifies the cockroach and the gecko to a woman and man respectively, by using the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘he’. Here the poet brings the prey-predator relationship and indirectly presents the sexual violence against woman.

In a nation like India, where patriarchal norms and mores play an important role, the progressive male writers are torn between the past tradition and the present progression. In a patriarchal society when a male child is born, before getting formal education and intellectual insights, his mind is psychologically conditioned with patriarchal moral codes. After getting the formal education, he tries to break up the traditional patriarchal norms, but he fails there. He is always caught between the conscious present and the unconscious past. He fails to come out of the patriarchal cocoon. P. Raja’s poems reflect this. As a progressive writer he tries to come out of that conservative cocoon, but because of his inclination towards the past, he fails there. Sandhya Mulchandani in her book *The Indian Man: His True Colours* says that “entangled in changes that have not been at their call or initiative, forced to make changes that go against the grain of masculine tradition, [Indian] men are increasingly caught between what they recognize as being politically correct and their own self-interest” (Mittapalli, vii). In this modern era of writing “whatever has been considered as archetypal has become stereotypical” (Aruna, v). P. Raja is not an exception. He is also caught in two worlds that is the conscious present and the unconscious past. As a result, his writings go back to the traditional way of writing where women are stereotyped.

Humanity needs both men and women. The existence of man and woman in a society is like a circle. Without the mutual existence of both of both of them the circle won’t be complete. Men have to understand women and their potentialities and vice versa. No one is superior to the other. Let us hope for a nation where both men and women will be treated equally and hope that it will happen in near future.

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