

An Analysis of Gopini Karunakar's Short Story 'The Moon in the Earthen Pot' from a Feminist Perspective

Dr. Nira Konar

HOD Humanities, and Associate Professor of English
College of Engineering and Management
Kolaghat

ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses upon an analysis of Gopini Karunakar's short story 'The Moon in the Earthen Pot' from a feminist perspective. This seemingly simple story has been chosen as a representative text, to explore the dualities at play in the text, including the marginalization of, and yet empowerment of Femininity- and that too of a poor, marginalized, elderly female character.

This paper underlies the fact that Feminism is a social and cultural construct. It also demonstrates that the protagonist: an almost nameless, toothless and blind 'Gudavva'(grandmother) in a village near Tirupati, is hedged in by the oppressive norms of patriarchy in traditional Indian society; functioning as it does along the lines of gender, caste and creed. Yet, surprisingly enough the female protagonist manages to blur the borderlines constructed both by the text and by the society, by the dint of her story telling.

This study deconstructs the given texts, and suggests the carving out of alternate texts, and identities, by this elderly marginalized female protagonist.

Keywords: feminism, feminist discourses, Indian, elderly females, marginalized, storytelling, magic, dialectics, texts, identities

Gopini Karunakar is a poet, as well as fiction writer. The text we are considering for our study is Karunakar's short story 'The Moon in the Earthen Pot.' It starts in the following manner:

"Once again Guddavva has taken out the moon from the earthen pot that hangs from our thatch roof, and thrown it back, up in the sky."(71)

Guddavva means 'blind grandmother' in Telegu. The setting is a village in the Sothern part of India. Though this story appears to be a simple enough tale for children, yet, read from a feminist perspective one can see the complexity and richness of the story as it unfolds. Guddavva

is an elderly woman, whose name we do not really get to hear, --she is almost **nameless**; only once we, the readers, get to hear that she had the name ‘**ljilacchmi**,’(74) **but that name had faded into oblivion**. So, like many marginalized women, whose social position and name would be lost, depending on the lack of support by her husband or son, here too with the loss of her eyesight and loss of her favoured place in the household; society seemed to have tried to wipe off ‘**ljilacchmi**’s **very identity**.

This elderly female who has been marginalized all her life, is however the central figure of this short story. Details of how she had been abandoned by her husband, and had led a hard life, bringing up her only son, are **a telling commentary on the condition of women**. Later on, after her son too leaves her, and goes back to the father and gets married, and settles down, while the poor mother has to fend for herself, we can **clearly see patriarchy at its worst**. Left to herself Guddavva has been cutting firewood, “selling water for the pilgrims visiting Tirupati”(74). The abandoned woman has to undertake the grind of daily work—they are such work that a poor woman in a village might have to do. Much of the work is back-breaking and yet, Guddavva, the aged lady earns the respect of the reader because of her ability to earn the coins in her own way, and at the end of the day to even feed sweetmeats to other children, tell stories as she confidently tucks in the betel leaves in her mouth. So though **the blind grandmother undertakes the traditional gender role of a ‘nurturer’**; at dusk she gathers the children of the village around her and feeds them sweets and tells them stories. The ability to earn for herself empowers her, **and in her quiet way helps her to carve her own space**.

The story moves backwards and forwards, and when it does start, we already find that this blind grandmother now stays in a village in the Southern part of India. **The child—who is the narrator of this story**, says simply in the fourth line of the story itself:

“My father’s mother, my Gudadavva, will wake up early tomorrow and put the moon in the earthen pot again..”(71)

Guddavva stays in her own thatched home under an ‘eucalptus tree,’(74) and she lives her life in harmony with the world around her. The very first line of the story tells us about ‘the earthen pot that hangs from our thatch roof’ (71)and yet, there is sheer magic—the magic of the moon, and the presence of the elderly woman.

It is remarkable is how this toothless woman at dusk gathers the village children around her, and feeds them sweets, and tells them stories. **On a more symbolic level, she feeds them stories also as a master story teller**. She nurtures the very souls of the children around her, though she has no children of her own. One would have expected this woman-- abandoned by her husband and son to be marginalized, and yet, she brings with her a sense of family as she is surrounded by

the children, is even surrounded by the other women in the viillage, for she asks Sakku Chinnamma, companionably, “Have some chunna?” (75) as both of them chew their betel leaves.

She is one who is loved greatly by the children for “She tells us stories. She gives us all lots and lots of special things to eat. She plays so many different games with us..”(73). When the narrator pesters her to give the moon, she humours him. Guddavva laughed through toothless gums. “I’ll give you the moon tomorrow, night” this is her persistent promise. There is something very homely in her quiet words “I’ve kept the moon safely in the pot. If I take it out now, the moon will just melt in your hands”(73).

Later on also we read “Guddavva untied the rope and slowly brought the pot down from the roof. She dipped her hands in and brought out the moon in her cupped palms”(72). Remarkable is the way in which this aged widow is endowed **with homeliness, and also poetic beauty**. The language and actions suggest something lyrical and endows all her actions with charm and **magical potency. Her ability to tell stories, her stories based on the ancient myths, her imaginative powers, bestows upon her with a certain potency**. The narrator tells us

“You got to keep an eye on Guddavva when she is telling a story for in the middle of it, she may suddenly prod the clouds with her stick and bring rain...or she’ll make the sun blaze red hot, or the great seas to rise in fury. Sometimes she can even magic the trees to burst into flowers! She says, a magician spans the seven seas with a single step!((73)

Gopini Karunakar has woven sheer magic, a story teller is endowed with potency and so the master storyteller that Guddavva is she overcomes the shackles of Patriarchy and seems to have almost supernatural powers by herself.

A close reading of the text brings out the dialectics at work. **The central character in this story is an elderly, marginalized female character**, where the female has been traumatized and made subservient to the husband or the son. **and yet, she is given a voice of her own.** This is a classic case **That Identity is often a social, sexual, cultural or economic construct** is made clear in the fact that Ijilacchmi has lost her very name, it has been relegated to oblivion, and her blindness defines her. Again, if **work acts as social markers** then we find that Gudavva had had to do a lot of menial work. However, there are certain remarkable points which make Guddavva stand out on her own. Though, she **has to take on the traditional role of the ‘nurturer’, yet it is remarkable that though she lives on the margins of society and feeds herself, she still earns and create enough food stuff to feed others with her own hands.**

Again, her **storytelling too has symbolic value, it enables to nurture and feed the mind's and heart of the other village children.** There is something homely, and sure about this elderly woman, as she tucks in the paan with practiced hand.

The narrato tell us that now **Guddavva lives under an eucalyptus tree, and as if by extension she is a part of Nature herself.** There is something 'magical' about her. **She tells fairy tales also** –the stories are of princes, princess, and **yet, from the feminist perspective we see that the dark realities of society** are there, not only through the figure of the Brahmarakshas but also through the story within the story where in the tale centering around Suranna we hear how the mother-in-law there is intensely hated by her daughter in laws. **The ugly social reality is embedded even in the substratum of the narratives of a fairy tale.** Moreover, even in the stories that are **told it is the male** –whether it is a Brahmarakshasa, or a Prince, **who is agentive and the central figures in the stories.**

Guddavva not only tells the stories, but enacts them. She is loved by all including the narrator and yet, there is awe and fear about this blind woman.

This ability empowers and makes this ordinary woman, move to the margins of the extraordinary. Her very presence and enactment of her tales makes her hover between the natural and unnatural. There is the visual and spatial depiction of her occupying the central position, as she sits surrounded by the children. Patriarchy cannot accept the extra-ordinariness of an ordinary woman. Her power itself, —her magic seems to have underlying shades of sorcery. The male narrator in the novel who avows to love his grandmother, gives voice to the awe, an yet suspicion about the elderly female.

Rea from the feminist perspective 'Moon in the Earthen Pot' remains a remarkable story of a toothless, blind woman who seems to traverse across all the boundaries. Guddavva enacts her stories, and through the process of enactment, she effortlessly takes on different characters herself. There is an element of fluidity –a constant blurring of borderlines between self and the other; home and homelessness; power and powerlessness that is reflected in the narrative itself.

REFERENCES:

Text

All references to the text are from **Gopini Karunakar's 'The Moon in the Earthen Pot'** from 'Fantasy: a Collection of Short Stories' Orient Longman Private Limited, 2002. Rpt. 2004, 2005)

Bibliography

Bhabha, Homi. 1990. Nation and Narration. London: Psychology Press.

Butler, Judith. 1993. Bodies that Matter: On the Discourse Limits of Sex. New York: Routledge.

Katrak, Ketu 2006. The Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.