

A Cultural Analysis of the Suffering of Women in World Literature

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ABSTRACT

Literature of the 21st century is a wholesome package of assorted subject matters in which each study is pregnant with meaning. One of the most controversial topics of this era is the oppression of women. It is ubiquitous in its characteristics and hence has been proving itself as a problematic issue for decades together. This paper will focus on the maltreatment of women that can be seen in the African, American, African-American, Indian and British literatures written by authors across the span of time. A parallel line will be drawn along the texts chosen to bring out the similarities and differences between the women characters with respect to their cultures. The complications on being a woman and the way in which these characters assert themselves to establish their roles in the societies they live in will be focused in works like *Storm in Chandigarh* by the Indian author Nayantara Sahgal, *Hotel du Lac* by the British writer Anita Brookner, *Sula* by the African-American writer Toni Morrison, "We should all be Feminists" by the African writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the ideas expressed in the poems of the American poetess, Emily Dickinson. Individuality is power for these women and the struggle they undergo to unleash their dynamism in this biased world is the result of an epiphany. The epiphany is the truth that they are no less than men. This revelation is the need of the hour and is poignantly presented in literature.

Keywords: Women writers, culture, identity, marriage

INTRODUCTION

We stand in an era in which women do not always retrieve into seclusion when surrounded by flames but are affirmed by the fact that they can conquer and find their way even if it means to walk through the blazing fire. However, the stereotypical societal norms and the cultural settings are hurdles that prevent them from leaping forward. Writers from across the globe have addressed this issue with the perspective of their cultural edicts.

Shashi Deshpande rightly explains in her essay "Telling Our Own Stories" about how women cannot start off on a journey towards self-assertion with a clean slate. They are made to carry a baggage consisting of tales, myths and archetypal concepts

about women being inferior to men. These ideas have been so infused into women that it takes a lot of determination to shun them away and begin anew. "Our very history has been told to us by others." [1]

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The method of research is done using the analysis of the text studied in parallel with the culture that each writer represents. Each culture differs in their treatment of women and the difference is also studied by having the similarities of the sufferings as the common base.

Historical documents and writings support the main ideas presented in literature pertaining to the struggle of women. A study of many genres paves way

for different perspectives and a better idea of the structure employed advertently for the understanding of the anguish portrayed.

Objective of the Study

The Objectives of the study as follows;

- i. To study the impact that culture holds on the stereotypes framed
- ii. To find the notions and the reasons behind the unequal treatment of women by men
- iii. To enlighten the impact of traditions that act as the tools of impairment in the empowerment of women

DISCUSSION

Amidst the binding forces of their communities, the women in particular seek for ways to assert their identities as individuals. Black women, for example, have been known to be tormented and tortured by their husbands as well as by the whites who oppressed them. This concept of 'double oppression' is often used to denote the multifold sufferings of the black women. African American women writers have explored the depths of human hearts when being subjected to such oppressions.

Sula (African-American):

Sula by Toni Morrison portrays the life history of a daring African American woman who defies laws to try to assert herself as an individual. Sula like every other African American woman face double oppression but the way she reacts to it is noteworthy. While most of the women surrender themselves to the binding laws of the community, Sula uses it for her benefit. She cares less about the colour of her skin and tries to assert her identity by sleeping with the whites. This quality of brazenness makes the community look at her in awe when she returns to Bottom after ten years. In stark contrast, Nel is submissive and allows the community to dictate the way she should live. To quote Alexandra Vasile: "...it is obvious why... Nel has difficulties in reconciling her individualism with the roles the black community expects her to play." [2]

Sula rebels against the traditional roles of an obedient daughter, loyal wife and a sacrificial mother. She rises from the very ashes that try to pull her down.

Storm in Chandigarh (Indian):

Indian women are generally seen under two categories that are extremely different from each other. Sikata Banerjee explains this idea in her book titled *Make Me a Man!: Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*. The 'pativrata' type of women represents those who view men as gods and are often willing to risk their lives to satisfy them. The second type of women opposes those rules that threaten to destroy their identities. [3] It has been widely agreed that a woman who enjoys the freedom of self-expression can ensure more compatibility in relationships.

Nayantara Sahgal's women characters are seen to be docile, ignorant and timid whereas the men are dominate and promote subjugation. The same idea is reflected in her novel *Storm in Chandigarh*. Saroj, a submissive woman, is enlightened about the basic rights of an individual by Vishal Dubey.

In India, virginity is seen to be an important necessity for a woman for getting married but with men, the idea of chastity loses its rigidity. Saroj accepts the truth about her pre-marital affair which greatly infuriates her husband, Inder. Inder has had a past himself but the rules of virginity does not apply to him because he is a man. When Inder interviews her as an immoral and soiled woman, Dubey sees purity and freshness in her. The latter boldly says, "If chastity is so important and so well worth preserving... it would be easier to safeguard it by keeping men in seclusion, not women... The entire east might flourish under this sort of reversal of purdah." [4]

Saroj and Inder suffer because of Inder's belief in the traditional roles that are assigned to men and women. Inder does not involve himself with matters concerning his children because according to him it is a woman's job. While Saroj finally decides to

step out of Inder's house, Inder loses the bliss of having a family. Sahgal portrays how the stereotypical roles prove to be fatal for the people. The author longs for the people of India to do away with compartmentalization. It is Sahgal's strong conviction that oneness is the mark of civilization.

Hotel du Lac (British):

Commonly identified as the "mistress of gloom", Anita Brookner is the winner of England's prestigious Booker-McConnell Prize for Fiction for *Hotel du Lac*. The dominance of her father had instilled feelings of hatred and hence Brookner views marriage as a prison and her characters reflect the same beliefs.

Ancient beliefs about women having an inferior status to men have spread far and wide. England is also victimized by these ideologies. The article titled "British Women's Emancipation since the Renaissance" manifests the state of British women.

English law and culture and customs derived much from these ancient cultures and their revered texts... Under English Common Law a woman's legal identity disappeared upon marriage... she could no longer contract, sue or be sued. All her property and anything she earned or inherited during the marriage belonged automatically to her husband with the exception of paraphernalia. ^[5]

English men believe that a woman is created to cook, take care of the family and arrange parties. Her personal desires are made to be suppressed and hidden. Brookner's protagonist of *Hotel du Lac*, Edith Hope, decides to stand out. Her fiancé, Geoffrey Long, had told her that she would have to give up her ambitions and prioritize him after marriage. The same idea is also seen in Mr. Neville. By refusing to give herself in to these men, Edith Hope reveals her aspirations of attaining her goals by breaking the norms of a traditional marriage where the state of the woman is so pathetic and her partner rejoices in the

advantages received as a result of her servitude.

It is strikingly admirable to note the common thread that runs in the novels of Morrison, Sahgal and Brookner. These authors focus on the need to satisfy the emotional need of the individuals. Sula, Saroj and Edith Hope long for deep, emotional connection with the men around them. While Sula and Edith Hope see hopelessness in meeting such broad-minded men, Saroj fortunately meets Vishal Dubey and is enlightened because of him.

Adichie (African):

Africa was once upon a time eulogized for its emphasis on matriarchal power. Women were equal to men but when the Europeans invaded, Africa became a patriarchal society. It is to be noted that the men of Africa viewed women as reproductive machines, devoid of any emotional response. They went to the extent of dehumanizing women. The cries of these women were best felt by the fellow African women. Some of these women went against the current to address these issues directly. Though Africa has become modernized, a large group of men are still bound by the traditional views on women.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie knew that she was meant to be a feminist even before she was familiar with the term. Adichie is at her best when she explores the psyche of African women. Gender difference is something she absolutely detests.

I know a woman who hates domestic work, but she pretends that she likes it, because she has been taught that to be "good wife material," she has to be-to use that Nigerian word-homely. The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations. ^[6]

She has been acclaimed by both men and women because she promotes equality, love and togetherness in relationships.

Adichie views are quite similar to that of Shashi Deshpande's. She views men as victims of the society. In one of her statements, she states her belief that we put men behind a hard cage and judge them by the act of generalization. Another similarity is that both these writers believe that women carry a baggage of ideas telling them who they should be rather than highlighting on who they actually are.

Emily Dickinson (American):

Emily Dickinson, who is known for her poems on death and loss, has dealt with the issues of discrimination between men and women both explicitly and implicitly. She talked about marriage in a positive as well as a negative tone.

Her poem titled "I Gave Myself to Him" views marriage not as a long-lasting covenant but as a mere contract that is signed to satisfy the selfish desires of a man.^[7] Dickinson, like all the other writers mentioned from various cultures, used her writings to express the views she condemned and supported. Her words were her tools and she used them effectively.

CONCLUSION

New and stronger relationships are built from the remnants of little sparks of hope that we find amongst hopeless situations. Viewing gender issues in the light of the cultural context helps us to gain an insight into the birth of these

stereotypical ideas and to find ways to emerge out of them.

Robert Frost says, "The best way out is always through." The only way to shun away the beliefs that threaten to disrupt our peace is to confront them. The call of equality resounds in our ears. It is not the duty of women nor is the liability of men to resolve these issues but rather it is the obligation of the whole of mankind to see and believe that such traditions should be broken for their well-being and benefit.

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