

THEME OF GENDER SENSITIVITY IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPE AND LESSONS IN FORGETTING

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Abstract

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases, the first phase beginning in the mid 19th century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evil of Sati. The second phase from 1915 to Indian independence began, when Gandhiji incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement and thereby independent women's organisation began to emerge and finally third phase, post independence, which has focussed on fair treatment of women at home, in the work place and right to political activity.

In the post colonial era, feminism has become an important ideological – political force. The contemporary women writers are sensitive to feminine issues and they give a new language and new idiom to articulate feminine sensibility. They challenge the unjust and exploitative gender based social constructions and radically change the general perception of women's place in society. Anita Nair, an eminent modern novelist frankly exposes the inhuman injustice done to women and the hypocrisy underlying the obnoxious patriarchal order through her major novels. A deep study of Nair's novels makes it clear that women have been living in pain and silence for ages as victims of gender bias and male dominance.

Introduction

Gender discrimination is the foundation for structural inequality between men and women by which women suffer sympathetic social injustice and the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity, but is produced by cultural construction of gender differences. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional, weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision making positions in the family as well as in the society, paying men higher wages than women for doing the same job and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such areas as mathematics and engineering. This kind of gender classification promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form of what is called 'biological essentialism' because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women.

Feminism therefore distinguishes between the word 'sex' which refers to our biological constitution as female or male and the word 'gender' which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine. In other words, women are not born feminine and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society and that has to be known as 'social constructionism'. So the ultimate aim of feminism is to promote gender equality.

Gender Stratification

In the Indian context, a woman has to face the problem of gender discrimination from the moment she enters this world. Female foeticide and infanticide is the ugly and earliest manifestation of

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discrimination against women. This is one of the major issues Nair deals with in the novel Lessons in Forgetting. When Shanta, the daughter of Chinnathayi, a mid wife, gives birth to a girl child, the remarks are very sharp from her mother-in-law. She says,

“We don’t need girls in our family. Let someone else have them. As far as I am concerned, they are trouble, just trouble.” (LF-351)

Nair exposes the cruel practice of this unearthly evil that still exists in some of the remote villages in Tamilnadu. Nair comes out with a warning to the society when she points out,

“Despite the laws and regulations, women still find a way of discovering the sex of their unborn babies. If not the women, their families. They abort the foetus, if it’s a girl. Soon there may come a day, where there are no women left” (LF-320)

The patriarchal society in India generally shows cultural bias against women. Girls are considered as liability until they are married off. Any kind of investment in girl’s education is considered as investment in failed enterprise. Their physical security is an added responsibility to the family. Practice of dowry puts extra burden on the parents and all these result into general preference for son. In *Ladies Coupe* the disappointment of Prabha Devi’s father at the time of her birth is revealed through his words.

“Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance” (LC-169)

In *Ladies Coupe*, the protagonist Akhila becomes the saviour of her family after her father’s death. She has become a useful instrument, a faceless provider. Eventhough, she is an income generating source, she is denied social independence. Akhila has to seek the permission of her younger brother to go out for a trip just because she happens to be a woman.

Meera (LF), a writer of cook books, has been content to stand in the shadows of her family. One day, when she is deserted by her husband Giri, she finds herself amidst wilderness. This is because she has been dependent on Giri so much that she no longer has her own identity. she feels emotionally paralysed.

Men have been using sexual violence and rape as a means to wield control over women from time immemorial and across cultures. Smiriti (LF) works as a sociologist and her plan is to fight against the evil practice of female foeticide. But, while executing her plan, she falls into the trap and is physically abused by a group of men. At the age of nineteen, smiriti has been reduced to silence lying poleaxed. Again, Marikolunthu (LC) falls a prey to sexual violence. The gloomy phase of her life begins, when she is deflowered by Murugesan, a man of aristocratic society. Constrained by the innate fear to voice out the injustice caused to her, she keeps quiet. But her pregnancy brings everything to light. For no fault of hers, the society expects her to feel ashamed and to bear the consequences.

Gender Sensitivity

Being sensitive to patriarchy is the very first step women need to take towards the path of liberation. Eventhough Nair’s female characters seem to suffer from the clutches of patriarchy, they are increasingly aware of the discrimination they have to face in the society and develop the urge to create a milieu for the full expression of their emotions and thoughts.

Akhila (LC) towards the end of the novel, emerges as an independent woman, going in search of her own self. Getting fed up with her multiple roles, she decides to go on a journey that will satisfy her hunger for life and experience. Meera (LF) transforms herself from being a weak passive woman into a more confident woman, thanks to a series of experiences she gains within her family and in the company of JAK, a professor with whom she optimistically begins the second innings of her life.

Marikolunthu (LC), after enduring a great deal of hardships, comes out as a new woman, taking a positive turn in her life as the mother of her son Muthu. Smiriti (LF) is a type of woman that the revolutionary Tamil poet Bharati dreamt of. Smiriti is silenced by violence, but she refuses to die and stays as a reminder of atrocities and exploitation against women in a society that adores the female deity in the form of Durga, Saraswati, Laxmi and several others. Smiriti may be destroyed, but not defeated. Her success lies in the unbeatable courage and indomitable spirit that she shows to abolish the evil practice of female infanticide.

Conclusion

From the foregoing study of the two novels, it is clear that most of Nair's women characters turn to be sensitive to the problems around them and they stand up to fight against it and assert their way boldly in order to attain a state of self realization. From the state of passive acceptance, they move to one of active assertion. Without succumbing to societal pressures, these Characters succeed in being individuals. When women are getting aware of the problems raised by gender hierarchy, it will certainly be a positive move towards emancipation. Here, it is apt to conclude with the words of Nair.

"Empowerment has to come from within" (LF-123)

References

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