

Pathivratha and Rajavritta: A Gambol of Patriarchy in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting and Mahasweta Devi's After Kurukshetra

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Abstract

Subjugation is an unmovable mark of women all over the world. History reveals that the hands of social evils mysteriously subjugate women forever from the dawn of human civilization. In India, women are discriminated and marginalised at every level of the society whether it is social participation, economic opportunity and economic participation, political participation, access to education or access to nutrition and reproductive health care. Patriarchy continues to be embedded in the system in many parts of India and denies a majority of women the choice to decide on how they live. The prime status of community in a patriarchal sense ensures that women seldom have an independent say in community issues. A significant few still consider women as sex objects. Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", has strived to draw courtesy to that large majority of the marginalised that is unheard in history (written by the dominant) because it could not or was not allowed to make itself heard. Her essays show how millions, under the colonial dispensation, have come and gone without leaving a trace; men, but even more so women. Thus, she says "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow than the subaltern male" (28). Mahasweta Devi and Anita Nair's novel mostly reveal the plight of such women. Nevertheless, both the writers often refuse to limit themselves as a feminist writer, it is their sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and consequent revolt invariably marks a feminist dimension to their work. The study aims to prove the fact that even though the characters in Nair and Devi's fiction undergo oppression and ostracism they emerge resilient.

Keywords: Women, Patriarchy, Oppression, Subjugation, Resilient.

INTRODUCTION

The imperial domination is extent not only over the native subjects but also over time and their memory. The empire made temporary exiles of the colonized by also ruling their memory and casting them outside their time. As a result, the colonized found themselves cut off from their time past, which they know to be their own history, a history in which they acted, wrote and remembered. A woman is marginalized in such a society because she is first, a victim of the imperialist project and then she is at the periphery of a patriarchal order. According to Jaya Srivastava, "A great deal of feminist literature is concerned with patriarchal ideology?" (36). Devi and Nair's novel mostly reveal the plight of women, they could be called

a feminist writer, which they often refuse to be. Though both the writers often deny to limit themselves as a feminist writer, it is their sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and consequent revolt invariably marks a feminist dimension to their work.

Periphery of a patriarchal order

In *After Kurukshetra*, Devi underlines the lives of the tribal women as well as women belonging to the royal family who are associated with each other as almost all have lost their husbands to the war, whereas, in *Lessons in Forgetting*, Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy, under which the characters namely Sarada and Kala experience agony both physically and mentally. In the words of Sunitha Sinha: Nair's India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried

in many ways to repress, humiliated and debased women. The question she poses in her novels not only shake the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality (149). Nair in her novels cares to show how, in life, oppression and isolation do not always come in decipherable forms but often under the pretext of love, support and the guarantee of security. Most of her female characters including Sarada and Kala become a prey to one of these guises but do not allow themselves to be carried away by it and defy to make an alternative reality. Caught in the cross-currents of the hegemonic male discourses of patriarchy, women are thus repeatedly pushed into a harassment. Sasibala says:

Indian Literature of the earlier era had depicted woman as one who is doodle, self- sacrificing, the embodiment of selfless love and a veritable monument of patience, ever willing to suffer. Such virtues are highlighted as the virtues of womanhood, the virtues of pathivratha (122).

Devi in *After Kurukshetra*, highpoints how the courage of the lower caste women is not to be seen in the high caste women. They remain passive most of the time and fail to protest. Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak states it is not only the colonialism that silenced the subaltern, but also those of us who are watching the oppression taking place around the world, and not doing anything about it. In her language, "the figure of the woman moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister/wife/mother structures patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity. "Patriarchal power, she argues, bases itself on "the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument" (Spivak, *In other Worlds*, 220).

PATHIVRATHA

Women in India accept and observe this pathivratha only as society enforces them. Even after a woman is abandoned by her husband, she is likely to live in his memory and prove her devotedness to him. They do not admit this heartedly, but observe this with an agonized heart. They even rebel against this, being suffocated and succeed in breaking the traditional concept. They urge for something more than this. They come out of this and

become empowered. As they become empowered, they become independent and achieve happiness. Nair in her novel *Lessons in Forgetting* draws a character by the name Sarada Ammal, one of the protagonists Jak's mother.

Sarada is an abandoned wife. Her life becomes so because of the selfishness of her husband who thinks that a wife just to an heir for their family. Not only he, but his parents think the same. He is a man whose desire is to forsake the world and go to an ashram, but marries Sarada as his parents compel him saying that wanted an heir:

If someone is to be blamed it is me for being such a coward. I should have told you. My parents knew I never wished for this. A wife, a child, the murkiness of grihastha ashrama... It was my duty to provide them with an heir. For the family line to continue... I couldn't hurt them. So, I was obliged to shelve my desire (*Forgetting*, 14).

It is apparent that Sarada is taken for a machine to produce a child and once when the work is over, it is a man's pride to toss her away. Sarada becomes a deserted wife, with her young son Kitcha. She is baffled at her status, "Neither a wife nor a widow, who am I Kitcha?" (*Forgetting*, 17). Even at this state it is her pathivratha that makes her say, "If he left me for another woman, 'I would woo him back. I would bring him back to us'" (*Forgetting*, 17). Abandoned women like Sarada desired to bring back their husband because, though she is the victim, the society blames her. Rendering to the society she is a disastrous woman, unable to hold her husband. This is exposed from the words of her sister, "They held Akka (sister) accountable for her husband leaving her. She just wasn't a good enough wife, one who could keep her husband at her side. She was a failed woman" (*Forgetting*, 96).

The current scenario is that, while a significant portion of women have profited due to steps taken for their empowerment, a large section remains confined to their roles as wives, and more importantly, mothers; subject to exploitation by males both in and out of the house. As such as Nair's, Devi's stories are a study in brutality and degradation imposed on women for centuries. The norms and cultural practices are inbuilt in a highly patriarchal social order where women are expected to adhere to strict gender roles as compared to men. Women

are placed in a position where they are easily exploited not because they are part of society but only because they are “women”. In the community, inequalities between men and women have caused from social structures being “constructed in the interests of men” (qtd. in Pavithra 55).

RAJAVRITTA

In *After Kurukshetra*, lamentation of widows of the royal families over the loss of their husbands and the luxurious lifestyle that came along with it. They foresee a dreary future destined for them filled with religious fasting and rituals. Uttara, wife of the deceased Abhimanyu, in “The Five Women” fears the lackluster life ahead of her which is to be filled with unending fasts, prayers and performance of daily rituals as expected from every upper-caste widow. According to the sages, the cardinal rule for a widow is that her life must be “stripped of luxury and leisure” (*Kurukshetra*, 3). They should remain clad in white cloth and be like “silent shadows” while they go about performing the daily rituals required of them (*Kurukshetra*, 7). They should also maintain limited contact with their children. The life of all the widows of Pandavas and Kauravas is, in fact, a series of “endless fasts, pujas and offerings of cows to the Brahmins” (*Kurukshetra*, 7). In other words, their royal status seems to be more of a curse once death touches anyone close to them.

The situation is a form of violence that has been overlooked for centuries due to women’s mute acceptance of their victimization. One of the reasons that patriarchy exists in society is because of women’s unchallenging fulfilment to the rules that are laid down before them. Here the royal women are expected to conform to the dictates of caste, class, and religion. She is taught to view her suffering as her dharma for it ensures both hers and her dead husband’s position in *divyalok* (*Kurukshetra*, 10). The royal wives and widows are indeed the victims of violence. They are ignored and forced to suffer at the hands of their male counterpart’s need for power in the name of justice.

In the other story “Souvali”, Devi subtly captures the sad tale about a *dasi* (subaltern) named Souvali who is forced to be a sexual companion to King Dhritarashtra while his wife Gandhari has conceived a child. Hailing from one of the marginalized parts of the kingdom,

Souvali bears Dhritarashtra a son who is named by the royals as Yuyutsu. After being sexually exploited by the king, both she and her son are cruelly discarded by the entire Rajavritta. In her view, living in order to serve the royal people is a more disastrous and violent experience than existing amongst “common folk” (*Kurukshetra*, 49). The rules imposed by the upper class demands the constraint of freedom which in itself is the most extreme form of violence which forces them to remain silent.

Failure of interpretation

In conferring the silence of subaltern female, Spivak clarifies that she was not using the term literally to propose that such women never already talked. It is not that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to arrive into a transaction between the speaker and the listener. The subaltern is not able to speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. It is, therefore, the silence of the female as subaltern is a result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation. (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 56). Giving the example of the practice of *sati*, where no account of the women-subject survive today, Spivak underscores how the practice of *sati* was constructed by the colonising powers as an example of the “white man’s burden” – “a case of white men saving brown women from brown men” (“Subaltern” 93), while native men sought to justify the act by stating “The women actually wanted to die” (“Subaltern” 93). Hence, Spivak is certain that the job of the intellectual is to make visible the position of the marginalised.

The Patriarchal ideological set up in the society which expects women to respect the ideas of her husband and the impact of Hindu mythology, largely influenced Sarada in her actions. Sarada is forsaken by her husband and still she kept weaving his reminiscence. She waits for him to return. Even a little word about him made her happy. This is revealed when a relative comes to their house bringing them a holy pouch saying it was sent by her husband from the ashram. She is subdued to say, “He has sent this for us, Kitcha. He has. does it say? He hasn’t forgotten us” (*Forgetting*, 232). She sat there fondling the vermilion dust with the tip of her finger as if it were her husband’s arm. She does this to convey herself that he was there and with her, observing

'pathivrtha' as it is the highest asset of womanhood. Liberty of opinions do not

triumph, conforming the words of her husband is the norm of the society. The protagonist states herself that she has fear of her partner and the society. It is simply because of the attitude of people and their ill-treatment of women both within the family set up and outside.

Women are the worse victim of male tyranny. A woman is seen in terms of a male-oriented world, a world which identifies her by the male counterpart. Women suffer in the hands of men just because they are women. The inferior status of women is established right from their birth. The birth of the girl child is annoying and the new-born is considered to be an economic burden. Women are viewed upon as a disgrace when they give birth to a girl child. The girl baby is considered as, "harbinger of curse" (Paul 99). In the words of Neeru Tandon, "Feminism achieves a respectable liberty for women with their natural instincts. It vehemently the categorization of women as mere sex objects" (25). For a girl, marriage is her destiny. There is no respect for her individual liberty in this. Her marriage is decided by her parents and the man who chooses to marry her does not respect her individual instincts but just take her for a sex object. Nair gives voice against this concept through the character of Kala. Kala is Jak's aunt and Sarada's sister. She is given in marriage in a hurry as the society does not accept girls kept for long without marrying: "Daughters are never for keeps. They are loaned to us for a while" (Forgetting, 195).

Kala's husband chooses to marry her as he was overwhelmed by her long hair. Neither her father nor her husband realized the pain she had due to the heaviness of her hair. Kala with a long hair became a sex object for him, "On Friday nights my husband made love to me with much gusto. It was the night when my freshly washed hair fell like a shroud on my back and he played with it" (Forgetting, 197). Kala wanted to open her mouth about this but couldn't do it as her destiny was linked to his as she says, "I had no life to call my own. I was nothing on my own" (Forgetting, 196). Yet she could not bear that heaviness and cuts off her hair to the hip. When her husband finds it out it is his pride of a man to ask her "You didn't even think of asking my permission?" (Forgetting, 203). Once again only when her hair reached the same length, he was

back to being the man he was. Kala wanted to ask "Do you love me or my hair?" (Forgetting, 204) but she couldn't. But she becomes furious when her husband decides to wed again, as she is still childless. She becomes outrageous when as a man he was proud to say that he would father the child and the child would have two mothers, one being Kala and the other his mother. At this juncture Kala found her self - respect crumbling and decides to erode his pride. She cuts her hair and gave it to Ambi and says with courage, "This is all you ever wanted of me. And let me go". She feels proud when her father says crying "one abandoned by her husband and other abandons her husband" (Forgetting, 206).

RESILIENCE

While projecting the women, Nair and Devi never romanticize the truth. They lay it bare before the readers; raw and unpolished. Their story reflects the continuous struggle of women to liberate themselves from the censors of the patriarchal society. Devi and Nair, are alike in presenting a progressively common notion of patriarchy in which a women is constrained by tradition to be reliant on men, crippled to realize their own strength. They have presented their women struggling alongside because of patriarchy but ultimately has given them a wave of defiance against patriarchy. Nair's women rise the query of their mode of life fused by patriarchy, and realize it not only as the site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of combat to crush their oppressors. They also replicate on the impact of cruel state machinery, industrialisation and unemployment on women and, through their story one can see that women suffer to the maximum. It is their strong belief that every person should fight against injustice rather than being submissive. They also document women's retaliations against subjugation, which become the means to their potential emancipation.

In Lesson for Forgetting, it takes time for Sarada to relieve herself. She later finds a job in a small-town school and had a steady income. Even then, she was tiring herself, by being a deprived creature who rose with bare-faced hope each time someone buzzed the doorbell. This hope comes to an end when she reads an envelope that said that her husband was moving to Rishikesh. Though women are enslaved by the patriarchal convention some of them are able to defy the oppression by constructing the image of self and

deconstructing the image of others at the same time, with the help of their self-confidence given by education. They have empowered themselves by retrieving the voices, space and identities silenced by the colonial power and pre-colonial tradition. Sarada gains this independence of mind, body and spirit through education. She does her B.Ed. Rational in thought that “she no longer talked her husband or even referred to him” (234). So, it is time for her to detach herself from her husband and apply for a divorce. She becomes a spirited woman to choose her life with to another man who loved her, “And this time Amma chose a man who loved life” (Forgetting, 234).

Surveillance of Religious ideology

In “The Five Women,” of *After Kurukshetra* the subaltern women are shown to be assertive. Their perspectives as well as their way of living are rooted in reality, and are in sharp contrast with the attitude practiced by the royal women. For instance, the five lower caste women refuse to label the battle of Kurukshetra as “the holy war” (3). They candidly inform the residents of the palace that the entire conflict and the consequent destruction is not a struggle to maintain righteousness. On the other hand, it is a war driven by petty feelings of jealousy and a thirst for power. Here the five common women are unique in a palace full of grieving royals, for they are strong, independent and practical in the face of adversity. The women of Rajavittira, influenced by religious ideology, attempt to control and direct the lives of widows by reproving their desire to remarry and procreate. The five common women, however, believe that it is disrespect to sacrifice their happiness on account of some man-made customs. They believe in following the lessons taught by Nature, where the experience of violence, death, and destruction provides a strong reason for an individual to pursue her life with zest.

Other subalterns expect Souvali to perform the rites of a widow in the story “Souvali”. But she quickly reminds them she would never mourn for the man who perpetrated violence against her. Souvali does not understand the reason that propels dasis to observe the rites and rituals of widowhood at the demise of the rich men who victimized them (Kurukshetra 48). She promises her companions that the funeral would not stop her from eating heartily and having a peaceful sleep as she gets to meet her son. Unlike the

royal widows, Souvali feels fortunate to be free from the misery that comes attached with riches and social prestige.

CONCLUSION

Nair as a feminist writer, her feminism is rooted in the larger frame work of women's rights of personal freedom and right to body. But Women in literature, over centuries have been the archetypes of Sita, the silent — sufferer, the model of Indian womanhood. So, a woman is always passive to accept the dynamic role of the man in her life. Through the characters of Sarada and Kala, Nair, has not only portrayed how women suffer in patriarchal society but also how they choose alternative to it. Devi's stories emerge as a sensitive delineation of the patriarchy of every hue, so as to unveil not only the cultural texture of female embodiment but also to weave in her narratives, a blueprint for repositioning and thus empowering the female within the masculism nation space. In spite of the misery that sets in critical situations what is remarkable in Devi and Nair's work is not the cry of anguish and pain but the zeal of resistance, a determined urge that will their characters to fight on regardless of all odds. It is this hope in the law of change, the hope in humanity, reason and justice that creates a unique space for them in the world of literature. The distinctive feature of both the writers work lies in the hope that breaks forth creating an indomitable urge to live — resist and fight the challenges that oppress humanity.

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