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A Comparative Reading of Kamala Das' "Marine Drive" and Sarah Joseph's "The Masc. of 'Virgin'" from the Postmodern Perspective

Abstract

Gender discrimination consistently plagues our social fabric down through the ages. Marginalization of women persists as a perennial problem. This paper is an attempt to explore how the two Keralite feminist writers, Kamala Das and Sarah Joseph, use postmodern techniques in their stories, "Marine Drive" and "The Masc. of 'Virgin'" respectively. Both the authors in question, being feminists, have dealt with various problems faced by women and the stories chosen here for study are no exceptions. This paper seeks to highlight the various postmodern traits that feature in these two stories. These feminist writers have employed postmodern techniques which have given them a wider space and scope to express their thoughts and ideas. This paper discusses in detail how these like-minded authors have made these stories laboratories of postmodernism.

Key words: gender bias, feminism, postmodernism, intertextuality, faction

Postmodernism was not the invention of literary critics but literature can certainly claim to be one of the most important laboratories of postmodernism. (Connor 62)

1. Introduction

Women's place is no more behind the curtains or confined within the kitchen. In spite of modernization and globalization, restrictions and limitations for women still prevail. Many women feel psychological suffocation as they could not have a comfortable space to think and act. Gender discrimination consistently plagues our social fabric down through the ages. We talk so much about gender equality and take pride in being refined in our outlook about women. But the irony of the situation is that most of the preaching is not put into practice. The condition of women in our society is arguable. Though physically weaker when compared to men, women prove that they are mentally stronger than men. History reveals sporadic examples of women leaders who were powerful and resourceful enough to decide the destinies of their nations. Women also compete with men intellectually. They have established the fact that they could effectively remove their constraints themselves and efficiently perform many things - right from managing a family to ruling a country. Women work hand-in-hand with men to bring financial stability to the family. Many organisations across the globe have more number of women on roll than men. All these glories and achievements show only the brighter side of the lives of women. The other side is so gloomy and dull as women are viewed as subordinates to men. Marginalization of women persists as a perennial problem. Gender bias is deeply entrenched in our society. Stressing the kind of platform that literature provides for writers to bring even issues like gender disparity and victimization of women to the attention of the reading fraternity, Anita Myles, in her book, *Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian Women Novelist in English*, says, "Literature has always been a handy tool in exploring the gender relations and sexual differences", (2). The feminist writers in question have employed postmodern techniques which have given them a wider space and scope to express their thoughts and ideas. Referring to the similarity

between postmodernism and feminism, Patricia Waugh in her book, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, writes:

feminism and postmodernism clearly do share many concerns as they each develop from the 1960s onwards. Both are concerned to disrupt traditional boundaries: between 'art' and 'life', masculine and feminine, high and popular culture, the dominant and the marginal. Both examine the cultural consequences of the decline of a consensus aesthetics, of an effective 'literary' voice, or the absence of a strong sense of stable subjectivity. (6)

2. Aim of the paper

This paper is an attempt to explore how Kamala Das and Sarah Joseph, the two Keralite feminist writers, have used postmodern techniques in their stories, "Marine Drive" and "The Masc. of 'Virgin'" respectively. Both the authors, being feminists, have dealt with various problems faced by women and the stories chosen here for study are no exceptions. The subject matter of these two stories is strikingly similar and a common thread runs through these two stories. These authors, in the stories selected, portray the predicament that women face and strongly reveal how women are subjugated in this patriarchal society and candidly admit how at times they need to kill themselves or to allow themselves to be killed just for the reason that they are women. This paper seeks to highlight the various postmodern traits that feature in these two stories.

3. Introduction of the authors

The powerful feminist from Kerala, Kamala Das (1934-2009), poet, novelist and short story writer, has projected herself as an advocate of women's rights by voicing against the issues which make women suffer and withdraw themselves into a shell. Equally powerful

feminist thoughts are expressed by Sarah Joseph (1946-), a Keralite novelist and short story writer. The corpus of their work throws light on the unexpressed sufferings of women who are vulnerable just because of the fact that they are born women and are part of a society which is patriarchal to the core. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan in her article, “The Malayalam Short Story – Evolution, Influences, Original Perspectives” writes:

Kamala Das is very different from other short story writers in that her style, content and approach to writing are very individualistic and modern and in some ways not indigenous to Kerala. She reaches out to a sphere of hitherto unexplored ideas and experiences and relates them in a style which is candid and poetic. Her style is not monotonous; she changes her style to suit the theme, ambience and emotional tone of the story. (25)

And about writers like Sarah Joseph and Manasi, she writes that they “show a great deal of external influence (be it English or otherwise) in that they do not restrict their stories to any specific Kerala milieu. Often their contexts have a global texture....Even their social and political consciousness is couched in their exploration into personal, inner worlds” (26). By way of comparing the writings of the two authors chosen for this study, K.Sachidanandan, in his essay, “Everyday and the Avant-Garde: The Contexts of Modernism in Malayalam Literature” rightly says, “While Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) still continues to be the finest exponent of the feminine psyche with its long-borne scars and unfulfilled longings, the new generation fiction writers like Sarah Joseph... appear more self-conscious in their effort to fight the ‘phallogocentric’ social order” (34). Both these authors have gone the extra mile to portray the grim realities about the plight of women.

4. Postmodernism: an Overview

Postmodernism is a distinct style of thought. Postmodern literature is an outcome of the social and cultural developments which are part and parcel of society, as society keeps on

changing, improving, rejecting the already established traits and attempting to add new concepts to the prevailing traits or systems. In *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry says, “the term ‘postmodernism’ ... has only become current since the 1980s” (78). Regarding the usage of this term for the first time, he writes, “The term ‘postmodernism’ was used in the 1930s, but its current sense and vogue can be said to have begun with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*” (82). Fredric Jameson, in his Forward to Lyotard’s book writes, “postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured” (vii). “Postmodernist literature,” says Fran Mason in his Introduction to *The A to Z of Postmodernist Literature and Theatre*:

embraces a wide range of forms and perspectives, including texts that use pastiche, burlesque, parody, intertextuality, and hybrid forms to create textual realities that either run in opposition to or in parallel with an external reality... fabulations that develop both of these strategies... texts that ironize their relationship to reality... works that use the aspects already noted to more fully engage with political or cultural realities... texts that deal with history as a fiction. (xxxii)

Postmodernism is cleverly phrased by Jean-Francois Lyotard as “the condition of knowledge”. By way of providing clarity about the abstract nature of this literary theory, he says, “it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts” (xxii). He adds, “Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s homology, but the inventor’s paralogy” (xxv). Postmodernism, as explained by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, “is a

fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse; install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and art of the past” (23).

5. Postmodern Traits in the Selected Short Stories

Kamala Das' story "Marine Drive" centres on two characters, Anasuya and Bison. Das portrays Anasuya as "a follower of the religion of love" and she mentions that Anasuya views "life as a festival of poetry" (95). Bison, the male protagonist of the story, is "seventy years of age" (99). He has conquered "the peaks of political power", wielded "the deadly weapons of threat, bribery and extortion" and enthroned "himself as the uncrowned king of the great city" (95). And on top of everything, for "the rich and seductive prostitutes, he was the apple of their eye" (98). The characters of "Marine Drive" are given names, whereas the characters of "The Masc. of 'Virgin'" are unnamed. Sarah Joseph's story "The Masc. of 'Virgin'" has four characters. To go by the words of the author, the characters are: "A good man, a trader, supports his family through trading, the Father; a good woman firmly rooted in her Faith, the Mother; the Virginal Daughter; the Sagacious Son" (11). Das and Joseph, in their stories, use third person narration which comfortably facilitates the authors to speak out their thoughts. In both the stories the readers could trace the use of metafiction, which is one of the characteristic features of postmodernism. By this technique, the readers are made aware of the presence of the authors throughout the stories. In both the stories, the authors' perspectives go hand-in-hand with the story line. The authors narrate these stories in such a way that the readers can easily correlate the fictional reflections with social realities. Both the stories have elements of intertextuality. The free dictionary defines 'intertextuality' thus, "Relating to or deriving meaning from the interdependent ways in which texts stand in relation to each other". Das, in her story, alludes to mythology. About the nature of the male protagonist, Bison, the author writes, "The hero, like Ravana, had ten faces" (97). He is

referred to as “the underworld emperor of asuras” (98). The author sarcastically says that if Bison, who is “close to seventy years of age” is reminded of “his old age or his weakness”, he will “cease to be Bhagwan Sri Krishna, the eternal lover’ (99-100). Even the name Anasuya is mythologically significant. To go by Wikipedia, Anasuya “was the wife of an ancient Indian rishi named Atri.... When Sita and Rama visited her during their exile, Anusuya was very attentive to them”. While Das refers to mythology, Joseph alludes to the Bible. She refers to the tragedy that lurks in the home of her characters as “vile Serpent” alluding to the biblical serpent that brought about the fall of Adam and Eve. The Daughter in the story, who is just fifteen years old, grows so sick at the hard realization that she was pregnant. In her pathetic and helpless condition, she asks her mother about Virgin Mary, by which the author once again alludes to the Bible and contrasts the biblical event with that of the totally unwarranted situation that the teenage girl faces. Joseph, in her story, uses a non-linear timeline in her narration of the story, which translates itself as temporal distortion, which is one of the key features of postmodernism.

The free dictionary defines ‘faction’, which is one of the postmodern traits, as “a form of literature or filmmaking that treats real people or events as if they were fictional or uses real people or events as essential elements in an otherwise fictional rendition”. Faction is an integral part of both the stories. Bison, Anasuya and Sita Devi are not strangers for the readers. People whose lives resemble the lives of these characters live in our society. Joseph generalises the setting of the story thus, “Viewed from the outside, the house looks just like any other” (11). She makes the readers also feel the same when she writes, “I have come across this Father and Mother in many places” (12). Towards the close of the story, when the author narrates about the suicide of the Daughter, she says, “I have seen this corpse before” (16). No reader disagrees with the author, as similar incidents have become very common

and get reported in the newspapers. The writers bridge the gap between the characters and the readers and make the latter empathise with the former.

The protagonists of both the stories experience a kind of emotional choking and both of them are unable to resolve their problems. The protagonists' distraught frame of mind is portrayed by the authors with empathy, when they suffer within the rigid confines of gender barriers. Joseph's protagonist, being a girl of just fifteen, is stunned and dumb-folded at the shocking realization of her pregnancy. She is emotionally baffled as to how to handle her pathetic plight. There is no mention of the perpetrator of the misdeed in the story. She ends her life when she is left with no solution. As Das' protagonist is more mature, she uses the appropriate opportunity to pay back Bison by sending the diamond necklace, which he had presented her on an earlier occasion, along with "an amount of one thousand rupees" and a note stating, "I'm sending a small amount as a token of gratitude for your services. Goodbye!" (103-104). The price that she pays for this reaction is her life. Thus both the authors bring to the forefront how women are victimized as they are part of the patriarchal society, which tries to subjugate them, as they are considered frail.

Paranoia is yet another postmodern trait that is found in these stories. Barry Lewis, in his essay "Postmodernism and Literature", explains:

Paranoia, or the threat of total engulfment by somebody else's system, is keenly felt by many of the *dramatis personae* of postmodernist fiction. It is tempting to speculate that this is an indirect mimetic representation of the climate of fear and suspicion that prevailed throughout the Cold War. The protagonists of postmodernist fiction often suffer from... a 'dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous'. (129-130)

Das creates a “climate of fear” towards the close of the story. Anasuya dreads Bison’s violent reaction as she knows his crime history. She is sure that he will decide her destiny. But the irony of the situation is that Anasuya ensures that Bison’s fate is held in her hands. In Joseph’s story, fear engulfs the Daughter the moment she realises that she is pregnant. She is robbed of her “autonomy of thought and action”. The writers’ keen sense of observation goes hand-in-hand with their critical thoughts and makes them react vehemently against androcentrism. Kamala Das, writes A. N. Dwivedi, in his essay titled “Feminine Sensibility at Work: A Comparative Study of Kamala Das and Judith Wright”, “has an inward eye and a thinking mind to look into the passions and pathos of women and to lay bare the mysterious depths of their delicate hearts” (96-97). “Joseph”, says Arthur Asa Berger in his book, *The Portable Postmodernist*, “writes as radical critical theorist who asks us to consider the relationship that exists between power and cultural practices” (81).

6. Conclusion

“Of all the genres of Indian English literature, fiction is the most developed and well received one in the postmodern period both home and abroad,” asserts Bijay Kumar Das in his book, *Postmodern English Literature* (55). Even when both the writers efficiently give expression to their genuine feminist feelings against gender discrimination, several postmodernist traits also feature in these stories. “Postmodern feminism,” asserts Jennifer Wicke in her essay, “Postmodern Identities and the Politics of the (Legal) Subject”, “is trying to catch up to a reality we barely have a name for, the postmodern situation of a theory of the identity that seeks to overcome the limitations of fixed, immutable, and hierarchal identities, with a feminism still involved in a straightforward identity politics” (33). Anita Myles says, “Modern critical theories lay emphasis on psychoanalysis because gender differences are now based more on mental life than on anything else” (5). No one will disagree with what

she says about the latest critical theories. The authors in question deal with the inhuman treatment meted out to women and present the trauma that women experience when they are physically and mentally abused by men.

K. Satchidanandan, being analytical about the condition of women, says, “Women’s writing in Kerala appears more like a wish-fulfilment than a reflection of reality since the actual state of woman at home and in the work-place remains unchanged or has even become worse if one goes by the increasing number of gang-rapes and export of women for flesh-trade while the women’s movement continues to be weak and fragmented and the old canons of life and literature continue unchallenged” (34-35). These two stories are reflections of the physical and psychological cruelty inflicted on women. It seems that the prejudice against women was so deep-rooted among men of the epoch in which the word ‘virgin’ was first framed that it did not even think about the masculine equivalent for it. Joseph, in a daring fashion, titles her story “The Masc. of ‘Virgin’” and brings to public attention that sexual purity is eternally associated only with women. The victim suffers whereas the perpetrator might probably be enjoying his life. Das’ protagonist Anasuya tries to stand on equal terms with her male counterpart, but she could only be partially successful, as she loses her life in the process of wreaking vengeance. In spite of being feminists, these authors have made their stories travel through the terrains of postmodernism. The various postmodernist features have gone a long way in helping the authors to powerfully project what they had in their minds. Both the stories throw light on the bitter truth that gender equality still remains a distant dream for women. These like-minded authors have clearly made these stories laboratories of postmodernism.

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