



WOMEN – PRISONERS OF MARRIAGE

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Abstract

This paper deals with the ways marriage penetrates and undermines the life of women, and their varied reactions towards it through ages. Three poems by different authors have been chosen and analysed in the light of the above statement. The paper also traces the reflection of Elaine Showalter's three phases of women writing literature alongside the thematic expression in these poems. The three phases of feminine, feminist and female aspects are discussed with respect to "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (1951) by Adrienne Rich, "Monkey Business" (2015) by Ashley Depuy and "There is Another Sky" (1890) by Emily Dickinson. The selected poems provide an appropriate platform to express these thoughts effectively.

Key words – Feminism, marriage, Feminine, Feminist, Female, suppression, liberation, self realization

Introduction

"If divorce has increased by one thousand percent, don't blame the women's movement. Blame the obsolete sex roles on which our marriages were based."- **Betty Friedan**

Women are victimised in the name of marriage which they seek for safety or dependency. But ironically, this so called refuge often turns to be an unsafe and insecure. Parents are not happy until their daughter is committed in a marital relationship with a man to rely on throughout her life. Shirley Chisholm says, "The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says: It's a girl." (www.Brainyquote.com) It is a mysterious fact that the daughters are brought up in such a way as to be perfectly ready, both physically and mentally, to relocate themselves to a totally unfamiliar place amidst unfamiliar people, and adapt themselves easily to the new alternative environment leaving behind their roots without any regret and in fact, with all of happiness. Owing to their probable unquestioning allegiance to the social mores, the victims of 'Sati' might not have felt depressed or worried, but instead might have proud and privileged to have lived up to the societal ideas regarding them. Social living and procreation within the wedlock are the two advantages of marriage. Conceding this, it becomes very clear that the trouble is with the imposition obsolete sex roles within the system of marriage and this is due to the gender bias as rightly pointed out by Betty Friedan.

Poetry is a magical mirror that not only reflects one's own image when one looks into it, but also shows different images to the very same person according to her or his moods. This lends a unique charm to poetry. As mentioned earlier, the poem as a magical mirror lets the reader interpret the very same poem in so many ways. In one of the selected poems, "Monkey Business" by Ashley Depuy, two main characters are involved, one an active speaker, and the other a silent listener. The speaker advises the other to shirk the monkey on her/his back which is constantly annoying or putting down her/him in life, and it also seems that it is not an easy job to get rid of that monkey for the listener. The initial readings of the poem gave an impression that it is a piece of advice given by a friend to a friend; a parent to his child; a lover to her lover, to give up a bad habit like drug addiction. These very same ideas have also been expressed by different reviewers as,

Ashleigh, Jemiemariereiner and Brenda McGehee. One of the reviewers has extended his thoughts one step ahead and has suggested that the speaker of the poem is an ex-lover coaxing his girl who is now in relationship with another one who is not reliable, to come back to him. But according to me, the poem centres on a woman talking to herself during the hard times of her marriage and recalling her shiny past similar to the way Emily Dickinson does in her "There is Another Sky". This is how poetry liberates the reader to interpret the poetry in her/his own way.

Three poets have been chosen for this brief study. They are: Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich and Ashley Depuy. Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich are popular writers whereas Ashley Depuy is an anonymous author. No details could be found on the Depuy and the poem has been published in an open website, familyfriendpoems.com.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, Amherst, Massachusetts. Adrienne Cecile Rich was born on May 16, 1929 Baltimore, Maryland. Both the writers belong to America, but they lived in two different centuries. Elaine Showalter in her work *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, not just introduces the term 'Gynocritics' but also classifies women's writing into three phases: feminine, feminist and female. She says the first phase, i.e., feminine phase covers women's writing roughly from 1840 to 1880, and detects evidences in it that make it an imitation of male literature. There were also women writers who apprehensive of writing in their original names and apprehensive of expressing their female identity in a male dominated world began writing under male pseudonyms. Despite this, the readers can find the literary evidence for the hidden female identity through the pressure in the narrative, the depressed tone, the strong diction and the peculiar characterization.

The second phase, the feminist phase, covers women's writings from 1880 to 1920, where the women writers are totally against men and protest against the stereotypical images of women in the writings of men. The women writers also fought for women's rights and equality.

The female phase which is the third phase denotes the period from 1920 to the present. These writers focus on the self-discovery and reject both the imitation of and protest towards men. Hence the female phase writers' ideas broke away from that of the other feminine or feminist writers. But real life cannot be so well compartmentalised. Thus the 20th century female phase can be observed in the 19th century writer, Emily Dickinson, the feminist phase from the late 19th century to the early 20th century can be noticed in the 21st century writer Ashley Depuy and then the mid to late 19th century feminine phase can be seen in the 20th century writer Adrienne Cecile Rich. In simple terms, Emily Dickinson substitutes female to feminine phase, Adrienne Cecile Rich substitutes feminist to feminine phase and Ashley Depuy substitutes female to feminist phase. Thus the changes of women are not a common gradual change, but a random change of the individual self with respect to her personal background, life style, stability of life and other external circumstances as well.

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" – Feminine Phase

"Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." - **Virginia Woolf**

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* in which the above quotation occurs, talks about the wives who live their whole life either for their husband or for their kids and not for themselves. These types of women or wives can be seen very frequently in developing countries where there is a fairly high percentage of illiteracy among women. More than that, since their childhood, the girls are educated by their parents, family members and media as to how to submit themselves to their husbands to lead a successful married life. A woman's prior duty is to take care of her husband's health, wealth, honor and the growth of his generation. Not only that, a wife has to act according to her husband's moods. Sometimes she should be a listener when her husband expresses his success or should be a motivational speaker when the husband feels low about him or should be a silent spectator or become invisible when he is concentrating on his own work for his career or personality development. This is what has been beautifully pointed out in the above statement of Virginia Woolf, women acting like a magic mirror that reflects the doubled size of man so that he can feel perfect.

In the poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", Adrienne Rich, talks about Aunt Jennifer who is a submissive wife and dutiful homemaker who wants to free herself from the burden of offensive marriage and the male

dominated society, in which she finally fails. It shows the feminine phase. The poet has aptly described the burden of feminine qualities in the following lines: 'even the ivory needle [is] hard to pull [with the] 'massive weight of Uncle's wedding band sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand". French also uses select phrases to explain Aunt Jennifer's yearning for freedom in the following lines: "they [Tigers made by Aunt Jennifer] do not fear the men beneath the tree" and "the tigers in the panel that she made will go on prancing, proud and unafraid". The inability of Aunt Jennifer to break free is expressed in the line, "when aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by".

Monkey Business – Feminist Phase

"When she stopped conforming to the conventional picture of femininity, she finally began to enjoy being a woman." – **Betty Friedan**

If every woman started to realise her own real self, she can definitely reach heights, and can change the world into a better place to live in. The problem is, a few women due to lack of wide knowledge are not able to analyse their own problems. Mostly they are illiterates and they blindly follow the instructions given by their illiterate elders. Even the other literate women, despite their education still blindly follow the same line and deliberately do not analyse the issues. What makes them do so is a mystery. A few more women are there who know what is right but are unable to stick to their stand due to social traps such as the patriarchal system and gender politics. But if a woman decides to come out of her pathetic condition at any point, no one can stop her. Even God cannot forbid women from getting knowledge.

The poem "Monkey Business" is absolutely a brilliant writing in which the reader can substitute so many subjects as addiction, reunion, bad thoughts as well and can interpret the poem in multiple ways. The poem is about a wife who is about to make a bold decision that is going to rescue her from all the pains she faces in her married life. She is about to go back to her own past life where she was very happy and full of energy. The only hesitation that she has is whether everything of her life in the past will be the same. But finally, her self confidence enables her to move on. In this poem, the wife keeps on asking the same question again and again to make sure about the firmness of her decision, "That monkey on your back? ...I thought he was dead and gone". It is very clear from the following lines that the husband is an abusive person: "he's a tricky little guy", "He's creeping into your mind. You don't see what you're doing. You've gone completely blind". "He'll do anything to get it. He doesn't care about the sting", "He'll distract you at all costs! As long as he has what HE wants, he doesn't care what YOU have lost!" "He made you lock the door so I couldn't get to you, when you were dying on the floor...", "he won't stop until you're dead, on your last trip to Neverland." The self confidence of the wife can be seen from the lines such as, "that monkey on you back or me? One of us has to go! The ball is in your court. Your choice. It's time, please let me know.", "and please tell me that you're ready to get your life back into shape.", "I can't lose you to this addiction! Please! Come back where you belong!", "this battle will not be easy! Don't worry! I'm on your side!", "there will be wounds and scars and blood but in the end you will feel pride!", "And I'll be there, on your side. If war he has declared."

"There is Another Sky" – Female Phase

"If you ask me what I believe in today, I believe in feminism. I believe that no one has the right to authority over anyone else. Feminism has to do with everything in the world, a vision of how the world can be. I have great doubts about utopias, but I just keep thinking there is a better way to live than the way we live now." - Marilyn French

When a woman imitates or protests against the male, it shows the utter dependency of women over men. On the other hand, if women realise their 'selves' and work hard to improve their self status, then there is no doubt that women can build a better society than the existing one which was created by men. In this Female phase, as mentioned by Elaine Showalter, women do not treat men as their foes or rivals. Instead, they concentrate on their self development and extend their hands to men and inviting them to join the world created by women. Like Ashley Depuy's "Monkey Business", this poem is also open to many interpretations. The garden is used as a metaphor in this poem. One of the readers sees the poem as the author's call to her brother to return to their homeland from the comfortable foreign land he has settled in. For another critic it is a deserted beloved's call to her lover to come and reunite with her. Another reader has interpreted this poem as a lover's passionate invitation to her lover for sexual union. Thus the description of garden in this poem is

substituted with a homeland, a woman's love and a woman's body by other readers. In my opinion, the poem picturises a woman who is a wife (representing all women), dreaming of an alternative land that can be created by her to where she invites the man, who is her husband (representing the whole men society), to live a better life with her. She never pronounces it as a perfect land; instead, she confesses that the land has some desert in it. From this it can be inferred that this garden is a woman's dream land. In the lines "there is another sky, ever serene and fair, and there is another sunshine", "here is a little forest, whose leaf is ever green; here is a brighter garden, where not a frost has been; in its unfading flowers I hear the bright bee hum", the poet promises that the world of women would be a greener, brighter and unfading land. The acceptable mistakes of that land are explained through the following lines, "Though it be darkness there; never mind faded forests, Austin, Never mind silent fields". And finally, she extends an invitation for her husband or men as, "Prithee, my brother, into my garden come". She tries to reveal that the married life that she is living is very partial as it is framed for the benefits of husbands by men. So it is fragmented and missing the balance. That made her to dream of a different land or world where equality prevails and she and her husband can lead a happy life.

Conclusion

Thus the voices of wives convey the message that marriage for them is not a convenient institution unless and until the necessary changes are made. And this point is communicated in Elaine Showalter's all the three phases of women's writing. The poem, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is an example of the feminine phase. It demonstrates the subordination of a wife to her husband and the failed attempt to liberate her. The poem "Monkey Business" by Ashley Depuy represents the feminist phase as the wife is conscious of her absurd married life and abusive husband, and completely hates him. She wants to get away from him. She sees him as an annoying monkey who is sitting on her back all the time. She wants him to be dead and gone from her life. Emily Dickinson's poem "There is Another Sky" illustrates the female phase. It doesn't express any protest against men; instead, it conveys the uneasiness of women living in a manmade society. Here the wife calmly tells her husband that they cannot lead a peaceful or harmonious life in that discriminated land. In addition, she tries to build a new land where there is equality and invites her husband there to accompany her.

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