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The Womb of Creativity: Tracking the Metaphors in 'Inside Every Woman Writer' and 'The Vein of Memory'

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As we examine the course of our history, we find that women played a very significant role in storytelling. The tales and talks by these women have been handed down to many generations and these have gradually attained the status of folk literature and oral tradition. But, as time went on, this oral tradition is replaced by the written forms. And as the need for documenting the literature came, women have lost their so-called status as storytellers. The phallogocentric society demands women to be confined in a domestic space. The various socio-political conditions existing at that time favoured this. This situation provides the platform for the male writers to emerge. As men gained more education and began to pen down their thoughts and ideas, the early literature became highly biased in the hands of male writers. In earlier writings, women were represented more as symbols and less as human beings. The women's creativity was ignored and she was considered as a mere object of desire and a tool for procreation. Thus, from time immemorial, we have been familiarized with woman considered as the 'Other' in relation with man.

The man dominated speech everywhere and the woman remained a silent audience. Simone de Beauvoir changed the Hegelian notion of the Other, in her essay 'The Second Sex', for use in her description of male-dominated culture. It is only much later that those women writers emerged and took a noticeable stand in the picture. They challenged the phallogocentric world and its underlying ideals. As feminist literary theory emerged, it made an intervention in the way of reading fiction and called for a whole generation of readers to reconsider what the female protagonists lacked when compared to their male counterparts. Various critics and writers eventually focused their works in this regard.

This paper endeavours to focus on the two short stories, 'Inside Every Woman Writer' and 'The Vein of Memory', written by two women writers, Sarah Joseph and K.R. Meera respectively. Both the stories depict the psychological turmoil of female characters, who desire to become creative writers, but their wings of aspirations are clipped by the patriarchal norms and mores. This study stems from an interest in understanding the unrecognized connections that exist between women writers across history, cultures and languages and also attempts to identify the underlying parallels in both the selected texts.

Indian tradition and culture expect woman to have a dependent nature. In Manusmriti it is written that "day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the male (of) [...] they must be kept under one's control. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth and sons protect (her) in old age: a woman is never fit for independence" (Buhler, 56). Discussions on womanhood have been prevalent in our society for ages.

Sarah Joseph's short story 'Inside Every Woman Writer' can be considered as a golden feather in her collection. The story was originally written in Malayalam as "OoroEzhuttukaariyuteUllilum," and has been translated into English by Dr.V.C.Harris. This story is a brilliant unfolding of a woman's resistance where her creativity is repressed in the hands of the male-dominated society. The title of the story carries the word 'woman' which stands as a collective noun to the universal female psyche. It voices for the silence that was instilled upon every woman under the communal and domestic subjugation.

'The Vein of Memory' ('OrmayudeNjarampu') is a short story written by K.R. Meera, a famous Malayalam women writer, has been inspired by the life of an old woman writer, the wife of a political leader whom the author knew from her childhood. In translator's note, JayasreeRamakrishnan Nair says, this story is "in simple language cloaked in a subtle style, K. R. Meera tells the story of an old lady who becomes the mouthpiece for many" (Raveendran3). The central character in the story, the old woman is a representative of suppressed female writers, whose wings of creativity are clipped by the male dominated society. The title of the story itself is symbolic and throughout the story it acts as a powerful metaphor for memory and creativity. The opening line of the story is a beautiful description on this female metaphor of memory- "a violet coloured vein stood out challenging on her wrinkled neck" (Raveendran 110).

It is very interesting to note how Sara Joseph and K.R Meera have very carefully portrayed the characters and even their identity. Throughout the stories, one can notice an absence of the protagonists' names. Both the protagonists are referred simply as female characters. It is a very careful move from the writer's part to associate a universal identity to the protagonists. They are the representatives of all the women writers across the world whose identity and creativity goes unrecognised.

Between Silence and Expression

Every human being has an instinctual craving for the freedom and choice of his/her own. But the society over years treated woman as the 'Other' in relation to man and hence she was demarcated to a certain space. Some women recognise this condition and try to forge resistance. They constantly are in a quest for an identity of their own. The protagonist of the short story 'Inside Every Woman Writer' is of this kind. She is a married woman and her domestic responsibilities demanded her to remain confined to the patriarchal rules and practices. Her husband Purushothaman is a typical representative of the male-dominated hegemonic system and is very much reluctant towards considering his wife as an independent intellectual being. It is a deliberate choice of the writer in choosing the male counterpart's name as Purushothaman. The name originally means the best man (uthamapurushan) but it is quite ironic in this context.

Throughout the story, the writer has interwoven a mosaic of metaphors. When the protagonist comes to a decision of leaving her husband's home, she prefers a place which she refers to as 'Aunt Mable's home'. Her husband keeps on repeating that she is lying and there is no such place. This is a strategy he adopts in order to prevent her from escaping from the harsh reality of subjugation. The protagonist says that:

Aunt Mable's house has no walls. It is built of thin, beautiful, mysterious screens. It has no grilles or bolts. Only nerves.And throbbing veins and arteries. Its backdrop is an indefinitely vast and open seascape. There I have a room of my own--with three windows that open out to the horizon--where I can read and write. (Kurien 104)

Aunt Mable's house serves as a metaphor throughout the story as a place (feminized landscape) where every woman celebrates her freedom of imagination and creativity. It is the place where she can exercise her female solidarity. The protagonist builds up her plots in the confined space of a corridor and has recurrent hallucinations about her spacelessness. The new world that she craves to create is her withdrawal from the real world where she lives in, which forbids her to spread her wings of imagination and creativity. It is an ideal spot where a woman writer enjoys her unreined freedom of soul. It promises her a realm of complete peace and tranquillity that is requisite for the spontaneous blossoming of writer's imagination. K. Satchidanandan, a poet and a critic opines, "the house on the seashore is an interior space for woman to manifest the inner freedom of her self," and "the fantasy about Aunt Mable is a fanciful

metaphor for female solidarity” (Mathew 224). It is a place where they want to be recognised as an independent intellectual being and where she is no more chained to domestic chores. It is the male-dominated society that curtails her freedom and it engenders a sense of insecurity in them. They are conditioned to believe that without their male counterpart, they are incomplete and insecure.

In K.R. Meera’s short story, the man’s exercise of authority and power as a father is brought into light. Even the woman is not allowed to name her children. The protagonist of the story wish to name her children, but it is her husband who took the final decision over their names. The mother- ‘the creator’, who take all the pain for giving birth to her children, is made impassive from the scene. The power goes to the hands of the male. She is silenced there also.

Sarah Joseph places Purushothaman as a foil to Aunt Mable. For the protagonist, "Aunt Mable never spreads dirty linen over my thoughts. She never puts a grinding stone on the ideas that take shape in my mind" (Kurien 104). But the very thought about her husband disturbs her and she says, “Purushothaman’s undergarments piled up in the bedroom come flying at me. One on the top of the other, they fall on my face, neck, my chest, smothering me with their unbearable stench” (Kurien 105). These lines reveal her passion for communication with other women or a place where she is accepted for her intelligence rather than a mere housewife. On the contrary, the man considers her as a plain object of pleasure. She possesses a spilt psyche where she simultaneously lives the miserable life of a housewife and a mother and an imaginary world of a successful independent professional woman.

The story ‘The Vein of Memory’ also shows how a woman writer is always positioned in a domestic space and how she is deprived of freedom to write and express her ideas to the world. The old lady in the story shares her experiences of the past with the young girl with great enthusiasm. From her words, “the sweet scent of the flowers of imagination in our humble gardens too...” (Raveendran 110), the zeal in her is effectively described. With “our humble gardens”, the old writer means the creative garden within every female writer. Most of the women writers are chained in the bondages of marriage and family life. In ‘The Vein of Memory’, the writer brings these ideas with the description “the sindoor she had put on her seemantarekha in the morning, soaked in the sweat stuck to her finger. It clung there for a second like a drop of blood. Then slowly fell off and died” (Raveendran 112). The ‘sindoor’ here stands as a metaphor of the bondage of married life and the so-called wifely responsibilities.

Gender is culture bound rather than nature bound. According to Ross C. Murfin gender “is a construct, an effect of language, a culture, and its institutions” (Guerin 237). It is noted that even though our culture and institutions are male oriented, it is not only the male who construct these kind of gender types, but also women play an important role in this construction of such disparities. Both the stories are reflections of this.

In the course of the story, Sarah Joseph brings a very powerful imagery of Panchaloha ring to present this idea. The protagonist says that, “My mother had got this ring specially made for me when I was born. Later, as I grew and the ring didn’t, it was enveloped by my flesh... If I sat with my feet dangling for a long time, the rings, declaring their existence aloud, would start running about and push me into the burning pit of unbearable pain” (Kurien 106). Here, the panchaloha ring that the woman writer speaks of is indeed a metaphor of the stereotypical norms and mores of the phallogocentric society. As a human being is born, his/her sex is determined and in the later part of his/her years, the gender is constructed. For a girl child, it is mostly her mother herself, who is another victim of the patriarchal norms, conditions her. She is brought up by instilling in her various virtues that the society expects from an ‘ideal woman’. She is expected to imbibe the images imposed on her and is never allowed to seek out her lost self. All possible avenues of female resistance are closed. The limitations of her life go unheeded and her desires and creativity are chained like the panchaloha ring clings on to her flesh.

In ‘The Vein of Memory’, the old lady recollects her past and narrates it to the young girl. She talks about her mother-in-law’s attitude towards her act of writing. She says:

The story written in the light of a lamp lit at the corner of this room, away from the sight of the mother of this house. The mother here used to get enraged if she saw someone reading or writing. What use would be to the family, she’d ask . . . ‘When he said that he

liked the girl who read the poem at the meeting, it seems it created a furore. Isn't that right? What use are stories and poems? Like mother says, girls should cook, give birth to babies....' (Raveendran 112)

This shows how the society including women, treats woman and her capabilities. Society frames certain norms for a woman, so that she always remains in the frontiers rather than at the front position. She is placed in a domestic space, where she has to perform her duties as a mother, wife, cook and so on. The society always wants a sacrificing and nurturing mother, a virgin heroine (*femme fatale*), a dutiful daughter, a redundant wife, a *pativrata* (loyal wife) from her.

The protagonist in 'Inside Every Woman Writer' utters the following lines as she recognises her subjugated state and decides to no longer follow it. "Purushothaman would order that I need not write anything different, that I continue to write hymns, songs of praise and love poems. I have written a lot about love. Using the Radha-Krishna love as my key image, I have found the pain of parting and the spirit of sacrifice burning through my veins like an intoxication." (Kurien 105)

These words render the idea of how Purushothaman is very careful in promoting the seemingly harmless themes for her writing that does not in any way disturb the male dominancy. The male writers and even her husband manipulate her creativity and make it a point that the hegemony of the society is not put into upset in any way by women's writings. The much revered Radha-Krishna love is highly approved as Radha is considered as an epitome of love and sacrifice towards Krishna. Though he does not marry her, she is still very much committed towards him. The phallogocentric society demands such an attitude from women. She is expected to be an epitome of sacrifice and love towards her man, so that she does not even care about her own existence.

A parallel can be drawn in K.R Meera's story where the protagonist's recognition as a creative writer is purloined by her husband. When one of her stories was awarded a prize, and people came in search of her house, her husband claimed, "Oh, it was indeed a story that I wrote" (Raveendran 113). This shows how the creative womb in her is made to vanish from the milieu.

In Betty Freidan words:

. . . the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness, in woman. There are aspects of housewife's role that makes it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or 'I' without which a human being, man or woman, is truly alive (quid. in Zola 337).

At the end of the story 'Inside Every Woman Writer', these desires and aspirations find their way to break through. Her womb of creativity is now ready to bring to the world her new self, breaking the foundations of the patriarchal society. She herself declares in the end, "Now I walk with an absolute free movement of my limbs. My hands touch the horizon and come back. A winged wind stirs free the strands of my hair and the folds of my clothes. My hair unlooses itself, soars and touches the sky, and my skirt whirls round in a wide, wide circle and covers earth" (Kurien 108). Here, it is her creativity and imagination that soars and touches the sky. The act of leaving home is an open statement of rebellion that frees herself and thus the whole woman community from their marginalized state. Now she is seen to be celebrating her freedom and untying herself from all the bondages constructed by the society and its institutions.

According to Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, it is the 'structural framework' of society, on the oppositions between "domestic" and "public", that positions "male and female in psychological, cultural, and economic aspects of human life". For her, "domestic" refers to the "minimal institutions and modes of activity" and these activities are organised "immediately around one or more mothers and their children". At the same time, the term "public" refers to the "activities, institutions and forms of association that are link, rank, organize" and it include "particular mother-child groups" (Rosaldo 24). In her *Woman, Culture, and Society* she opines:

Though this opposition will be more or less salient in different social and ideological systems, it does provide a universal framework for conceptualizing the activities of the same. The opposition does not determine cultural stereotypes or asymmetries in the

evaluations of the sexes, but rather underlines them, to support a very general (and, for women, often demeaning) identification of woman with the domestic life and of men with public life. These identifications, themselves neither necessary nor desirable can all be tied to the role of women in child bearing: by examining their multiple ramifications, can being to understand the nature of female subordination and the ways it may be overcome. (23-24)

Both the stories present the domestic circumstances where multifarious repressions strangle the creativity of women are brilliantly unfolded. Both the characters are imprisoned in the tumultuous silence. One character breaks that silence and comes out with her identity, whereas the other character chooses to pursue the silence. From all the ages, the patriarchy has been callously suppressing female voice, and tying her in the so-called family system to avoid the chances for alternative claims of supremacy. Its claims are based on the notion of 'gender'- social and cultural construction on biological difference, which pronounces the superiority of male over female. This paves way not only for a physical dominance, but also gives space for psychological and emotional supremacy of man over woman, so that all probable ways of resistance can be blocked. Most of the times, these gender barriers pull back woman to come up with her ideas, and her capabilities and imaginations are ignored and snubbed by the gender- blinded society. The prospects of this gender construction, blind the society and the society remains in the darkness of this ignorance or snobbishness. It is with the emergence of the new found 'self' by women, which forms a challenging force that shakes the foundations of the patriarchal frameworks.

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