

THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN: VOICES OF RESISTANCE AND WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract

The following paper deals with the voices of women which go unheard. It talks about different women writers who try to incorporate the plight of women through their writings. The paper wants to let the audience's know that the discourse is not just limited to the first world and third world conflict which almost every writer contemplates and shows his/her resistance in one aspect or the other but they are leaving us with a greater question to ponder upon. Starting from a general question of what is resistance literature and need of it, the paper dwells deeper into the issues and talks about bigger issues of first and third world problems. The paper, then dives into important issues of heterosexuality, social issues, economic problems, and how women are expected to behave in a manner and how they are confined by the pressures of family, society which results in decay of their psyche. While some women who are strong enough to stand against the injustices done to them, others give in. In a patriarchal society, a man's world: a world of opportunities whereas a woman confined in the four walls of her home, a door of prospects, power, ideas, thoughts, a man's world to be precise is shut for them. The paper however focuses on three major playwrights of different origins, Manjula Padmanabhan, Lynn Nottage and Marsha Norman for their remarkable piece of work incorporating and supporting their ideas and thoughts through writers of fiction and non-fiction respectively.

“The resistance of a woman is not always proof of her virtue, but more frequently of her experience.”

- Ninon DE L'enclos

Resistance has always been directly related to courage. Mark Twain once said that courage is resistance to fear, it is mastery on fear and not absence of it. How was resistance literature born? When you are pushed beyond the point where you finally break and feel the urge to shout words and it is only when you break is when you are born anew. Since time

immemorial, we have been ruled and we have been changed. We became what our colonizers wanted us to be, we tried our best to be like them. Resistance literature or post colonial literature, however covers a wide range of writers, male and females both who stood up and backfired after realizing what they are. *Fanon's* in chapter two of White Skin, Black Masks, he gives an account of a woman where he examines a book written by *Mayotte Capécia*, a black woman, in 1948. She in her book writes why she is interested in white men and gives reasons for the same, a black woman who denies her identity as black and calls herself a white by demeaning the blacks. The further analysis of the book reflects that it is not just the inferiority complex with which she is suffering from but it is also connected with the kind of comforts that are available to the whites and her white husband becomes the key of her wish fulfillment. Fanon talks about how in order to attain the white-hood, in context of the book, a female black child pours black ink on the fellow mate and feels content and happy by doing so, on the other side, a black woman feels privileged by the fact that she is a daughter of a white mother. Fanon calls this desire of affiliating oneself with whiteness, “lactification” (Fanon 47). Fanon suggests that it's a two way process, a black is trapped in his blackness just like a white is trapped in his whiteness, which is inferiority complex and superiority complex respectively.

After the long history of colonialism came the period of post-colonialism, which led to the birth of resistance literature where began the awareness that they were so much more than to be just someone who could be ruled. The writings spoke against the injustice of identity, societal, religious pressures, and racial differences. As Homi. K. Bhabha puts it:

[t]hey (postcolonial criticism) formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, societal authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the ‘rationalizations’ of modernity (qtd. in Nayar 9).

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, in his book Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, talks about how the colonizers used language as a tool to eliminate their culture to the point that they no longer remembered their language which was Gikuyu, how language became the tool to erase the legacy of storytelling and eventually to colonize the minds of people. After being imprisoned for writing a play about government, he decided to write in his own language to let his people understand the gravity of beliefs of his art and culture.

Just like different men from different countries have expressed their resistance through literature, women have also expressed their spite against the various injustices done to them be it culturally, socially or economically. For instance, feminism all around the world can be categorized in the same genre but it is important to note that western feminism is entirely different from African or Asian feminism. *Spivak* is critical about the attitude of western white feminists:

Western feminism, like postcolonial Studies, assumes the role of an authoritative commentator on its ‘Other’- the non-white woman, The Asian or African woman is ‘ventriloquised’, were a voice is ascribed to her by the First World commentator. (qtd in Nayar 26).

One such woman is *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, who in her If I Were a Man defines woman as “a true woman”, “true to type” (Gilman 1). The question to ponder on is how do you define a woman, what is true to type or who a true woman is? If a woman, who is beautiful, tall, fair is a ‘true type’, then what would you call a woman who isn't pretty or let's say is short or not fair? She further explains:

Little, of course-no true woman may be big. Pretty, of course-no true woman could possibly be plain. Whimsical, capricious, charming changeable, devoted to pretty clothes and always "wearing them well," as the esoteric phrase has it. She was also a loving wife and a devoted mother possessed of "the social gift" and the love of "society" that goes with it, and with all these was fond and proud of her home and managed it as capably as-well, as most women do (Gilman 1).

The above mentioned extract further explains the 'expected' womanhood and how the true woman in this particular piece of fiction wishes from her heart and soul that she was a man. Why? Because of all the patriarchal benefits that a man enjoys and the upper hand, that society provides them with. So *Gilman's* central character, Mollie, wishes to be a man, in a quite fantastical manner her wish is fulfilled, and she is transformed in to a man. Charlotte explains the transformation as 'the right size', meaning to say how little of a space a woman gets. Mollie felt that her changed feet felt more solid and firm on ground. She gained the sense of freedom which society deprived her of and the happiest of revelation came when she discovers that she has pockets. 'Pockets' indicate financial instability that a housewife goes through when she is not allowed to work because society has decided her place indoors. Mollie suddenly has gains economic independence and an identity of her own. Earlier she was known as Gerald's wife, but now she has an identity,

To her, they would have been distinguished as "Mary Wade's husband," "the man Belle Grant is engaged to," "that rich Mr. Shopworth," or "that pleasant Mr. Beale." And they would all have lifted their hats to her, bowed, made polite conversation if near enough especially Mr. Beale (Gilman 2).

Through her story *Charlotte* clearly makes a point how the patriarchal society makes it difficult and doesn't let a woman work because it hurts the pride of a man, if given proper and equal opportunities such as men, there is no stopping.

Another one such text which shows the resistance of woman towards the patriarchal order is a protestor of caste and patriarchy, *Tarabai Shinde*, a feminist activist of 19th Century has written an outrageously spiteful piece of power relation and gender disparity, called Stri-Purush Tulna, where she has compared woman with man, a non-fiction essay. She here focuses on how society distinguishes between a man and a woman, how women are associated with some pre-assumed characteristics and notions, and how society sides with men. *Shinde* says that women are accused of gossiping, superstition, impudence, duplicity which she examines are more common in men than in women. Another female writer, *Imtiaz Dharker*, who among many revolutionary poems wrote Purdah talks about the social and religious restrictions and tensions that society has put on women. The whole poem focuses on how after when a woman gains puberty is made to feel ashamed of her body. She compares purdah or veil with the coffin with which a person is wrapped when he is dead. *Dharker* writes:

The cloth fans out against the skin
Much like the earth that falls
On coffins after they put dead men in (Dharker 1).

She investigates and attaches female body with shame because of how society treats her, calls vagina, which is a natural part of female body, a sin between thighs. She explores the idea of shame and also tells us when a woman is expected to adhere to it, which is right after she hits puberty. She talks about how the eyes of the same people she grew with changes and is rolled at

her as a result of which her inner voice, ideas and her intellect falls prey to the patriarchal society. She further dives in to the issues of their rights, inability to speak or represent themselves, which *Spivak* calls “subaltern” (*Spivak n.p*). *Spivak* talks about women who are subalterns and says that they are doubly marginalized, firstly because of colonialism and secondly because of patriarchy. The same subaltern quotient has been explored in *Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi*, inspired from the *Mahabharata’s* tale of *Draupadi*. While in the *Mahabharata*, *Draupadi* waits and hopes for *Krishna* to come and help her save her dignity, *Mahasweta Devi’s* *Dopdi* gains her power of speech after being raped, she uses her naked body as a tool to fight and stand against the marginalization and she finally breaks her silence instead of running which leaves *Senanayak* spell-bound. *Mahasweta Devi* explores the possibility of what happens when a subaltern speaks. However *Mahashweta Devi’s* text is much more than a text of marginalization of women and assertion of female power, It talks about the Santhal Tribal conflicts of Bengal, how first world tries to control the third world, the sexual violence that they experience when captured and first world’s efforts to destroy the third worlds. *Devi* aims to project woman as a human, to be judged without her femaleness, race, and caste.

There are female playwrights who have written wonderful pieces of substance. One such remarkable playwright is *Manjula Padmanabhan*, whose revolutionary and futuristic writings are different from the lot. In her play, *Harvest*, she addresses the trade of organ selling in India. She talks about how third world countries are exploited by the hands of first world citizens. First world countries use third world citizens and offer them a meager amount in return of almost their lives. *Harvest*, synonymous to ‘reaping after taking care’, set in the future Bombay where we see *Om*, who is the sole bread earner in family loses his job and is married to *Jaya*. They live with his sixty year old mother and a younger brother, *Jeetu*, a handsome male prostitute. There are two parties ‘The Donors’ being the third world citizens falling prey to what we call ‘Neo-colonialism’ and ‘The Receivers’ being the first world citizens. *Om* accepts a job he doesn’t know about, gets all the luxuries he has dreamed about, his mother gets to have a super deluxe video couch where she lies and watches TV all the time, not caring about where it all of this coming from and how and in what form she has to pay for it. In the end, *Jeetu*, instead of *Om*, loses his life willingly to a ‘A computer-animated wet dream’ that is *Ginni*. The first world recipient, *Virgil*, talks as if he has done a favor on him after taking *Jeetu’s* life and says to *Jaya*,

Virgil: Was it any worse than his life? When he was lying on the streets...was that better? (*Padmanabhan 84*).

The donor is not satisfied after acquiring *Jeetu’s* body, he wants to put his sperm into *Jaya’s* body so that he can have a baby as well and just like other members of the family he tries to manipulate and talk *Jaya* into it. But *Jaya* being smarter of the lot disagrees and threatens to kill herself. *Virgil* then calls her pride ‘a poor man’s fancy dress’ (*Padmanabhan 90*). She is the only one in the family who resisted the wealth offered to her, she knows she is poor and helpless and that she has no one to go to, yet she makes a deal. She asks *Virgil* to come to India if he wishes to have her child and also threatens him that she will take her life if anything is forced upon her. *Padmanabhan* shows the twenty four-seven state of close watch that the third worlds are under, how the exploitation occurs, not directly but by indirect offers of wealth and manipulation. The relationship that the donor and receiver share is a two way process, there is compromise as well as contract. “*Homi. K. Bhabha* explains that ‘it is two way process of negotiation and transaction and differs from *Edward Said’s* idea of the relationship between colonized and colonizer being unidirectional. The colonizer offers a fulfillment of desire and there is fear of acceptance hence *Bhabha* says that this process is complicated and not stable and

fixed unlike Edward Said. For Bhabha, the identity of colonizer and colonized is movable, it shifting others and getting shift in return” (qtd in Nayar 27). There is no privacy that remains, eventually directing to the under surveillance condition.

Another feminist fabulist who is known for combining fables and fiction together to create and show a feminist view through her writings is *Suniti Namjoshi*. She is known for her widely written acclaimed works, one such being The Mothers of Maya Diip. The whole text revolves around limited role of women in society while focusing on the issues of homosexuality. *Luce Irigaray* builds upon the same idea of womanhood in her, This Sex is Not One where she lists how woman has just three roles to play in a society, a mother, a virgin and a prostitute and criticizes Sigmund Freud’s theory. She engages herself in the discussions as to how women are exchanged as a commodity in a male centered economy in different forms. And she is exchanged according to the value that is attached to her and is preferred only if she fits in the three mentioned categories. *Suniti Namjoshi* on the contrary talks about woman centered society, where there are only women and if there at all there are men, they are identified with womanly traits. In her attempt to show a place like that, she writes a fabulist tale of where there is an island called Maya Diip. The island is full of women; the play unfolds only when two outsiders enter this place, one woman called Jyanvi and Blue Donkey. *Namjoshi* has a peculiar and very subtle way of describing this place which proves that it’s an imaginary land where matriarchy prevails,

Of all the princely states of India there was one in which matriarchy bloomed unashamedly. Perhaps, it was the soil, perhaps the climate, perhaps it was the location and the fortuitous accidents of genetic history. Perhaps, it was the goddess (whom feminists in the west beseech intermittently). Or perhaps it was the happy line of competent queens (Namjoshi 1).

Namjoshi paints a society of women where they are seen only as mothers; to attain adulthood you have to be a mother, Jyanvi, being the brat of the story, gets annoyed at the fact that she has to accept motherhood if she is to be accepted by the society she is living in. She is told that “This society has no use at all for childish women” (Namjoshi 15). She falls in love with a woman called Saraswati, mother of Sona and is expected to raise Saraswati’s daughter if she is to marry her. She is keen on understanding the rules that the matriarch society follows and later gets distressed at the fact that the whole society is divided into three grades of motherhood. *Namjoshi* has painted a society which propagates lesbian relationship and condemns a heterosexual relationship. On the one hand, it milks boys of their semen and drowns them in the sea, which indicates the hideous killing of boys just as a girl child is killed in a patriarchal society. The only use of these boys is to use their semen to fertilize the females; on the other hand, there is a land which lets the boys live but only as mothers. Both the situations are problematic for a healthy living society and *Namjoshi* makes it clear through her writing by fighting against the sexual difference while dealing with a whole lot of other issues. *Namjoshi* has shown what she calls is "an Asian perspective, an alien perspective, later a lesbian perspective (Mann).

A woman is not only oppressed by society but also by her family members, the closest of blood relations. This aspect is prominently reflected in the works of *Marsha Norman’s* Pulitzer award winning play Night, Mother in which she shows the inner conflicts born in a woman due to the societal pressure as well as familial pressure resulting in either death or mental retardation. In society, a woman is seen as an object and where her life is always on a display, she is not independent to keep her experiences to herself and in most cases her own life is not hers so much

as much as it belongs to the family or neighbors or society. *Marsha Norman's Night, Mother* focuses on a daughter who was epileptic a year ago and her mother's life. Daughter Jessie Cates is divorced mother of a son who is a thief, is seen to be arranging all the necessary stuff which her mother might need later and calmly informs her mother that she is planning to suicide after she is done with the list of work that she intends to finish. The major part of the play focuses on Jessie arranging candy jars and informing her where her stuffs are while her mother, Thelma Cates, tries hard to gauge her mind as to why she wants to kill herself. It is only later audience understand the unhappy, directionless life she has been leading. Her mother doesn't tell her about her epilepsy when she was young, lied to her that she fell every time she had a fit which she only gets to know about in the night she decides to kill herself. She tried her hands on different jobs but it doesn't work out in her favor, her only child is a petty thief, his brother Dawson knows every detail of her personal life which she doesn't want anyone to know, her mother who claims to love her hide things from her about her. Her mother needs her because she works for her, gives her company, and is dependent on her for her daily chores. Her mother's dependency on Jessie is visible when she asks her to get her basket and then stops her again to hand over her glasses and then she asks her to measure the knitting thread and so on.

Laura Morrow in her article 'Orality and Identity in *Night, Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart*' (1988) says, "Sweets are for [Thelma] a happy substitute for genuine human interaction; they provide Mama with the sensual gratification and the sense of fullness she failed to obtain from her marriage" (Morrow n.p). Her mother hired a construction worker so that Jessie can marry devoiding her of another decision. Her mother's decision about hiding the disease of Jessie from her made her isolated from the world and hence she never got the confidence of being with people or around people which resulted in failure of her married life and her job. She became so isolated and alone that she could not get over it even after her epilepsy was cured. Her life was controlled and decided by her mother and the only way she could find her peace was through death because that was the only way through which she was able to take control of her life. She is not satisfied with her loveless marriage; his brother's wife and even her neighbor Agnes do not like her. Her husband later divorced her. She is living a life where she has no hopes, no happiness, and no free will and feels used. Even when she is all ready to kill herself, her mother tries to question her confidence if she can actually kill herself or not, to which she replies that she thinks she can. In another instance, she compares her killing to sin and threatens her that she will go to hell if she tries to kill herself.

Jessie: Dead is everybody and everything I ever know, gone. Dead is dead quiet.

Mama: It's a sin. You'll go to hell.

Jessie: Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me.

Mama: You'll go to hell just for saying that. Jessie!

Jessie (*With genuine surprise*): I didn't know I thought that" (Norman 16).

In her attempt to try to let Jessie embrace life she pushes her towards death by making her feel low about herself. The loneliness, lack of free will, the regular subjugation is not limited to mental injury but also physical that women go through on a daily basis and hence remain at the periphery.

In warfare where a side gains and other loses, there are people who are torn and are at loss. One such writer who writes about what status a woman acquires when war is on is *Lynn Nottage*, an American playwright. She is mostly interested in the lives of women who are African descent. Although she is known for, her play called *Intimate apparel*, another play which is of interest here is a Pulitzer Award winner *Ruined*, where she talks about and represents the

plight of Congolese women who suffered in civil war and on what price they paid to survive it while others gave in. *Ruined* is a play which has its undeniable resemblance with the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* by *Bertolt Brecht* with the same setting. *Ben Brantley* in his *The New York Times* review wrote:

Ms. Nottage, the wide-ranging and increasingly confident author of *Intimate Apparel* and *Fabulation or, the Re-Education of Undine*, hooks her audience with promises of a conventionally structured, purposefully plotted play, stocked with sympathetic characters and informative topical detail. She delivers on those promises. Yet a raw and genuine agony pulses within and finally bursts through this sturdy framework, giving *Ruined* an impact that lingers beyond its well-shaped, sentimental ending. . . . *Ms. Nottage* has endowed the frail-looking *Sophie*, as well as the formidable *Mama*, with a strength that transforms this tale of ruin into a clear-eyed celebration of endurance (Brantley n.p).

The play is based on civil war that takes place in the democratic republic of Congo, a bar cum brothel house which is run by *Mama Nadi* who takes girls in from different villages while they work for her. The brothel house is utilized by soldiers and miners of the war. *Nottage* has shown a very strong character in *Mama Nadi*, an attractive woman who was once running for her life has now turned into a strong willed business woman and at no cost is ready to bargain or leave her business for anything. She finds her security in herself and trusts no one but herself, has build a wall around herself so that none can see the pain that she went through in life and pretends as rude and heartless as anyone can be. She along with other ten women chooses the life of prostitution than a decent one because this is the only way she can survive the war. *Mama Nadi* in fact goes on and says that her girls are safe with her in a brothel then be out there. She says:

MAMA. You men kill me. You come in here, drink your beer, take your pleasure, and then wanna judge the way I run my “business.” The front door swings both ways. I don’t force anyone’s hand. My girls, ask them, *Emilene*, *Mazima*, *Josephine*, ask them, they’d rather be here, any day, than back out there in their villages where they are taken without regard. They’re safer with me, than in their own homes, because this country is picked clean, while men, poets like you, drink beer, eats nuts, and look for someplace to disappear. And I am without mercy, is that what you’re saying? Because I give them something other than a beggar’s cup. (*With ferocity*.) I didn’t come to here as *Mama Nadi*, I found her the same way miners find their wealth in the muck. I stumbled off of that road without two twigs to start a fire. I turned a basket of sweets and soggy biscuits into a business. I don’t give a damn what any of you think. This is my place, *Mama Nadi*’s (Nottage 57).

Even when *Christian* proposes her and tells her that he will marry her and take care of her, she refuses him saying that she doesn’t need a man to take care of her. The reason of this complexity as to why she is not ready to accept the kind of life that she has been offered is revealed later where she finally collapses and gives herself in accepting the tragedy that took place:-

CHRISTIAN. We joke. It’s fun. But honestly, I’m worn bare. I’ve been driving this route a long time and I’m getting to the age where I’d like to

sleep in the same bed every night. I need familiar company, food that is predictable, conversation that's too easy. If you don't know what I'm talking about, then I'll go. But, please, I'd like to have the truth ... why not us? (*A moment. Mama says nothing. Christian starts to leave, but her words catch him —*)

MAMA. (*With surprising vulnerability.*) I'm ruined. (*Louder.*) I'm ruined. (*He absorbs her words.*) (Nottage 67).

Nottage paints two women who gets raped so brutally that they lose the capacity to bear children and society castes them out. "I was very interested in the different levels of exploitation," says *Nottage* in an interview. "We begin with financial exploitation, and then I wanted to move to sexual exploitation. I think the brothel became that perfect venue with which to explore these issues" (Lunden n.p). One however comes out of it and becomes a strong willed ruthless business woman that is Mama Nadi while the other still juggles with what happened to her. Mama Nadi, who is nurturing at one place and ruthless the next, sees her reflection in Sophie and tries to help her by taking her in and not letting her get into prostitution. She later even tries to help by giving Mr. Harari a diamond she kept all her life for herself, and asks him to take her away and get some place safe where she can get surgery done and be alright and start over. Salima, once a woman of honour is raped by soldiers and later discarded by society, family, and her husband, enters the life of prostitution but is not able to survive the life of prostitution and eventually dies. *Nottage*, through her tries to show how some women are not accepted by society even when they are innocent, the kind of oppression, violation, and abuse that they go through, eventually results in their death. She is first brutally beaten, raped by soldiers, they killed her child in front of her and sex-slaved Salima for months and finally when she manages to free herself and comes back to her family, her husband denies her shelter because she dishonored him, because she disgraced him. She later dies declaring that she is now free from the life of prostitution and her body is now finally free. "You will not fight your battles on my body anymore" (Nottage 63).

She becomes the victim of war and later patriarchal society. "What we're finding that's peculiar to this conflict is that women are being raped in large numbers," says *Nottage* in an Interview. "Not only are they being raped, but they're being brutalized. Rape has become a weapon of war" (Lunden n.p). *Nottage's* play *Ruined*, however, is less a plight, mutilation and rape but more a celebration of woman's endurance.

Why is even there a need of resistance literature? Why do we have to even talk about something which is so understandable? Are we human or just wild creatures who only know how to utilize or fight each other for our good no matter what result it brings? Have we become so indifferent, selfish, brutal, snobbish, and apathetic towards people who are weak and are not able to defend themselves because our greed is making us support the oppressors? What are we, humans or animals? We have the answers; we know the answers, its blowing in the wind.

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