

EMPOWERING THE SUBDUED VOICES: RESISTANCE AGAINST THE PATRIARCHAL DYSTOPIAS IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN

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Abstract

Writings have been a potent weapon for the delineation of ideologies, philosophies and sensitive issues. Feminine writers concentrate on issues pertaining women and their works have thus become an outcry of protest. Kamla Das' frank treatment of her intimate relationships and experiences, highlight her innocence and surface the web weaved by the Patriarchal institution (family), and the physical-cum-psychological pain and burden on her body and mind. Polie Sengupta: another Indian Writer, renarrates history to defend the accusations on the mythological villains i.e. *Shoorpanakha* and *Shakuni* from feminine perspective and colors her narrative in all contemporary hue and color. Dina Mehta: another Indian writer, portrays her Lady Macbeth like female characters with an air of strength, vigor and firm determination. Manjula Padmanabhan: a writer of versatile genius, leaves her plays with an open ending so as to engage the community of readers with their perceptions and views on the concerned issue. Her plays are a sort of resistance against the patriarchal dystopias in which women have fallen on account of the biological differences and the social attitude towards them.

Key words- Patriarchy, Dystopia, intimacy.

“Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies”. - Helene Cixous “*The Laugh of Medusa*”.

Literature has been a tool for reforming the society since times Adam. In the modern, technological and globalised world, print and electronic media play an important role in forming public opinion on sensitive issues like- female foeticide, corruption, rapes etc. Slow but steady development is perceived at various levels, but the attitude concerning women needs to be changed and developed. The lamp of hope for woman needs oil and protection from mild and tempestuous wind regularly. The technological developments have made life easier and comfortable, but there is no relief for woman. All these so called changes and developments have not been able to broaden the outlook

of the male society. The societal structure is weaved in such a way that female always remains a marginal, an outcast and an alien among the males. Religious customs, rituals, folklores and scriptures are misinterpreted in the favor of a dominant male-discourse. A girl child after her birth seeks inferior treatment in her family as compared to her brothers. She is given abusive names- like nirasa (disappointment), ramdhakeli (pushed by God on this earth) etc. She is given leftover food, ordered to carry the bags of her brothers, not sent to school, even beaten by her mother on occasions, when she is not at fault. After marriage, her husband, her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, weaves the web of subjugation. So families with a typical outdated and fundamental outlook become dystopias for women. Bapsi Sidhwa, a writer of Pakistani origin, draws a horrific picture of the ill-treatment women are subjected to in the tribal society of Karakoram region, in her novel, *The Pakistani Bride*. Women are exploited, molested, cursed, fondled, seduced and forced to obey, she has to sacrifice her wishes to live and breathe in these hellish dystopias. The religious epics and scriptures too reveal the exploitation of women on issues of duty, justice, democracy etc. In *Ramayana*, Sita, was forced for the ordeal by fire. In *Mahabharata*, Gandhari was married to blind Dhritrashtra, and the societal pressures lead her to live a dark and dreary life. Kunti has to leave her son Karna, because society could never believe a woman. Draupadi is disrobed publicly. Past and present equally remain a witness to the exploitation of women.

After the advent of Feminism, in the literary world, female writers equipped their literary works for protest against the female exploitation. Now the revolt was more radical, logic and theory based. Female writings itself became a genre in literature, and certain parameters were fixed for feminine works and women were expected to write in that particular manner. Padmnabhan stands apart in using a language frank, and so called obscene for a female writer. Female writers use their writings as a resistance against these male-discourses, and so the treatment of feminine issues differs in case of male and female writers. Kamla Das' frank treatment of her intimate relationships highlights her innocence, meekness, the web weaved by the patriarchal institute- family and the physical-cum-psychological burden on her body and mind. Her writings become a search for true love. Polie Sengupta re narrates history to defend the accusations on the mythological villains- *Shoorpnakha* and *Shakuni* from feminine perspective and colors her narrative in all contemporary hue and color. Dina Mehta portrays her female characters as strong and firm in their determination. Manjula Padmanabhan: a Journalist, Cartoonist, Illustrator, Author of children books, Dramatist and Fiction writer, delineates women enshrined in the patriarchal dystopia called Family and Home. She reacts firmly against the social injustices and the malpractices exploiting women. Her plays *Lights Out* and *Harvest* are chosen for analysis to probe the objective that her plays are really a reaction against the Patriarchal Dystopias. She is not satisfied with the exploitation women receive in the present society and this anger, protest and angst find voices through her writings. She becomes a spokesperson of the fair sex, defending and advocating their cases, but leaving the judgment in the viewers and readers hand. Her writings give us space to ponder over the issues and to change our outlook and develop a general consensus over such issues.

Dystopia generally means not good place. The free dictionary defines it as- “an imaginary place or state in which the condition of life is extremely bad, as from deprivation, oppression or terror”(). The modern patriarchal societies have become such

dystopias for women, where they are deprived of basic human treatments. Padmanabhan's, *Harvest*, is set in a post-modern world where first world(America) is powerful, resourceful and ready to exploit the third world(India). All the events and the story hovers round a middle class family where Omprakash is the only breadwinner in the house, the other male member in the family his younger brother, Jeetu works as a Gigolo, Jaya; his wife is worried about Om's losing his job and the calamity to befall and Ma; his mother loves and appreciates Om for his hard work. Set in the middle of things the play starts at a critical moment in Om's married and familial life. He loses his clerical job and qualifies for selling the organs at the Interplanta services. Jaya knows the outcome of the contract signed by Om to the interplanta services. The play posits Jaya as a bold lady from the beginning of the play. She keeps the nature of the job a secret from Ma. He talks to Om and replies boldly to Om's helplessness.

Om: Nobody wants a clerk. There are no new jobs now- there's nothing left for people like us.

Jaya: You are wrong, there are choices – there must be choices.

Jaya strikes an optimistic note and stresses on the need to search and create opportunities in critical times. Ma and Jaya both are the victims of exploitation, their house turns into a comfortable dystopia created by the patriarchal society. Ma enters into a virtual world of ease and luxury, but she cannot satisfy the urge of her soul. None of the relations in her house fulfill her expectations. She only loves Om for being the breadwinner of the family. In the end, she sits inside a video coach and tried to escape the harsh reality, but her tormented self finds no solace. She is undoubtedly the head of the family, but there is no attachment between the members of the family. Her expectations die at each and every moment of her life. She is chained to a world of comfort; a patriarchal dystopia created by her own son. Padmanabhan leaves the space for readers to ponder over her issue and experience the pain, helplessness, the deceit, women are subjected to on account of the male dominance.

Jaya on the other hand serves as a foil to Ma. Like a typical Indian docile wife, She is worried about her husband's deal with the Interplanta services, but she is a lady of conviction, determination and foresightedness and she discards the temptation of money and luxurious life by the Interplanta services. She develops a clandestine affair with Jeetu to fill the vacuum(love and emotional support) in her life. Ginny is another lady, never presented on the stage. She is embodiment of what is called- Illusion, *Maya* or *bhram*. Man is lulled and tempted by *Maya*, and he strays from the path of duty, truth and wisdom. Jeetu enjoys the voice and beauty of Ginni and thinks her as a lady. Ginny also represents the first world who cares for the third world, but only for the Harvest, she will collect. She does everything to make Om's life happier and comfortable, because, the field needs proper care before harvest. Om becomes a crop to be harvested after the due time. Ginni keeps a close eye on the happenings, and on the crop to be harvested.

Jeetu is mistaken as Om and the members of the Interplanta services take him for organ transplantation. They remove his eyes and replace a contraption. This replacement creates a sexy image of Ginni in his mind. Ginni seduces Jeetu and he finally donates his entire body. At last, it is revealed that Ginni is really Virgil who wants Jaya to produce children. He also makes an insemination gadget. Jaya is left alone, she is the

only member who has been in severe loss. She loses her husband, Ma and Jeetu. She boldly asserts-

“ I’ve discovered a new definition for winning, winning by losing. I win if you lose. (*Harvest*,100). “ the only thing which is mine is my death. She warns Virgil that she is about to kill her. The play ends here, Virgil is perplexed what to do and Jaya threatening him and on the verge of committing suicide. Padmanabhan leaves space for us to fill it with our own interpretations. Jaya is undoubtedly the winner and she firmly resists the temptations of the *Maya*. Apart from Jaya, everyone in the house succumbs to the ease and comfort provided by the Interplanta services. Jaya vindicates her name and is victorious. Both the ladies in the drama resist against the patriarchal dystopias, Ma resists by covering herself under the veil of silence. Silence too is a mode of resistance, but the true retort came through the character of Jaya who destroys all the plans of Vigil. Padmnabhan presents two modes of resistance through the two characters- Ma being the passive viewer, whereas Jaya an active agent and an initiator against the injustices.

Another play *Lights Out* by Padmnabhan is set in a city sixth floor apartment in Bombay. The main focus of the drama is a nearby building not yet completed. A suspicious activity in the building is going on for at least a week. Bhaskar and Leela are the residents of the sixth floor. Leela hears a scream from the nearby incomplete building. She brings it to the notice of Bhaskar, but he subsides her. Leela is dependent on Bhaskar for taking decision. Padmnabhan tears out the garb of simplicity and docility and reveals out the hypocrisy on the part of Leela. She criticizes male and female equally for female subjugation. Another perceiver of the event, Mohan holds a different opinion, he wants to enjoy by merely watching the incident. Their interpretations are misleading, as they interpret it as a “drama” an act of “domestic violence”. Discussing and evaluating, they lay waste their powers. “New cults can be violent at the outset especially their initiation rites” (*Lights Out*,129). Another female voice, Naina arrives with her husband, Surinder. Surinder provides another facet of observation, he calls it a case of “exorcism” and clarify that all these violent acts are only to get rid of the evil spirit in the woman’s body. They also interpret the situation as- a whore being molested. They inhumanly concludes- whores are never raped only decent women are raped. Freida; the maid servant watches them silently. Padmnabhan presents the two facets of the problem, rapists are on both sides, one raping physically others virtually. All of them unite to fight the molesters, as soon as they are ready to react, the molesters leave the house and run away. The play concludes here leaving space for audience and readers to think over the apathetic attitude of the society (male and female) on such a sensitive issues. It is rather shameful that the firm determination and activity shown by the molesters could have been shown by the observers. Thus I conclude that the sole intention of Padmnabhan in *Harvest* was to awake women against the exploitation at various levels of life- in family, in society, and at workplace. In *Lights Out*, Padmanabhan uses an incident of molestation or rape to point out the indifferent, careless and apathetic attitude of the society towards female centered issues. Padmnabhan accuses both male and female equally for the exploitation of the weaker sections in society. Her works thus become a mode to empower the fair sex against the patriarchal dystopias, they are placed in, on account of the biological differences.

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