

REJECTION OF PATRIARCHAL MOULDS: EXHIBITION OF THE ELEMENTAL WOMAN BY MANJULA PADMANABHAN IN “THREE VIRGINS”

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Manjula Padmanabhan, a twenty first century Indian English short story writer is an intellectually gifted writer who plays with her imagination. Her imagination takes away the readers to various corners of the universe and also many times to the unobtainable past and unbelievable future. The fantastical fictional elements found in her stories strike us with awe. Her stories, apart from providing entertainment also make us think in multidimensional perspectives. Her revisiting and retelling of existing myths induce us to think with fresh points of view. She deals with notable societal problems and most of her stories take up “morally complex issues” that often invokes “morbid realities” (TVS: 1). She is highly conscious of the feministic issues and raises her voice for the upliftment of women through her stories.

The story “Three Virgins,” the last in her collection of short stories, “Three Virgins and Other Stories” explicate her concern for women and their independence. This story gives a new dimension to notions of female sexuality and the experience gained of it. The Narrator of the story, an unmarried woman, has an artistic streak in her right from young age, and possesses an ability to see things from a different perspective. When once a cousin aged ten asks her the meaning of the word “virgin” she feels it awkward to tell her that the word referred to the “disgusting things” that men do to women in order to “coax the next generation into being” (TVS: 229). She also does not want to tell her that that referred to a person who had not experienced “sexual horrors” (TVS: 229). At that time having been only 14, the Narrator feels herself puzzled about this, and feels that her nine years of schooling in three different Catholic schools in three different countries had not provided her, an answer to it. The implausibility of the virgin birth, referring to the Madonna of Christianity and her own attempts at finding explanations for it engineers her journey past virginity as “a conscious campaign” (TVS: 230). She does not want to wait passively as a “dandelion seed, for a masculine wind” to shake loose and sweep her away, rather she wants to be the captain of her fate. She wants “to choose rather than be chosen” (TVS: 230).

It is here that the Narrator proves to be the “Elemental Women” whom Mary Daly, the Radical feminist advocates. Radical feminists like Kate Millett, Marilyn French and Mary Daly were interested in challenging patriarchy’s construction of gender. They proposed several ways to women to escape from the sexual domination of men. These ranged from “transforming the institution of heterosexuality so that neither men nor women play a dominant role to rejecting heterosexuality in favour of celibacy, autoeroticism, or lesbianism” (Tong: 95). They worked towards “an androgynous culture in which male and female differences are minimized to replacing male culture with female culture” (Tong: 95).

Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970) argues that male-female relationship or heterosexual relationship is the paradigm of all power relationships. Hence, she believes that men and women have to eliminate gender, specifically, sexual status role, and temperament that has been constructed under patriarchy in order to eliminate male control. Like Millett, Marilyn French too believed that “sexism is prior to all other ‘isms,” including classism and racism” (Tong: 98). Hence, she believed in a positive construction of an androgynous future.

Mary Daly, however, rejects androgyny and she also rejects ‘God’ and homosexuality in her book *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) as she felt that everything constructed by man including the label “femininity” has nothing to do with femaleness.

The last section of Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* is a dictionary of new language, where the terms like “hags”, “spinsters” and “haggard heretics” that had pejorative connotation in patriarchal language, take on celebratory meanings in Daly’s language. For instance, the word “hag” that originally meant “an ugly, repulsive, old woman, especially an evil and malevolent one” in feminist language meant as “a woman who sees through and rejects patriarch culture’s demand for submissiveness, obedience, and complicity” (Tong: 105).

In her book *Pure Lust* (1984), Mary Daly continues her transvaluation of values, the values “radically different and separate from those of patriarchy” (Tong: 109). She contrasts genuine passions such as love, desire, hate, joy, sorrow, fear, hope, anger and so on with different passions like plastic and potted passions. She opines that the genuine passions like the ones mentioned above spur women on to action whereas plastic passions “leave women passive and deprived of a sense of purpose”

The plastic passions of guilt, anxiety, depression, hostility, bitterness, resentment, frustration, boredom, resignation, and, interestingly, fulfillment enervate women. Daly’s contrasting of plastic passion of fulfillment is the “therapeutized perversion” of joy. A fulfilled woman is “filled full,” “finished,” “fixed” just the way patriarchy likes her. Because she is so “totaled,” she cannot live the “e-motion of joy.” She lacks the energy to move/act purposely. Fulfillment, says Daly, is another term for Betty Friedan’s “problem that has no name” - having a comfortable home, a successful husband, a wonderful child... but no joy (Tong: 109).

Daly brings in another set of pseudonyms called “potted passions,” which are more real than plastic. However, these passions are stunted, and give only a little space to grow, instead of the vast wildness. Daly construed the image of “wild female” and states that in order to become a whole person, to make contact with her true self, a woman must strip away the false identity – femininity that patriarchy has constructed for her. They must refuse to be domesticated by men. They must be Elemental Women who will inspire their sisters to release themselves from the pots and plastic moulds that block their passions.

Once women’s passions are released, no patriarchal morality will be able to restrain her volcanic and tidal forces. She will be pure, positive spinster (Tong: 109).

The Narrator of the “Three Virgins” is one such “pure, positive spinster” (Tong: 109) who has released herself from the pots and plastic moulds of femininity. She is the Elemental Woman who has pushed away the false feminine identity thrust upon her. She looks at Madonna, a virgin mother so pure in the patriarchal construction of the world with an artistic eye that leads her to problems. She gives a new dimension to the Sacred Virgin Mother, who in her painting was a symbol of the “Perfect Woman” (TVS: 238). The familiar image of Madonna in the

Narrator's artistic hand showed a "poetic rendering of a woman's nether corrugations" (TVS: 237). She feels of the Madonna thus:

The elegance and beauty of her pose suggested that her female body is a portal to a higher plane of experience, I said. Her arms are spread wide in a gesture of loving invitation, generosity and hope. Her entire being deifies the female condition, with the blue of her veil representing the heavens, the white of her robes purity and the stars rimming her head the promise of eternity implied by sexual union and reproduction (TVS: 238).

This unleashing of imagination, though never unintentionally meaning to be blasphemous, leads her to be denounced as an obscene artist whose painting were "obscene abominations" (TVS: 237) and that which tainted Christian iconography. She was regarded as an eccentric and a pervert, but her paintings sold enormously in international auctions and this led her to become affluent.

It is during this time of her professional success that the Narrator embarks upon her second sexual experience with her friend Ork. Her first physical experience with a one-time-only sexual partner Gai proved a "sober and unromantic" (TVS: 235) experience for her since it was only out of curiosity for sex that she had indulged in it. There was no love or satisfaction of lust in it. It proved an unpleasant experience for her right from the beginning and she was disappointed in not having felt a "vaulting up into another sphere of experience" (TVS: 235) that is usually associated with sex. Her anticipations about romantic notions of sex as an exhilarating experience proved wrong. She felt isolated and distanced with this during the act and it ended in disillusionment for her. However, although having ended in disillusionment this experience gave her a "wonderfully liberating realization" (TVS: 236) that it was only her body that was invaded and not her mind. She indulges in the second sexual affair with Ork with the same objectivity and, takes it up as a need of the body, rather than interested in being committed or caught up in a long term relationship.

It is she who first suggests to Ork about the idea of getting into an affair and is shocked when he refuses. She understands that he was keen on being least interested in losing her friendship for the sake of physical unity. However, she readily helps him to lose his virginity before his marriage and this episode gives her little contentment except for the satisfaction of having helped her friend lose the fear of sex before marriage. Here, the Narrator seems to have taken up the dominant role in sexual relationship. She is charged of having behaved like a "professional courtesan" (TVS: 243) by Ork since he felt that that experience taught him little about being a husband to a wife. The Narrator was keen on providing sexual contentment to her friend at any cost and had a feeling of responsibility towards him during the act, which has actually reversed the original patriarchal roles. Here, the Narrator decides when and where to have physical relationship and to what extent they could carry on with it. In the first cases, with her boy friends she does not have any qualms and does not commit herself to the two men. She was also particular that she does not have anything to do with men engaged or married. The third time, however, despite feeling against her morals and principles of having a relationship with committed men she chooses Om. Though recognizing in herself the symptoms of falling in love with Om, she does not want to fall into it. Had she expressed her love for him, he would have given up the girl but she feels that the "emotional chaos" that would be caused out of this would never be "balanced by the pleasure gained" through it. Also, as falling in love was against her private regulations, she turns herself down. She also feels this kind of sentimentality as "dishonorable and unconstitutional" to her principles. However, having a physical encounter

before his marriage to his betrothed does not make her guilty and hence, she arranges for a physical tryst with him.

However, once in the room, the closed walls make the romantic spark die in her and the sexual act between them is more like a “medical procedure” (TVS: 247). Nonetheless, they never mention about it in their subsequent meetings or conversations and Om’s disappearance from her life creates an “impenetrable emptiness” in her. She understands that it is all her own doing and does not feel the need to blame Om. She does not feel victimized but her love for him makes her feel “burgled” (TVS: 247). She feels that something vast has been siphoned out of her. She gets used to the way of living the life of a pure spinster, her achievements in the creative field mounting high. It is only after twenty years of the tryst with Om that she learns from Om’s confession that he was a virgin despite having had a girl friend at the time of their sexual encounter and that she was his first sexual partner.

Usually the term ‘virgin’ is associated with women, and for the first time the author associates it with men and hits upon the idea that the term could equally be used for men also. This little confession of Om after twenty years, hits upon the Narrator that virginity was invisible, and that it has little to do with membranes or blooded sheets or pain. It has no mass or atomic number, and it means nothing to those who do not seek truth.

The Narrator was dumbfounded at this confession. Her first sexual experience with Gai was an unpleasant one for her and led her to disappointment about sexual experience. It taught her that “the abstract notion of chastity does not excite special interest in the world outside the Semitic religions” (TVS: 236) and that “morality is understood only in the context of society” (TVS: 236). She learns that if no social repercussions are caused by an act, it is simply irrelevant. It also shows how the Narrator has come out of the moulds of femininity and leads a life of her own, devoid of the controlling forces of men. Although in love at one stage of her life, she refused to enter into that patriarchal set up that would have domesticated her and would have blocked or killed her passions. She, to put in Mary Daly’s words has not sought “fulfillment,” a term that refers to a “problem that has no name” (Tong: 109), having a comfortable home, a successful husband, a wonderful child ... but no joy” (TVS: 109). Instead she has released her passions, and has been with “lust” which according to Daly refers to good non-patriarchal meanings like “**virgin**”, “**fertility**”, “**craving**”, “**eagerness**”, and “**Enthusiasms**” (Tong: 108), instead of meaning LECHERY, LASCIVIOUSNESS – the words that carry negative connotations in patriarchal language. She is an example of Elemental Woman who inspires her sisters to release themselves from the pots and plastic molds that block their passions. She is a “pure, positive spinster” (Tong: 109) whose released passions are like volcanic tidal forces that no patriarchal morality would be able to restrain.

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