

PORTRAYAL OF PATRIARCHY IN ANITA NAIR'S NOVEL 'EATING WASPS'

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Abstract

Eating Wasps is the latest novel of Anita Nair published in 2018. It narrates the stories of nine women from different social and economic background. In this novel the author depicts how patriarchy obstruct the path of women and reduce them to nothingness. A woman who dares to abide by the dictates of her heart rather than following the dictates of society is forced to feel the clutches of patriarchy tightened around her neck. Various shades of patriarchy working in our society have been delineated in the novel covering a time range of 60 years. Anita Nair in this novel discusses problems like child abuse, acid attack, cyber stalking and social media as a threat to women's emancipation. Through the story of major female characters namely Sreelaxmi the protagonist, Urvashi, Nazma, Brinda and Liliana, the author foregrounds trauma of women in contemporary society. This paper attempt to explore how far the plight of women stems from patriarchal mindset of the society and how far they succeed to float against the undercurrent of male chauvinism.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gender discrimination, subjugation, emancipation, male chauvinism

According to Hindu mythology man and woman are Lord Brahma's creation. One is strong physically, other is blessed with emotional strength. They are made different in their capabilities and the role assigned to them to sustain human civilization on earth but they are complementary to each other. It is human mind that has made them competitors. And when there is competition there emerges a winner and a loser, dominance and defiance. Patriarchy is the system which devalues women and manages to maintain men in authority and dominant, decision-making position whereas women as subservient and submissive to men. Analyzing the restrictions of society American feminist writer Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* defines:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and the language, customs, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (qtd. in Goyal 402)

Nair in her latest novel exposes the hollow orthodox norms of the society which claims for equality of all sorts but exercises none. The protagonist of the novel is Sreelaxmi, in fact the ghost of Sreelaxmi who was a renowned, prize-winning writer and a professor of Zoology in 1960s. She was forced to commit suicide because of the male chauvinism. After her death her lover brings a piece of bone from her embers. In due course of time this piece is taken from one place to another and unfurls the stories of different women as it happens to confront them. The memories of her own tragic end foreground what miseries awaits a woman who ventures to rebel against gender related norms of the society.

Sreelaxmi was a lecturer of Zoology in a college and a renowned writer whose novel "A Fistful of Shadow" won her Sahitya Academy awards. She was the youngest to achieve the prestigious award only at the age of thirty. At the age of thirty-five she had written various short stories and a novel. Then Markose came in her life. He was a priest and six years younger than her. Though Sreelaxmi knew that he was a married man she was infatuated with his dashing looks and quick wit. She knew that it was like walking into a hornet's nest, but decided to go ahead with him. Being a researcher of science, she wanted to understand how love works on an individual. But slowly she found herself irresistibly drawn towards him. She felt her desires unsatiated and in this madness she decided to write love notes to him in public. That was how her new novel "Letters to a Man Never Met" came with a candid confession. It was so ardent and deep in its description of love and lust that even Markose raised the eyes of suspicions evident in the following conversation between them.

"Have you been in love before? He demanded.

My eyes widened.

"I mean have you been with a man before?"

"I am a student of zoology, a teacher of zoology. I know the human body in great detail." (Nair 230)
She could pacify what was going on lover's mind but her story raised a storm of protest everywhere. It was condemned as a vulgar one. Even her mother raised question about it, "You are an unmarried woman. How would

you know what men and women do together? How can you write such things? That too when you are a teacher” (236). The society didn’t accept free play of emotions from a spinster. Her writings created such a turmoil that her proposed supervisor who was once willing to guide her, refused to be guide in her thesis work, her family was asked to vacate the room by their house owners. Her relatives rebuked her mother that her writings were destroying their reputation and it would be difficult for them to find good alliance to their children. At the college her colleagues and students looked at her with an eye of suspicion as if she had committed an act of moral infidelity. The scorn of the society came out from her mother’s mouth in the following words:

Really? She asked. She would no longer hide her anger. And they will ask us to vacate too, when you publish the next installment of that thing you call a story. But do you care? Do you really care what I or anyone else thinks? You are no better than a bitch in heat, a whore, a brazen whore. I am glad that your father is dead. You would have killed him with your writings. (248)

Through the character of Sreelaxmi Nair torches the relentless criticism which a woman writer receives in the society. Though Sreelaxmi was a prize -winning author, her writings were charged of plagiarism., She was not accepted in the literary circle, as she was a woman. In fact, sexual desires of spinsters are not acceptable to patriarchal minds. Markose was a married man and a priest. He too was as much responsible as Sreelaxmi if it was a sin. Nair highlights his patriarchal mind in the following lines:

“We cannot keep meeting like this, I said. We were sitting in a tea shop in Palakkad town.

He nodded ‘I realize that. Someone in my position.....The words hung between us.

What about me, I wanted to ask. A woman in my position cannot afford to do this either.” (232)

Markose was conscious about his own prestige but not about Sreelaxmi. He asked her for two days stay in an unknown place. Blinded by his love, Sreelaxmi agrees to his proposal but after a day’s stay in a hotel he suddenly disappears. He robbed her of her modesty and of her life both and never returns. After this incident Sreelaxmi felt as if she had been dumped into an abyss. She couldn’t find a way out. Life had become so miserable that it was easy for her to succumb to death than to survive. She decides to end her life. Nair exposes the hypocritical behaviour the society which never questions the flagbearers of morality like Markose but frowns upon women for everything they do. Sreelaxmi’s mother disliked her wearing salwar kamiz instead of saari. “To her, the salwar was as vulgar as it could be. It hinted that a woman had legs. And between those legs was the seat of sin” (222). And Nair further hurls saltire: “Was this why the temples in Kerala insisted on women wearing a mundu or a sari?” (222)

NAJMA: A VICTIM OF ACID ATTACK

The heartrending story of Nazma, an acid attack survivor depicts the plight of woman in contemporary society. Nazma was a 24-year-old woman brought up in utter poverty by her mother who was single parent. In spite of adversities her mother brought her up in a quite different way from a traditional Muslim woman. She was strangely modern in her thoughts. She detested burkha and kept her daughter free from it. Nair comments: “Once upon a time she used to wonder what perverse mind had created the burkha: its hideousness appalled her to hide herself as if she were a shameful creature” (56).

Her mother wanted Najma to stride her own path. She named her after a famous star as she thought her daughter was destined to be great. Though she was uneducated she did not want her daughter to suffer like herself. She was determined to educate her. With her efforts Najma went to school and college. Her mother worked as kitchen helper in a catering company which made Hyderabadi cuisine. She found Najma a job at a school run by Muslim charity.

Najma’s mother was only 12 when she was married to a man 23 year older than her. Her father was a drunk who had sold her merely for 500 rupees. Her husband was a drunk too and he suspected her of having illegal relationship with anyone he saw, with her neighbor, with samosa vendor and more. He beat her every now and then. He died when Najma was hardly one year old. She became a widow at the age of seventeen with an infant daughter. After that she never married again because she “never wanted to be another man’s slave and whore in one body” (59)

Najma lived close to Tannery Road near Bangalore east station and her school was at Bangarpet. So, she daily commuted by train. They had dreamt of shifting to Bangarpet when her job was made permanent. She planned a life for both of them but an event occurred which ruined her life overnight. One of the workers from her mother’s catering company named Imtiaz was attracted towards Najma. He came to the school gate and at the station, everywhere his eyes followed her. When Imtiaz proposed her to marry, she replied it was her mother who would decide whom to marry. When Imtiaz asked Najma’s mother, she at once laughed at him saying that her daughter deserved a better male. Imtiaz felt insulted. He abused her of being characterless as she didn’t wear burkha. “Do you think I haven’t seen you? Flaunting your face for the world to see. Using your beauty to have your way with men. From the tea stall boy to every man in the train. How many men do you want, you whore?” (62) None of the passengers seating beside her objected to Imtiaz. In the contrary, a man among them remarked: “Education doesn’t mean you disdain the Koran. What kind of Muslim woman steps out without a hijab?” (62) Imtiaz was furious at her refusal and hurled a bottle of acid over her saying he wouldn’t allow her to become anyone else’s wife.

Her life was destroyed in a fraction of second. She was hovering between life and death. No one was there to hear her shrieks except her mother. Amongst this hopeless situation when she hardly regained her health; her mother got a stroke and died. Nazma was now jobless, her face likely to give nightmare to children. Her little savings had finished. She was utterly hopeless but she thought of her Ammi whose name was Nazaria (Attitude) who had been an eternal fighter throughout her life. And for her Amma as a tribute to her undaunted will power, she decided to live again and face the world. For her she took the resolve that she would never wear the burkha again.

URVASHI'S MORAL INFIDELITY

Urvashi is a 51year old journalist leading a happy life with her husband Mahesh who works for a business advertisement. It was in a girls' night out, a pub that one of her friend Surya insisted her to download tinder, a dating app to make a fake profile and have some fun. Then she had a profile and started dating a married man. It is from here only her troubles start. At first, she felt fascinated by the charm of attention and attraction cast over her but soon she felt tired and fed up. She realized that her relationship has no validity and no destination. She felt suffocated by his all the time monitoring and possessiveness. She started avoiding him, but Raghu was not ready to accept her refusal. When she tried to end up her affair, she felt that it was not so easy, rather a threat to her life which she had not even speculated. He accused her of using him.

"You toyed with me. You messed with me. You can't just dump me." (160)

Urvashi knew that it was an affair I was destined to end she asserted firmly:

"But I feel nothing for you. How can you want to be with someone who feels nothing for you? I can't. I really can't." (160)

And then Raghu turned to be a cyber stalker. he followed her everywhere, messaged her with a new number every time she blocked him. He called into the landline of restaurant where she was staying, he pleaded, scolded and abused thereafter to not to leave her. He did everything he could and Urvashi felt terrified. She didn't know what to do. But once again her friend who had once suggested her to download the app tinder for fun was with her to decide what she should do now. She gave her the courage to not to bother about the consequences:

"So, you need to get over this fear. What is the worst he can do? Tell your husband of family? As for your colleagues, do you think they really care? And if it does happen, you will know how to deal with it. We always do. Nothing is as bad as we imagine it to be" (185).

From her friend at last, she got the courage to end the affair without bothering about what others think and what the consequences would be.

Through Urvashi Nair foregrounds the dual standards of society in which women only are held responsible for moral infidelity. With the advent of social media and cyber technology many ways of harassing women have popped up. If Urvashi was accountable for her immoral conduct equally accountable was her lover but trouble came only her way. In any relationship the word 'no' is of prime concern. A woman has the right to say 'no' at any stage of a relationship. But until and unless the male chauvinism digests it, a women can't exercise her free will. Simone de Beauvoir opines: "In our civilization of enduring patriarchal traditions, marital infidelity is still more serious for the woman than the man" (610).

YIELDING TO SOCIAL HYPOCRISY: BRINDA

The story of Brinda is a big question mark on the claims of gender equality and women empowerment. Brinda Patil was girl with an exceptional talent who was the winner of district level Badminton tournament under 10 categories, winner of under 15 at the state level. She bagged many international medals and has now turned to be India's hope in Olympic games. A girl who was toiling day and night to keep the head of Indians held high but what the society gives her in return is very much discouraging. She realized it for the first time when she went to attend a Diwali party wearing a lehenga choli. She overheard two of the women saying:

"Actually, the short skirts suit her. What doesn't is dressing up in all these fineries.

I was thinking the same. She's like a boy dressed up. All angles and no curves. Girls need curves.

Do you think she's on steroids? They say most sports people take them. Even her face has none of the softness of a girl's." (Nair 128)

Brinda was so much hurt from this incident that she couldn't concentrate on her game further. The thought that what for she is doing all this struggle. What will happen when it is over. Life seems meaningless to her and in utter despair and hopelessness she walks out of the court of Asian games when she was at the game point sure to win the game.

LILIANA'S ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

Another victim of social media is Liliana. She was a girl from Milan, Italy studying in Cambridge. Once during her vacation, she was in Milan to attend a party in her friend's house. It was out of sheer fun that she was crawling like a cat and going towards her friend. At this point someone captured her in a video and sent to her ex-boyfriend. Out of envy he forwarded it into her school, college and university groups with a caption "She had a

new name: Pussy-Mouth, and a new classification: Deviant” (171) She had done it only for fun but the power of male imagination worked wonder. It was taken as an act of illicit attitude. She was made notorious overnight. In YouTube her video went viral with two million views. The video had turned her to ‘Pussy Mouth’. There appeared a fan page on face book. Her posts and memes were viral in Twitter and Instagram. It was to keep herself away from all this nuisance going on that she came to Koman Memorial Dance Academy in Kerala. But social media stalked her everywhere. Even at the dance academy her fellow learners whispered and giggled at her saying she was prostitute. This is how social media affects a woman. The attitude of society, the power of male imagination had turned Liliana’s life in a trauma. A student of Cambridge University and a girl of exceptional talent was made to suffer in such a way that even her parents didn’t try to understand her. Everyone behaved as if she was a whore and Liliana finding no possibility of escape, at last decides to retain her identity as Pussy Mouth.

CONCLUSION

We live in a society where roles for women are set and assigned by the strict framework of patriarchy. From the times immemorial the dual standards of morality, hypocritic and biased valued of our society have reduced womenfolk in to second sex. In this novel Nair has exposed all sorts of discrimination prevailing in the society. She minutely describes how the whole scenario makes life an endless struggle for women. Even the well-educated and independent women are not spared. The scenario hasn’t changed much over time. The advent of technology and social media has also sometimes proved to be deteriorating women’s prestige in society. With majestic caliber and elegance, the author has torched the sensitive issues and exposed the double standards of society. She reaffirms the idea that women still have a long way to go to break the shackles of patriarchy.

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