

Traces Of Patriarchal Indoctrination In K. R Meera's Selected Short Stories

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This article focuses on K.R Meera's selected short stories – “Machakathe Thachan”, “Aattukattil”, “Ekanthathayude Noor Varshangal”- from the perspective of contemporary feminist concerns. It explores the issues of unfulfilled desires, physical violence, and patriarchal restrictions strengthened through myths and beliefs. “Feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concerns with the silencing and marginalization of woman in a patriarchal culture, a culture organized in the favor of man” (Guerin,223).

The women characters of K R Meera's short stories can neither decide for themselves nor fulfill their wishes. They live in an oppressive society which is fundamentally governed by patriarchal indoctrination. Their words and deeds are limited by society and they cannot even think of going beyond the social norms. Though the women characters in the short stories seem to be different, they undergo a similar mental and emotional condition, which is governed by powerlessness, acquiescence, passivity, frustration and helplessness. All the women characters recognize their predicament and victimization but are reluctant to voice it or confront it for fear of being defeated.

K.R.Meera's short story “Attukattil” can be seen as a prototype of women's writing where the narrator and the central characters are women. The first person narrative tries to draw a parallel between herself and her grandmother who was found

dead on a swinging cot one early morning. This story is well crafted mesh of memories, desires and emotions. Meera creates an atmosphere of magic and mysticism in a realm where women characters are relegated or considered 'abnormal'. The narrator is taken to a place which was specially set apart for sorcery where the authority figure sorcerer questions her. She is accused of being possessed. On examining her right palm the sorcerer ("mantravadhi")pronounces:

"I can see two women."

The narrator affirms it and says:

"Yes, about forty or forty two years old. She has thick locks up to her knees. She is fair. She got married at the age of fourteen, became a mother at fifteen, a widow at seventeen and a grandmother at the age of thirty seven".

The narrator's frequent reference of the grandmother establishes that the grandmother figure has left a deep impression on her mind. She identifies herself with grandmother and it is rooted in love and bonding. The grandmother's untimely death created a sense of loss in the child. Since her grandmother's death, probably due to the memories of violence and blood associated with it, the narrator could no longer love anyone. The trauma that the child suffered is depicted implicitly in the narrative though not directly stated. Her grandmother is clearly a victim of restrictive society. This is evident in the narrator's description of grandmother, as articulated by her in the magical portion, the "kalam" which was specially set apart for sorcery. It is possible that the

grandmother must have been forced into child marriage and she had to endure the unnatural social norms. Her death shows that in no way could she endure and continue living in that oppressive society.

K.R Meera has portrayed the women characters' desires and needs in the narrative description of sorcery.

“The sorcerer was a young man with beautiful eyes and soft lips. I never liked men with thick lips. I like this young enchanter very much. But I am doubtful whether he would be able to retain his original charm and strength, after my frenzied bacchanalian dance with staring eyes bulged and hair unkempt. I want to know that...”

However she has no hopes of fulfillment of her desires and wishes.

“Yes! My Grandma's death was a mysterious death. I too have the same fate. I would also be seen dead, lying on one side in the swinging cot at dawn, with blood spurting out through the open mouth and long hair flowing down.. like her...”

She expresses her foreboding thought that,

“Now I could narrate the story of Lord Krishna- the story of him sucking milk and finally drawing in blood!”

The figure of Lord Krishna who is frequently associated with romantic love adds to the thematic concerns of the story. Love in its varied manifestations- love denied,

violated and lost, forms the crux of the story. Hence it becomes an intricate framework of feminist cries and concerns.

K.R Meera's short story 'Machakathe Thachan' fuses myth and everyday life to weave an interesting tale of women. The unseen presence is that of a carpenter, a carpenter on the attic. The narrator, a young woman describes it to her husband on her wedding night.

"The sound that is heard from the attic at night is part of the two thousand year old tradition of this ancestral house. My father told me so".

The fact that it is the father who articulates the myth indicates that the myth serves the interests of patriarchy. The carpenter could be a projection of the desires of the women of the household. The image of the carpenter as a common factor in their lives, binds the generation of women of the household. Clearly the women are consciously or unconsciously victims of a society that decides their love, life and fate. Sometimes the myth serves as an effective tool that directs women in making crucial decisions.

"To my father nothing matters but the history of two thousand years. Everything else is insignificant. Yes, two thousand years' tradition is definitely something worth mentioning and important!"

Myth is incorporated in the story to satisfy the needs of the patriarchal society.

It is after their crucial turn of events that the Malayali Thampuran arrives from America and finally gets married to the woman of the household (narrator). The traditions and beliefs serve as a means of manipulating the lives of women as well as controlling the wealth and property of the household (the ancestral house). The story is set in the context of traditional family. Even when the myth of the carpenter remained alien to the younger generation of the family, ultimately the myth takes over in their lives too.

“She was awake! I was conscious that the master carpenter had not yet completed his works. I was overwhelmed by the revelation that tradition needs no green card and visa to reach and find out the real heirs of a tradition which is two thousand years old. That revelation simply overpowered me.”

Another subtheme of this story is loneliness and seclusion. The narrator makes the statement:

“I was terribly lonely in that huge house! That is the curse that befell my ancestral home. Children are always too lonely. The house is always crowded, full of people moving in and around. But the children have no friends to play with or talk to... Nobody takes care of us, we are not significant or important... a neglected lot...”

The women of the ancestral house were brought up in a secluded atmosphere. This also hints their lack of connection with the society outside the four walls of the house.

The carpenter on the attic continues to engrave the carvings. His sculpture can also be interpreted as manifestations of the women's dreams. The two forms that the iron rod take - lotus bud and sharp end of a knife-reveal that the women's heart can make one concrete object be seen as two entirely different entities. In other words the thoughts and feelings of the women of the household determine what it signifies.

Here the ancestral house becomes a powerful metaphor for the family which is rooted in a society that involves differences and distinctions based on caste, class, creed and gender. The women characters in the story are made to orient their likes and dislikes so as to maintain the existing myth and tradition. The mythical proportion of the ancestral house symbolizes the socio-cultural identity of the family.

In the story "Ekanthathayude Noor Varshangal", K.R Meera presents two characters Noor and Sathyan who are from different social backgrounds. In the story these two characters' love and desires cannot be fulfilled because of their circumstances such as disability, bondage and helplessness. Both suffer from extreme loneliness and are imprisoned in their own life situations. Noor being physically disabled has an isolated existence. Satyan being a convict is imprisoned. Satyan had a difficult childhood and for him a woman signified a 'lump of flesh that can couch supine.'

Satyan falls in love with Noor the very first time he see her. Her existence as a disabled woman doesnot affects his passion.

“He watched her blood thirsty. Her eyes, nose, cheeks, neck, breasts, lower belly, navel, all simply majestic in accurate proportions. But below her navel.. Even in that agitated mood, Satyan’s body quivered... He stood there paralyzed. Below her navels there were no thighs, no legs, no feet. There were only two very lean piece of flesh, like a tender stem of a creeper. Yes, she was indeed a lump of flesh.”

This shows that his love transcends beyond mere physical considerations and that become an instance of metaphysical love.

Satyan had found the novel “One hundred Years of Solitude” with Noor on their first encounter. Since then Satyan carried the book with him. This symbolizes her presence in his life.

“When he went out he tucked the book in his waist and the sword in the back. He wrapped the book with a plastic cover to keep it safe”.

The love and bonding between them transcends the borders of religion, caste and community. The central characters are in one way or the other marginalized. They are alienated figures in their own ways. Satyan captures her heart because he is the first man to accept her femininity despite her disabilities. Noor speaks to him:

“You were the first to see my body. You were the first man to clean my bedpan. Yes, you were the first man to hold my book against your chest....”

Noor had emotions and desires like any woman, but society was unwilling to acknowledge even her presence. In the letters that Noor writes, she expresses her helplessness and fears. Her dreams are powerful but these dreams do not get materialized. K.R Meera presents a narrative where the bed-ridden protagonist dares to dream a life filled with love and desire complained.

“When will you come? I’m really frightened. I fear the numbness of my legs. It is slowly spreading and reading up..Oh! How shall I give birth to your children?”

Thus the protagonist’s letters are a blend of disabled women’s suppressed desires and justifiable anxieties.

The narrator suffers from loneliness, alienation and vegetative existence until the character Satyan enters her life. The accident love and companionship between them however cannot sustain; thus erasing the possibility of a happy ending. The narrative highlights the helpless conditions of a disabled woman. The narrative thus becomes rooted in feminist impulses.

K.R Meera’s selected short stories address the relation between women’s experience, social power and resistance. The notion of experience in relation, both to social practices and to the formation and processes of subjectivity is a feminist concept. The feminist practices -critical and textual- involving raising feminist consciousness as well as criticism of social and cultural discourses can be discerned in her short stories.

“ For a theoretical perspective to be politically useful to feminism, it should be able to recognize the importance of the subjective in constituting the meaning of women’s lived reality. It should not deny subjective experience, since the ways in which people make sense of their lives is a necessary starting point for understanding how power relations structure society. Theory must be able to address women’s experience by showing where it comes from and how it relates to material social practices and the power relations which structure them... In this process subjectivity becomes available, offering the individual both a perspective and a choice, and opening up the possibility of political change. (Weedon,8-9).”

In K.R Meera’s short stories one encounters images of subjection, acquiescence, passivity, conformism, femininity, victimization and powerlessness. The women characters of stories conformed to the existing myths and beliefs. In “Attukattil” the narrator and the grandmother assert their femininity yet become victims of patriarchal culture. The central character Noorjahan in the story “Ekanthathayude Noor Varshangal” is a symbol of powerlessness that is central to female existence.

In K.R Meera’s fiction we see feminist critical discourse on culture, social institution, subjectivity, writing and representation. In the short story “Attukattil” one can find a feminist attempt to redefine the trends of women’s nature and the choices they make on the terms of existing social relations. The modes of femininity are placed in the overall network of social power relations.

As discussed in this article the notion of women's existence that is suppressed or repressed by patriarchy recurs in the three short stories. There is an attempt to systematize individual insights about the oppression of women into three varied but coherent critiques of patriarchy. An understanding of how discourses are mobilized in a particular society in a historical period, is the first stage in intervention in order to initiate change. These short stories point to newer terrains for contemporary feminist cultural criticism.

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