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The Role of Culture and Society in the Development of Plot in Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem* and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*: A Feminist Reading

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ABSTRACT. Culture and Society are often the main gist of most novels. These two factors often influence and control the characters, thus helping in the development of the plot. A plot, as defined by Egan (1978), is used to indicate an outline of events and serves as a skeleton in a literary piece. In other words, it is a tool in making sure the main incidents or scenarios are presented in a particular order to establish a clear understanding of what is being written. Culture and society plays the essence in a novel as it constructs these main ideas in engaging the interest of a reader and also extends the intended message of the particular writer. This paper looks into how culture and society helps in developing the plots of the selected novels using the feminist approach. Tanushree Podder's, *Escape from Harem* (2013) and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993) amazingly are both set in India. Podder and Mehta have inserted the perception society had over women and how male supremacy was glorified in many aspects. The essence of feminist approach was very much present in these two novels. According to Tyson (2006), feminism concerns the ways in which literature undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression on women. Though the setting of both novels fall in different eras but the theme of female oppression remains the same. The patriarchal society uses culture and religion as a tool to control women and oppress them. Both authors have shown how the women in the 17th century and in the 20th century face the same kind of judgment from the society and men in general.

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture and society plays an integral role in the development of any plots. Egan (1978) defines that a plot is used to indicate an outline of events and serves as a skeleton in a literary piece. In other words, it is a tool in making sure the main incidents or scenarios are presented in a particular order to establish a clear understanding of what is being written. It cannot be denied that culture and society plays the essence in a novel as it constructs these main ideas in engaging the interest of a reader and also extends the intended message of the particular writer. A writer maintains the focus of the write-up and makes sure each incident was given enough shed of light throughout the journey of the plot. This paper intends to study to what extent society and culture contributed in development of the plot and what kind of approach has been applied to these novels. The first novel that would be analyzed is *Escape from Harem* (2013) by Tanushree Podder and the second would be *A River Sutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta. Both these novels were written by female authors and interestingly the settings are in India. What sets these two novels apart was the setting of time where the first was in the 1600s and the second was during the modern Indian era. *Escape from Harem* revolves around the life of Zeenat who was thrown in the Mughal emperor's harem to satisfy the raging lust of the emperor. The novel tells the story of how Zeenat's life was changed forever after her abduction and spending four consecutive nights with Jahangir. Lust, exploitation of women, sexual satisfaction and hunger for power in the society back then were the primary themes of the novel. As for *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta explores the diversity of cultures within the society by presenting a fragmented novel consists of various interlinked stories that were presented by various story-tellers all by the bank of Narmada River. In this novel too, Mehta inserted the

perception society had over women and how male supremacy was glorified in many aspects. Both being female authors, it cannot be totally neglected that the tendency of writing issues pertaining women would certainly be part of their write-up. According to Patel (2013), Indian female novelists always tend to write issues regarding female subjectivity and their works depict their own identity. Fair enough, in both novels, the culture and society were very much inclined towards male dominance, oppression of women and also glorification of men and their superiority. Women were always a subject to subordination and often regarded as a companion, wives or merely a slave. This inferiority of women can be seen throughout the novel and served as the dominant force in the development of the plot. The essence of feminist approach was very much present in these two novels. According to Tyson (2006), feminism concerns the ways in which literature undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression on women. He adds on that these issues extend into diverse areas of our culture. Some of the common spaces in feminism include oppression by the patriarchal society and also marginalization of women in a social context (Millet, 1969). *Escape from Harem* and *A River Sutra* are no strangers to these issues. Throughout the development of the both plots, the authors explicated in many scenarios how male dominance and women subordination existed in the culture and society of the people. Hence, the application of this approach in these novels cannot be sidelined as both the novels showed evidences of how patriarchal the culture and the society were. Hence, this paper intends to examine how feminism approach has been applied in the write-up as well as to investigate how the society and culture in these novels have affected the development of the plot. In order to do so, these two novels will be analyzed by putting on the lenses of feminism especially patriarchal concept in order to ascertain male dominance, inequality to women, exploitation as well as double standards practiced by the society and culture of both novels.

2. ANALYSIS

Set during the Mughal dynasty in India (1600s), *Escape from Harem* was surely an epic novel that focused on the power hungry rulers and thirst for bloodshed. The aim of that era was to extend their empire at any cost including killing their own. The society in that culture perceived women as of lower status as compared to men. At the expository level of the plot, the author introduced a young beautiful character named Zeenat. It was explained that Zeenat was brought to the harem on a daily basis by her mother in fear of her safety at home. The following excerpt is taken from the novel:

“Throughout the day, inebriated men loitered around the streets, making it difficult for women to move out”. (Podder 2013:3)

The above excerpt shows that when women live in a male dominated society, their safety is compromised. This is supported by Yodanis (2004) who claimed that when the status of women is low, the prevalence of sexual violence against them is higher. In this novel, when the society themselves perceive women as second-class citizens, any acts of crime against them would be considered as a norm. Besides, women were seen merely as sex-tools. The story develops further when Zeenat was brought to the palace to satisfy the emperor's lust. She was ordered to come to the palace by the eunuchs and refuting the emperor's plea amounted to treason. Zeenat was forced to dance before him and then brutally raped by the emperor. “The shock numbed her senses and she closed her eyes as he entered her brutally” (Podder 2013:9). The negative treatment and oppression faced by Zeenat clearly suggested how low the perception men had over women in that society. The emperor merely used her for his satisfaction for four consecutive nights and then he absolutely abandoned her. This shows how men treated women just as sexual tools and kept them in the dark once all was done. Zeenat was not shown any mercy despite being only 15 years old then. In addition, even the women in this novel were made to believe that it was considered as a very noble thing to have been chosen by the emperor to satisfy his lust. The women in the harem thought that Zeenat should stop crying for what have had happened but to be ecstatic about it as not everyone is as lucky as her to have had spent not one but four nights with the emperor. The following excerpt is taken from the novel:

Do not fret, wench, you are fortunate that the emperor desired you. You will be rewarded suitably (Podder 2013:12).

They expressed that for all of Zeenat's effort, there will be rewards given. Money is what rules them above all including self-respect or even purity of a woman. Michele (2014) suggests that monetary relief seems to always be the compensation for women's involvement in sexual acts. Similarly here, Zeenat was seen to be expecting some rewards after what had happened to her. The society in the novel had set the perimeters for the roles of women in the novel. They were seen as the keeps for their masters and there was no such a thing as acquiring power or any sense of authority. They themselves had accepted such a faith and questioning this matter was seen as something bizarre.

Never had a woman been given so much power and authority. Women were meant to give pleasure to men and not rule them. (Podder 2013: 33)

The excerpt above is in line with feminist critic Friedan (2001) who claimed that women are domesticated and that true feminine women are those who are able to be good wives and mothers only. The aspect of ruling their husband is out of the picture. Their role is only to provide the needs of the family. And *Escape from Harem* truly condones the idea of this critic as in this society, males especially, view women inferior to them. *Escape from Harem* maintains its male domination and suppression of women throughout the novel. There were a lot of double-standards in the novel. Firstly, the females were not allowed to seek male doctors. "Women of the royal harem were not allowed to seek the services of male hakims" (Podder 2013:37). Their illness can only be treated by females of the harem Secondly, the males were allowed to have more than one wife but the females (including the princesses) were the property of the emperor.

The men are allowed to marry as many times as they wish as they can enlarge their kingdom (Podder 2013: 135).

These clear distinctions showed how the culture and society favoured men compared to women. Men were allowed to be polygamous and have four wives but some women were not even allowed to choose her own future partner as it was the rule of the emperor. Mernissi (1975) asserted that being polygamous humiliates the woman as a sexual being as it shows their inability to satisfy men. Another factor that suggests the novel had a rather prominent aspect of feminism throughout its' development was the celebration of joy when a prince was born compared to a princess. The following excerpt shows how the birth of a male heir is celebrated extravagantly.

Amidst all these events, Arjumand Begum gave birth to their first son, Dara Shikoh. The birth was announced with trumpets, cymbals and drums through the empire. (Podder 2013:49)

Undoubtedly, when the pair's first daughter, Jahanara was born, there were celebrations too but the empire was not buzzed with activities and so much joy as per compared to the birth of *Dara*. Again, subtly, the author reminds the readers how much importance a son means to the empire compared to a daughter. A prince would lead the empire one day in the future but a princess would merely be another member of the royal harem forever as the Mughal princesses were not allowed to marry. Such was the society and culture of the people in the novel. This double standards did not just exist among the commoners but also affected the women in the royal family. The Mughal princesses were not allowed to get married as there was a fear if a princess gets married, she might be attracted to the enemy's side and later on create a lot of nuisance for the empire. This rule was imposed by Akhbar as he was afraid misuse of power through the princesses. Although Dara Shikoh promised Jahanara that he would one day lift the ban set by their great grandfather Akhbar but Aurangzeb kept all the women locked up in the harem (Mani 2015:65). The following excerpt shows that Princesses themselves knew that there was no marriage in their lives.

"My dear sister, we are Mughal princesses. We are not allowed to marry, so forget about marrying an emperor", teased Jahanara. (Podder 2013:135)

Such unfairness was even showed to their own family. Hunger for power has made men so irrational and start treating women with so much in equality. They rather extend their empire than giving off the princesses in marriage to others. In fact, Shah Jahan even poisoned Jahanara's

steward who was seen as a potential husband and constantly checked her room to see if she was hiding any men (Mani 2015:65). The final aspect that proves the feminist approach was very relevant in the society and culture of the novel is through the value placed at women. Women were considered as a subject of commodity. This was seen in the following excerpt:

Mewar surrendered its sovereignty to Prince Khurram. It was decided that Maharana's son, Karan Singh, would represent the ageing king in the Mughal court. In return, Jahangir promised that the Mughals would not demand any woman of Mewar in marriage. (Podder 2013: 45)

Even though in this particular context the emperor promised not to take any women by force after the falling of the Mewar empire, this clearly indicates that women were seen as something that can be used to be exchanged. A win in the war meant that women were subject to be looted and presented to the king. Juliet Mitchell (1974) claims that in a patriarchal society, men exchange women to assert symbolic power. Clearly, this provides proof that the society in this particular novel too was very patriarchal and undervalued the value of a woman's dignity. However, Gita Mehta in *A River Sutra* has presented the negative treatment of women by the society and culture in a rather fragmented way. The collection of stories that were presented in the novel by various story-tellers throughout the development of the plot showed various incidents where oppression of women was seen from various angles. Mehta treats religion as an elemental part of culture to create an ideological discourse within the context of various religions found in India like Hinduism, Islam and Jainism. These conventions allow the plot to have depth in terms of literary richness where culture and society drive the plot. In the "Minstrel's story", women regardless of their age were seen as a tool in money-making. Uma, a young girl was sold to a brothel by her father for 500 rupees as the family was poverty-stricken. The excerpt below shows how a woman is sold for mere 500 Rupees.

"But I paid five hundred rupees for her. It was a great charity I did her father..."

(Mehta 1993: 246)

The excerpt above validates the notion that females are priced-commodities. It is the society that puts such an impression on women and their value. Women, again, are used as sex tools to satisfy other men for a very low price. What is sad in this context is, Uma's own father was willing to sell of his own daughter at the value as low as 500 rupees. This shows the mentality of the society and how uncultured they can get as poverty envelopes them. Uma was also discriminated in her own house when she was denied to eat before other family members in her house. This inequality faced by her was due to the fact that she was a girl and others should dine before her. It is obvious in the following excerpt:

"I was never allowed to eat until everyone else had eaten. So I was always hungry. And I was beaten by my father."(Mehta 1993: 249)

The excerpt above explains that in a regular Indian house hold, the female of the house will have to wait for the men to finish eating before she can eat. Despite Uma feeling hungry, she had to wait for her turn to eat. Men are viewed as the leaders of the house and dining before them seems to be a great disrespect in certain communities. Again, the author creatively inserts the status of women in the society by showing how they were treated. In the "Executive's Story", issues on exploitation of women by the society is also presented. Nitin Bose was shown as a womanizer and had little respect for women. Nitin was sent to manage a tea estate and this was where he met Rima, a married woman, and had an affair with her. Nitin felt it was totally fine for him to have such feelings for a married woman as it was a norm in the culture where he came from- Calcutta.

"Such was my enchantment with Rima's strangeness that I did not find it odd that she was married". And I could tolerate the thought that another man might embrace her. (Mehta 1993: 129)

The above excerpt shows how the sanctity of a marriage was sidelined by Nitin. This was supported by Thakur (2014) who said that "The Executive's Story" portrayed a modern attitude of lustful eyes as well as exploiting a woman regardless of the marital status. Men treated women with very little respect and even a marriage would not stop them from flirting with another woman. The three main

issues regarding women in this particular story were physical exploitation of a married woman, love for a married women, and revenge of a cheated woman. Nitin had a confession that he had never regretted that he had been having affairs with married women. "After all who had I slept with all those years in Calcutta but other men's wives" (Mehta 1993: 129). This clearly shows that men with higher social standings in life do not respect the status of a poor woman and having an affair with married women was seen as a norm in the society. As the plot develops, it was then portrayed that the society and culture had put huge importance on physical and mental attributions of women. In "The Musician's Story" the musician's daughter did not have a beautiful looking face. Thus she was always looked down upon her beauty. "People are always alarmed the first time they see me" (Mehta 1993: 195). She had some abnormality as compared to other women. She had manlier features. Because of this, she was always neglected by her mother and the society. Even her own mother could not accept that her daughter was born with such a hideous face. The painful lamentation of the poor girl shows how even her parents cannot accept her deformity.

"Unfortunately, my mother seldom spoke to me. My ugliness upset her."

(Mehta 1993: 210)

In another instance, women with low intelligence will not be able to survive the harshness of the society. Women are perceived as weak and the only thing that might help them fight the society back is their intelligence.

"... a woman without genius could only be protected by a husband in a harsh world designed by men." (Mehta 1993: 212)

This instance shows that without knowledge, it is difficult for a woman to live on her own. Moreover she will not be respected for who she is. A woman will need her husband by her side to protect her all the time. Thakur (2014) in "Sociological Status of Women in Geeta Metha's *A River Sutra*", stated that women in this society are always obliged to do whatever the men ask them to do. They have no rights to give orders but only to listen to what has been instructed.

The last story that portrays the negative treatment of women by the patriarchal society and culture in *A River Sutra* is the "Courtesan's Story". In this story, the courtesan narrates how she has failed to protect her daughter from the growing indignity around her. It was stated that the society was unable to protect the safety of women. As a result, her daughter was abducted by a dangerous bandit, Rahul Singh. An evident theme portrayed in this story is the inability to protect a woman. When the Courtesan's daughter was kidnapped, on one around that bazaar was able to prevent the Courtesan's daughter from being kidnapped.

"... I could only watch as a blanket was thrown over her head. My daughter's limbs failed against her captor as he flung her over his shoulder..."(Mehta 1993: 171)

It can be concluded that the ignorance of the society was on the high as no one were bothered to step in and help the daughter. The society and culture of not wanting to help women in need was something what the author wanted to highlight here as well. None of the men stood up in response to the abduction in broad day light. Again, element of oppression and exploitation of women presented by the author.

3. CONCLUSION

Hence, what the society comprises of affects the quality of their culture. In both selected novels, it has been very clear that issues pertaining to discrimination of women as well as treating them as objects to subordination were very vividly presented. Throughout the development of the plots, both authors have made it very clear in expressing their concerns about gender inequality by showing so many instances on how women were treated or how they were perceived by the various characters in the novels. Discrimination, sexual exploitation, low social status were some of the issues that have been raised in the novels. The authors have certainly made it very clear to present all the inequalities faced for the readers to know some of the hidden truths of the society.

The very fact that both of the novels were set in India, it enhances the idea of the society and culture of the people who promoted male dominance and its glorification. It being so, both authors used this very reason to explicate how women were treated and perceived in a patriarchal society.

All the discrimination and subordination of women were presented in various levels of the society; from rich to poor. It is important to note that these issues were the driving force in both novels as how the discussions above have illustrated. Elements of feminism were seen throughout the build-up of the plot in many instances. In short, the atrocity and exploitation of women were presented in a very well-mannered style to show how patriarchal the society and culture was and how it affected the development of the plot.

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