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Interrogating misogyny, claims to selfhood and empowerment in Mrinal Pande's story, "Girls"

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Abstract

This paper seeks to challenge misogyny portrayed in Mrinal Pande's short story "Girls". The short story portrays how women are taken for granted in patriarchal society. At the same time, it is also depicted how women are becoming empowered and claiming to selfhood. The research methodology includes a close reading of the text.

Keywords: Selfhood, empowerment, misogyny, patriarchy, feminism

Introduction

Of late, a new plume of victory has adorned the bonnet of Indian women. This is women's Reservation Bill. It has obtained an unequivocal approval of the parliament, in consequence of which 33% seats have been reserved for women in the parliament. This is one of the many avenues through which women have been cruising on towards the long- aspired domain of autonomy and empowerment. In their long march to the shore of their dreams, women have always been interrogated, hemmed in and threatened with segregation, exile and even execution – physical, psychological and social. Alone they bore the cross, and have now succeeded in reaching out to the metaphoric 'Sun'. They know that conquering the "sun" means to constitute the history of their own saga.

In Mrinal Pande's comprehensive story "Girls", we get a clear glimpse of how girls/ women have been conditioned and taken for granted in the traditional Indian society, and how slowly but surely they do evince the sign of their awakening to social activism.

The author lays bare the odious misogyny of the patriarchal set-up at the very outset of the story, where we find that the mother of the protagonist, an eight- year old girl, is in a state of pregnancy for the fourth time because of her "failure" to produce a son – all her children are girls so far. In the hegemonic perception of the patriarchy, of all the tasks that designate a women's femininity, the most crucial one is to bear son/s, thereby satisfying her male counterpart's dynastic ambition. This misogynistic ambition of the male sex situates a women as a mere son- breeding machinery. Here I offer to give a reference from Ania Loomba's book, "colonialism/ postcolonialism" (P. 180), in order to substantiate this point: "Anti colonial or national movements have used the image of the Nation- Mother to create their own lineage, and to limit and control the activity of women within the imagined community. They have also literally exhorted women to produce sons who may live and die for the nation. Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic resistance movement makes this points rather blatantly: "...She is a factory to produce men, ..." (Jad 241)

Even today, in many families, haunted by the spectre of the nineteenth century male chauvinism, this birth of a girl is just as much disappointing as warmly welcome is the birth of a son. Silent, cold sneer is still hurled upon a women who has given birth to a girl child, as though, she has played down her husband's family which would have brightened up had she produced a son. In the story, "Girls" the protagonist's mother, being recurrently pestered by the hazards of pregnancy, exclaims with a pathetic wishfulness: "I hope it's a boy this time. It will relieve me of the nuisance of going through another pregnancy." Here there are more than one ignominies for the woman. Her husband's and his family's aspiration for a son- a son, and not a daughter is deemed fit to succeed to their heritage – dehumanizes her into a son – breeding "factory". Hideously, her husband perpetrates a marital rape out of a perverted desire to have a son in exchange for her repeated anguish and desecration.

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Naturally, getting a boy child would be just a source of relief for her, and not a source of delight and happiness.

The protagonist's mother is "preoccupied with all her problems", the most plaguing being her second daughter, the protagonist, because of her proactive, inquisitive nature, and her trend to run athwart the norms fixed by the traditional system for the girls to internalize and follow. So there is no surprise why her mother accuses her, saying: "You are the cause of all my problems!" (Pande 60)

While in the Naani's house, the protagonist is reminded: "you are born a girl and you will have to bend for the rest of your life,..." here there is the protagonist's voice in silence, interrogating the validity of such rotten custom as threatens women with perpetual subordination.

Despite her very tender age the protagonist realizes through her everyday experience with the social order, that females like her are always kept below menfolks. Naani's lap is permanently reserved for mamma's son. Her father grows annoyed when she asks "...I can't become a boy, can I?" Here there is a faint suggestion of women's suffering from a sense of lacking the male organ.

The girl's bitter experience of the world controlled by the male sex, grows richer and richer as she feeds herself with the suppressed tales of her counterpart's ignominy. She hears on the sly her Chotomaasi's sobs: "I don't get as much respect as a dog does in that house."

The protagonist's elder sister represents the so-called "Angel of the House"- docile, submissive, tongue-tied, keeping the authority in good humour. She goes onto thread a garland for Naani's Gopalji. In defiance of her advice to abstain from questioning the grown ups, the protagonist rises into a stout protest: "I will ask questions. I will, I will." She refuses to be girlish and submissive. Her elder sister is extolled by Naani as "my precious Lakshmi". (Pande 63)

In the ideological version of patriarchy, the protagonist, because of her refusal to be cut out for the service of the authority, would be condemned as "O- Lakshmi".

In the grey past, in a State of Nature, women enjoyed an equal status with men. With the growth of a feudal framework, women were reduced to a subjugated entity. We find in Simone de Beauvoir's highly comprehensive book, *The Second Sex* (1949) her incisive critique of "the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object or "Other" to men as a dominating "Subject" who is assumed to represent humanity in general". (P.101, *A Handbook Of Literary Terms* by M.H Abrams/ Geoffrey Galt Harpham).

In "Girls", Mrinal Pande posits the protagonist as a metaphoric mouth piece of women's murmurs for the retrieval of their robbed status, their recognition, their dignity. She disagrees to let Hari's maa (one of the few representatives of the servant class in the story) go until she says properly "girls are nice" (Pande 63).

one of the feminist tropes which feature in Mrinal Pande's story "Girls" is that of a close affinity between the servant class and their female hostesses. The latter shared their secrets and sufferings with their maids. The protagonist's mother expresses her anguish at her most excruciating recurrent pregnancy to the maids. She says to the midwife Tulsa Dai: "If I have a boy this time, then I will be relieved of this burden forever,". (Pande 65)

The author has thrown light on a very delicate and significant sidelight of the new patriarchy which evolved out of the growth of Nationalism. This patriarchy devolves upon women a new responsibility of serving as a repository and custodian of the essential spiritual/ feminine qualities of

the "home", the inner sanctum of the nation. With this end in view, nationalism cast women in the mother or- daughter or wife image as well as in the construct of Goddesses, like Durga or Kali within the framework of religion and mythology. In the words of Partha Chatterjee: "As with all hegemonic forms of exercising dominance, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother. Whatever its sources in the classical religions of India or in medieval religion practices, the specific ideological form in which we know the "Indian Woman" construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly and undeniably a product of the development of a dominant middle- class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. It served to emphasize with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new construct of "woman" standing as a sign for "nation" namely, the spiritual qualities of self- sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity and so on."(Chatterjee 131)

Women were idolized under the image of mother or Goddess to represent the nation, but with her idolization her real identity was restricted and even diminished under the male superiority. In the story girls, Mrinal Pande has exposed how hypocrisy is meted out to women on the pretext of extolling them as deities. Girls / women are left in the cold, but when it becomes necessary for the nation and patriarchy to exploit their image, it suddenly glorifies them, enshrining them on the altar of worship. Naani, who is one of those woman who have conceded socialization by patriarchy, neglects the protagonist, but on the Ashtami day, she treats her together with the other girls reverently, adulating them as "Kanyakumari". The girls of flesh and blood are things of contempt, but the same girls are raised to deities on special occasions when patriarchy requires to idolize them, either to symbolize them as the nation, or to hide their misogyny behind the mask of benevolence and piety. In the story, the protagonist defiantly interrogates this double-facedness "When you people don't love girls, why do you pretend to worship them?"

The protagonist refuses to be conditioned into melting by the hypocritical adoration of Naani, representing patriarchy, and screams with anger and anguish: "...I don't want to be a Goddess".

The conclusion of the story with the symbolic presentation of a bullet having been fired somewhere, is very significant as it signalizes women's awakening to their right to emancipation, autonomy and empowerment. Women must assert themselves by their own power.

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