

Voice for an Anonymous Woman in K.S. Maniam's *In a Far Country*

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Abstract

The idea of a world beyond patriarchy is a change that has been expected for a long period by several women in society. This paper explores a feminist perspective of a voiceless woman whose problems need to be heard. Domestic violence is an important obstacle to women's empowerment. The primary cause of domestic violence is the patriarchal privilege, where certain behaviour of men is culturally transmitted from one generation to another, supported by the system of male supremacy. Earlier, society believed that violence against women by men was normal and marginalized the issue as a subject that is not worth consideration to be discussed in the mainstream. But when women voiced their rights and demanded equality and social justice, reformation began, and the process continues. The novel, *In a Far Country*, portrays the unfortunate situation of an Indian woman in a rubber estate in Malaysia. But her situation and her story can be equated with any Indian woman who is poor, illiterate, and economically dependent on her abusive husband. The study undertaken explores the anonymous woman's struggle as a representative of women who have lost their life in the hegemony of men in the patriarchal society. The anonymous woman has undergone a lot of domestic violence, and it has wounded her psychologically.

Keywords: Domestic violence; Hegemony; Patriarchal society; Women empowerment.

Introduction

In a Far Country is written by an Indo-Malaysian novelist, K.S. Maniam, and was published in the year 1993. The novel portrays the experience of a man facing a void in his very existence and who is in a constant quest for purpose in his life. When the novel begins, Rajan is in his middle age,

and through his narration about his past, he shares his childhood and adulthood period. The people he meets in his life play a significant role in changing his perspective toward his existence.

The novel also unfolds a feminist perspective through the protagonist Rajan's realization of his wife's sacrifice. His realization that he has played a part in subjugating his wife makes him feel guilty, however, he does not take full responsibility for it. He says that women also play a major part in their suppression, for instance, Vasanthi's submission to Rajan has made him act rude. The way Vasanthi was brought up by her parents is one of the reasons for her subordinate behaviour with her husband in her early married life. She was never given a chance to choose, her parents sent her to school for some reason they knew and when they wanted someone to take care of her sister, they immediately stopped Vasanthi from going to school. When she married Rajan, he further crippled her and he later realises that he had made her suffer silently.

Women, I feel, have always acted out of reaction. They are not entirely to blame but they must take some responsibility for what has happened them. Their breasts and hips have been damaged, say, by the arms of history by the arms of the men what made history, personal or otherwise. Their loins are soured by the very menchildren they have produced. How to stop this line of progeniture? And on what scale? How to restore to the women their innocence? (*In a Far Country* 185)

During Rajan's childhood, he witnessed a woman who suffered domestic violence from her husband. This woman is not named by the author and this paper deals with that anonymous woman who suffered domestic violence from her husband. The nameless woman is also addressed by the author as an estate woman and her husband is referred to as the dark Indian clerk in the estate. Even though the woman in the novel is not named, the novelist describes every minute detail about her. For instance, he describes her odour while she is happy. The story of this estate woman is narrated by the protagonist Rajan who recalls his childhood days in the rubber estate. The majority of the critical works on K.S. Maniam's writings deal with the exploration of the diasporic concept in his fiction. But K.S. Maniam's female characters are unique in nature and there is a research gap from a feminist perspective.

The early marital life of the estate woman seemed to be a joyful one to Rajan as he was witnessing their life during the boyhood period of his

life and he could only capture or understand a few things around him, "The husband worshipped her as if she [estate woman] was a goddess, bringing or buying jasmine flowers for her hair, every day. She had a bloom on her face that I [Rajan] thought would stay there for eternity" (*In a Far Country* 180). But the marital harmony did not last for a long time and it soon faded away when the woman gave birth to her first child and she could not take care of her husband in the way she did when she was newly married. The transformed behaviour of the woman infuriated her husband. Before her first pregnancy and childbirth, she pampered her husband like a man who is incapable of handling himself. For instance, she kept a pail of water ready for him before he returned from work. She also washed his feet and at times she even fed him his meal. But after the birth of her baby, she could hardly take care of herself. She took care of her child without her husband's support as she believed that it was her sole responsibility.

Binary Nature of the Treatment of Women:

Mahadevi Varma's essay "Links in Our Chain" written in 1931 was published in the year 2003 as a collection of essays titled *Links in the Chain* which makes an important point regarding the binary nature of the treatment of Indian women who are either treated as Goddesses or as submissive beings who are made to suffer in darkness and silence. The plight of the nameless estate woman in the novel taken for study echoes Verma's argument,

A common tendency among mankind, with respect to an object whose beauty or delicacy surpasses that of ordinary earthly objects, is either to elevate it to the status of the divine, fit to be venerated, or to consider it lowly, and subject it to neglect and disdain. // Due to the irony of fate, the Indian women has experienced both states. She has been revered as a presiding deity of a temple as well as been made a prisoner in the darkest corner of her home. (*Links in the Chain* 3)

As years went by, the anonymous woman suffered a lot, and in the next three years, she gave birth to three children. She no longer had time for herself, and her husband abused her whenever he felt annoyed. She suffered in silence, and when the battle between them went out of control, people in the estate came to support the wife, but the husband sent them off, calling it a "Husband-and-wife quarrel" (183). Later the neighbours around them did not intervene much, and the husband took advantage of

it. The woman had lost all her youthfulness, and she, in turn, directed her stress toward her children and hit them. Due to her changed behaviour, the people who supported her earlier turned a blind eye to her suffering and showed their resentment. The practical difficulty of women voicing out and reporting the violence of their male partner or any close family member is highly challenging when it comes to the implementation of legal justice. It is because of the fear of being blamed for the conduct of the person who has committed harmful or illegal activities against her. Society is quick to judge the victim rather than the victimizer. This situation creates anxiety in women and the fear of character assassination is instilled in women from a very young age which curbs women from using their legal rights.

The woman's anonymity in the novel cannot be neglected since this woman represents countless women who had endlessly suffered and ended their lives without any peace. There are very few occasions in the novel where the estate woman speaks for herself as she remains mute, enduring her struggles in silence, but the occasions in which she spoke marked a turning point in the story. For instance, the lullaby to the baby in her womb shows the resentment she has for her husband. Although the estate woman does not hold any dominance over her husband, she vainly tries to create authority with the help of her son. In the work, *Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity*, "The fact of mothers' authority over young sons has been noted in most discussions of the psychodynamics of masculinity" (152). Rajan remembers everything vividly, and he quotes the estate woman's song to the baby inside her womb:

Little one, you about to be born, listen. You came into my womb violently. I didn't want you. The man put you there while smelling of drink and vomit. Other, worse things are smelling inside him. He has made me smell too. When you come at last into this world, you won't be drinking milk from my breasts. You'll be drinking bitterness, hatred, [and] suffering. You can stop the suffering if you try. You must get through the strength for that from the little milk you can receive from my breasts. If it's not the custom for a son to beat his father, you must break that custom. You must break his head and spill his blood. There won't be any brains to spill. So, son, you must be stronger than your brothers and sisters. He buys them sweets, clothes and toys. He makes them soft. You must be hard. Hard like a twisted metal that can't be twisted anymore. (*In a Far Country* 183-84)

The nameless and voiceless woman was successful in passing her pain and hatred to the spirit inside her womb, and the young boy grew up to be violent and angry. As a child, he damaged anything he found around him, like windows, plants, bicycles, and clothes. The anger inside the woman slowly spread like poison in her and also destroyed her children. She failed as a mother, and the children suffered more than she did. In a research article titled "Why women suffer domestic violence in silence: Web-based responses to a blog", the psychological aspect of violence is taken under study, and it states that the children who witness the father's violent behaviour will automatically learn the behaviour of violence from their parents. The son who grew up seeing his father's violence may inflict the same behaviour on his wife in the future. "The Vicious cycle of violence has long been considered a key factor for the perpetration of violence" (208).

Years later, the estate woman became very weak, and there was something unusual about her "protuberant hips and carbuncular breasts" (*In a Far Country* 184). Even the strangers who passed by could not avoid looking at it. But the people who were acquainted with her knew that the abnormal tumors and unnatural swelling in her body were not only created by her husband and that there was something more to that. "The breasts were ugly tumours and the hip knobs of extra bone not only because her husband beat her in these places but also because the woman did something mysterious to herself. It was, perhaps, a secret rite of mutation" (*In a Far Country* 184).

The woman in the novel appeared to be vulnerable as she did not question her pitiful condition but accepted it as her predestined fate. Rajan, with his memory, powerfully articulates the woman's story and questions himself whether he committed the same mistake against his wife Vasanthi as the husband of the estate woman did years ago. Even though Rajan did not physically harm his wife, Vasanthi, he shattered her mental well-being. Though the contemporary situation has changed a lot and women have made remarkable progress in all fields, most women of the present day are trapped emotionally in their marital life and are clinging to their relationship even when the partner is not right. The question of what had made the estate woman endure the torture of her husband and bear it in silence needs to be explored as women face critical conditions that are averse to their physical and mental well-being when they remain in a toxic relationship.

The estate woman is a representation of women who are poor, unedu-

cated, and forced to marry at an early age before they get mature enough to understand the world around them. She represents the women who marry at an early age and who are deprived of any control over their bodies and reproductive system. In such a scenario, the women are treated as commodities, causing them more physical and mental pain. Although many women have crossed the obstacle laid out in front of them, the journey they have undertaken is not an easy one. Still, the majority of women continue to suffer domestic violence. It is not only the poor and uneducated women who suffer, but women who are educated and working with better financial status also suffer from domestic violence and are victims of many other patriarchal rules in society. True harmony can happen only when there is a massive or collective understanding of women's rights and needs at all levels.

Changing Narratives of Sexuality: Contestations, Compliance and Women's Empowerment points out how women can resist the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their interests and agendas. These constructions may form the basis for mainstream narratives of sexuality produced by institutions such as the law, religion, and the development industry and by cultural arenas such as television and print media; they may also form the basis for counter-narratives produced by women. The role of culture plays an important role in women's empowerment. For generations women have been attending to the domestic chores of household and child-rearing in India and also globally. So, the way that culture was constructed in defining the gender role of the female sex is partial. *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India* edited by Mandakranta Bose, contains a collection of articles that discusses the cultural root cause of Indian women's submissiveness, and it interconnects history, religion, code of law, and many other factors that affect a woman's life. Therefore, bringing in reformation and terminating injustice and forming a successful as well as practical theory, and convincing the majority is a strenuous process.

The special edition of *The Hindu* newspaper in Chennai, dated January 21, 2018, published statistical data about women of Tamil Nadu titled "Uncomfortable Truths". The data was decoded by Vignesh Radhakrishnan and Varun B. Krishnan, and it states that 69.6 percentage of women in Tamil Nadu believe that a husband's action of hitting or beating his wife is justifiable for a specific reason and 44.6 percentage of women in Tamil Nadu have experienced violence either physically or emotionally and sexually. The news article also quotes Prasanna Gettu, founder of the 'International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care,' "When it

comes to sex, women are taught from a very young age that they cannot say no to their husbands- consent is not part of this conversation. Men expect it and believe that sex is part of a wife's duty. For men demanding sex can also be a form of exerting control" (2). If this seems to be the state of women in the twenty-first century then the novel, *In a Far Country*, published in 1993 narrating the story of a late 20th-century woman's life dealing with a similar problem of domestic violence proves that not all Indian women have progressed. Therefore, a feminist perspective is crucial even though many scholars are analysing and researching women's struggle to give way for women empowerment in a real sense. Only when there is a wholesome progress, not just in paper or in the form of vocal promise, a change can be witnessed in the day-to-day routine of women. Until then, women's empowerment in a complete sense cannot be counted.

The exact reason behind the rude behaviour of the husband of the estate woman in the novel cannot be pinpointed as the Indian men working in the settlement underwent a lot of stressful situations in Malaysia and migrated for various personal and economic reasons. Working-class men were most of the time subjected to structural inequality in society. The ill-treatment of the wife by the indentured labour men may also be an outlet of frustration which he could not unravel in the workplace as they worked under the British masters. Therefore, the women in the settlement during the British period had two masters and were at times subjected to double patriarchy. Subjugating women not only brings psychological pain to them but also stifles a major contribution from women to society. There can be no feminism without the inter-sectionality of other social issues as everything in the world is interconnected.

Men need to play a significant role in women's empowerment as there can be no revolution when men in society get excluded in the process of liberation of women. Women's freedom is curtailed in several ways by society and she does not feel liberated completely. Even after many years of struggle, the revolution is being delayed because the feminists are busy disagreeing among themselves.

Conclusion

The study undertaken in this research paper begins by stating the problem of an anonymous woman in the novel, *In a Far Country*. Later, the analysis turns out to be a quest for the reason behind the struggles she faces and the obstacles that prevent her from voicing out her sufferings. Finally, the nameless woman is taken as a representation of many women, who, even

in the present day, tolerate their misery without voicing it to the world. To improve the situation of women and reduce the violence inflicted upon them, action has to be taken by the individual and the community as a whole, with the help of various governing national and international bodies through laws against violence and discrimination of women. Empowerment in the real sense can happen only when women are self-aware of their rights and one important weapon to sensitize even poor women is education. Society on its part also needs to change its attitude concerning its culturally dictated practices such as women should sacrifice and compromise in every instance. Women need not bear violence in silence assuming that it is a way to protect their respect and image in society.

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