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A STUDY OF INTERACTION AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN SELECT SHORT FICTION OF
ANJANA APACHANNA, RAJI NARSIMHAN AND GOGU SHYAMALA

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ABSTRACT

Gender is all pervasive. Whenever we encourage girls and boys to dress up differently, behave differently, we are perpetuating the process of establishing gender in the society. It is an evident fact that our ideas of male and female natures emanate not from facts and observations., but from norms and expectations that govern our lives. (Geetha, 5). These norms exist in varying degrees in different societies. In India, the norms do not work the same way for women and men belonging to upper and lower castes and classes. However, the underlying point remains the same, that men and women are expected to do different things and their roles in the society cannot be the same. They are predetermined and any deviance from adhering to the norms is looked at as an aberration or abnormal. Individuals come to interact with certain common socially created beliefs, cultural meanings, experiences and social rules. Ann Weatherall, a discursive psychologist, says that "... identities are produced and negotiated in the ongoing business of social interaction. Thus, identity is not viewed in essentialist terms as something that people 'are'. Rather, identities are progressively and dynamically achieved through the discursive practices that individuals engage in (Weatherall 138)." This article makes an effort to study the short fiction of Anjana Apachanna, Raji Narsimhan and Gogu Shyamala from the perspective of Gender and Interaction. A few short stories from Anjana's, "Incantations and Other Stories", Raji Narsimhan's "The Illusion of Home," and Gogu Shyamala's "Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Basket, But...." present the contrasting characters of the traditional and the modern women. They get into the minds and hearts of women protagonists and reveal great gender differences and also impact the differences further and solidify them.

Keywords: Gender, Interaction, Inequality, Short Fiction, Anjana Apachanna, Raji Narsimhan, Gogu Shyamala, Socialization.

Gender is all pervasive. Whenever we encourage girls and boys to dress up differently, behave differently, we are perpetuating the process of establishing gender in the society. When we reprimand a girl for acting like a boy, or chide or tease a boy for doing "girly" things, we are indeed 'doing' gender. It is an evident fact that our ideas of male and female natures emanate not from facts and observations., but from norms and expectations that govern our lives. (Geetha 5). It is interesting to note that these norms exist to varying degrees in different

societies. And these norms are dynamic. They are not consistent and uniform. In India, the norms do not work the same way for women and men belonging to upper and lower castes and classes. However, the underlying point remains the same. That men and women are expected to do different things and their roles in the society cannot be the same. They are predetermined and any deviance from adhering to the norms is looked at as an aberration or abnormal. These norms are very powerful and influential, not because they are adhered to everywhere, but because something contextual is made to seem universal.

Individuals come to interact with certain common socially created beliefs, cultural meanings, experiences and social rules. Cecilia Ridgeway, a Sociologist, maintained that interaction is the most proximate cause, through which individual level aspects of gender and inequality are accomplished (Ridgeway IX). In her book, "Gender, Interaction and Inequality", she puts together several theories and researches conducted on the concept of gender and interaction, where gender's impact on interaction and vice versa are investigated. Ann Weatherall, a discursive psychologist, says that "... identities are produced and negotiated in the ongoing business of social interaction. In this view, identities do not have predefined, essential characteristics. Rather, identities emerge from the actions of local conversations ... Thus, identity is not viewed in essentialist terms as something that people 'are'. Rather, identities are progressively and dynamically achieved through the discursive practices that individuals engage in (Weatherall 138)."

In this article, I have made an effort to study the short fiction of Anjana Apachanna, Raji Narsimhan and Gogu Shyamala from the perspective of Gender and Interaction. Anjana's writing won acclaim not just in India, but also in the US and England. Apachanna received the O. Henry Festival Prize and a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in the US. Her short story collection, "Incantations and Other Stories", presents the contrasting characters of the traditional and the modern women. A close look at the interaction happening among the characters in the short fiction reveals how the concept of gender is deep rooted in our societies and how every interaction reinstates the preconceived notions about men and women and their capabilities, their assigned roles etc. Such interactions further sustain gender inequalities in the societies.

In the story "her mother", the daughter comes home with her long hair cut short, and both the parents are left aghast at the act. The mother is shocked and the father almost feels his limb is amputated. Such was the impact of the daughter's action. The response of the father was mere silence and he remained so for a few days, without interacting with his daughter. He was avoiding looking at his own daughter (Apachanna 163 & 164). Most Indian societies of those days strongly believed that women should have long, well-kept hair that would symbolize beautiful womanhood. Any attempt to deviate from the accepted norm of the society was received with such disliking. In the same story, when the mother's elder daughter chooses her career over staying together with her husband in Delhi, the mother says that the women are no more normal. They do not have normal dreams anymore. According to her, a normal woman would only dream of love, a large home, silk sarees and sapphires, none of which her daughters aspired for (164). This kind of interaction puts forth the idea that the traditional was and is the normal. And moving away from it is obviously abnormal and therefore an aberration. In her letter to her daughter, she writes about her concern for the wellbeing of her daughter. She says, "How will you look after yourself, my Rani Beti? You have always had your mother and I don't mind doing all this, but someday you will have to do it for the man you marry and how will you, when you can't even thread a needle?"

And the father too blames the mother, for she had not taught the daughters how to cook or sew, and had only encouraged them "to think and act with an independence quite uncalled for in daughters." (165)

Here we can observe that the kind of interaction that the mother has with her daughter and the ones that the husband and wife have with each other are not just reflective of how the society has laid down certain norms and how women and men are expected to adhere to those norms for a happy living, but also a constant reminder to all about the norms to follow. Whether the woman willfully accepts the norms are not immaterial to the society, as long as it is followed. In the following lines we can see how the mother, though she adheres to the roles prescribed for a woman, envies the comfort and the escape of the solitude that only a man is privileged to enjoy, while the woman is forced to keep herself busy with the household chores viz, cooking, cleaning,

rearranging cupboards, polishing the brass, putting buttons on shirts, falls on sarees, lighting the kerosene stove, taking the dry clothes from the clothes-line, pressing the clothes etc. She thought that her daughter was like her father- she too had wanted the escape of the solitude, which meant, of course, that in the process she neither made her bed nor tidied up her room (165).

Raji Narsimhan is a famous novelist and short story writer, literary critic and translator. Stories from her collection of short fiction, "The Illusion of Home," deals with fascinating stories that get into the minds and hearts of women protagonists who are driven to the edge of society. These tough women reincarnate themselves, weathering all odds, in harmony with themselves and the realities outside. In her short story, "The Pilgrimage", the protagonist goes on a pilgrimage to a city, where she finds that none of the numerous pilgrims' lodges dotting the bazaar was ready to offer her a room at night for shelter, as she was single.

'May I have a room for one night please?'

'Certainly. How many are with you?'

'No one. Just myself.'

'You are alone?' The eyes dropped, hazing over. The face changed.

'No. Nothing for a single woman.' (Narsimhan 59)

This loaded interaction speaks volumes about the kind of notions that Indian societies had nurtured for ages. A single woman was always looked down upon. A woman gains respect, or for that matter, even security or shelter, only when she has an accompaniment. There is some kind of negativity associated with single women, holding fast to the idea that women are necessarily dependent and incomplete and incapable of having an identity of their own. She is considered a respectable woman of Indian culture only when she's a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother. Alone, she loses her identity. Here was a woman who was struggling from lack of housing and identity. A single woman is always looked upon as a characterless woman. The 'good' society keeps such women at bay. Though she was all alone out there at a pilgrim centre, still people found it dangerous and sacrilegious to offer her a room for shelter at night. But the protagonist's response to the situation is again a proof of the staunch dismissal of the modern women in India of those times, whose daring acts of going against the established and deep-rooted norms were not just momentary, but were strong and consistent. The author writes, "No argument was possible. The ghosts of the past were definitely circling around her again, flapping their wings. She walked out after each dismissal, with her back more erect, face more set and uncomplaining, in the way familiar, remembered, and as she knew now, never to be lived down" (60)

From the above description of her gait, we can understand, how firmly some women of those days stood against the unjust gender discrimination of the day. But it is a fact to be acknowledged that even today, women in India generally do not go out visiting places and staying in lodges all alone. The clutches of gender discrimination still hold strong and the kind of humiliation that the protagonist faces in the story with refusals of all lodge authorities, is not something that women would love to face. To avoid and escape such insults, many women adhere to the norms set by the society. The protagonist's interaction with her husband reveals the pathetic, confusing state of affairs in which the daring women land themselves in. They receive no understanding from their family members, instead they face mockery and sarcasm.

'So, you did come back. I always knew you would.'

'What makes you think so? You are rushing to conclusions as you always did. You needn't crow, not at all!'

'But look at you. Buffeted by time, bruised. You never did find yourself, did you, the Great you that you went in search of?'

'I did find it, I did. That's the trouble.!' 'Now I want to lose it.!' she wanted to say, but he would never understand.....

'What do you mean? Why aren't you rich and famous then?'

'You'll never understand!'

'Because there's nothing to understand. Listen to me, in your old age at least, with your looks gone, your dreams gone! Listen, come to me, for your own good. I'll give you a home yet.' (63)

The voice of the husband is the voice of the male dominated, patriarchal society, that scorns women trying to liberate themselves and set out in search of their own identity. They try to camouflage the trials of such women under the garb of women's longing for power, fame and money, by using sheer physical beauty. And such men take pride in the fact that women, when they get defeated at their attempts, have to at last take the refuge of their husbands, who are the only ones who can provide them with a house. The protagonist's journey towards self realization is mocked at, and this is how many women are discouraged from pursuing their dreams.

The situation is no different in the labour classes. In the story "Ulcers", Raji portrays the picture of a woman from the uneducated, lower strata of the society. The protagonist is a lady who irons the clothes of the people in the middle-class neighbourhood. She is tired of the menial way of living that she is entitled to. She wants to break away from such a life. However, the path that she chooses is rather self effacing. She doesn't mind the insults poured out at her, by the well to do women in the area, when she goes out begging / requesting / demanding for some delicious and rich food from the neighbourhood.

'The words rolled out of Shanti's mouth in a half coaxing, half demanding way. 'Got something to eat?'

The woman's face knotted up. 'What'll you eat?'..... She bit back a curse and turned into the house.the woman drew out a cold gobi paratha from the vessel. The ghee lay congealed on it, 'All for these riff-raffs', she cursed freely out of ear shot. Achar to go with the paratha? No, she decided, no point pampering these ever-ready begging females.' (45 & 46)

Another woman also treats her with similar disrespect.

'She went in to rummage and get rid of the nuisance. Some saag sticking to the bottom of the utensil. She scraped it out with a spoon. There was even a piece of paneer in it. 'Lucky beggar', she muttered, emerging with the laden spoon.' (47)

The protagonist turns a deaf ear to all the insulting words directed at her. She willfully becomes a beggar to have a taste of good food. She doesn't mind bearing the physical and verbal abuse of her husband, just to have a few morsels of tasty food that can heal her stomach ulcers.

She got to her feet with sudden force, and draped her saree back overhead, half ready for his blow. He would have given it to her, only he was at work on the collar of the shirt, wiggling the tip of the iron up its curve.

'Where are you off to?' He tried to nail her with his voice, as he tackled the billowy back of the shirt.'What are you up to?' He glowered. But she fought free. He couldn't have held her. The clothes would have come unfolded, She got away again.'(44 & 45)

If going on a search for self-realization is the concern of a middle/upper class woman, filling the stomach with appetizing food was the concern of the lower-class women. Here the protagonist tries her best to dodge the physical and the verbal abuses of her husband and moves ahead undeterred, to gain a mouthful of good food. Towards the end of the story, we find that the husband sends the wife to beg for some curd from the neighbourhood. He was against her going around begging for food, when it was to fill her own stomach. But he doesn't mind her doing that if it is for him. Or else he can become abusive. At the same time, he being a man cannot go begging. Such a menial act can only be a woman's forte.

Gogu Shyamala is a senior fellow at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women, Hyderabad. She has worked as an editor, biographer and a fiction writer in Telangana. "Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Basket, But...." is her first collection of stories translated from Telugu. The Outlook reviews her book, "Her expressive prose converts caste and gender oppression into stories about human dignity". In this collection of short fiction, we do find numerous interactions happening among the characters belonging to the same sex and across sexes, revealing great gender differences and also impacting the differences further and solidifying them. The

protagonist belonged to a Dalit family. She has three children, and a mother-in-law to be taken care of. Her husband flees the village on charges of stealing. Later it is learnt that someone else was the thief and not her husband. However, he was away for almost a year. The family suffers from abject poverty and attributes the cause to the father's absence. The mother tries to comfort the children that the father's return would bring positive changes to their family's condition, though she knew pretty well that nothing would change.

"Once this year is over, we can get rid of this trouble son. Next year, your father will come back from the town. He'll pay back the debts. Not too many days now; the harvest is over. It will be one year on new moon day, since he left. If we repay the four installments that we owe, it will be one year." (Gogu 19)

So, saying, the mother tried to console the son, though in her heart she knew pretty well that her husband would not save any money, leave alone repaying the debt. However, this kind of reiteration from the mother, only enlarges the image of the father, as the main supporter of the family, the most responsible person in the family. The idea of father being the head of the family gets further ingrained in the minds of the children. The mother has been the major breadwinner of the family for the last one year, and that goes unnoticed as it is constantly reiterated that the father will take care of everything. The mother-in-law too reinforces the idea of the son being the whole and soul of the family. On his coming back home, the mother exclaims,

"Your wife, your children...we have all been waiting for you like orphaned birds." (21)

And after a couple of days when the man doesn't get money to drink toddy, he turns into a brutal animal and thrashes his wife black and blue.

"Give me a little money. I feel like drinking toddy today."

She said, "Where's the money left after buying salt, chilli and meat? It's all over." After some time, he said again in a loud voice, "You give me ten excuses when I ask for a little money to drink toddy."

She said, "This is not fair, where did I hide any money? You've seen everything. You know how things are....how can you still ask for more?"

My father pounced on my mother, "You say it's not fair?" You've learnt to talk! What? Have I seen everything? How do I know what you have done?" (23)

So saying, he starts abusing the wife. Here we can see how, though the woman tried her best by slogging day long to make ends meet, in the absence of her husband, all she gets in return is verbal and physical abuse. Instead of appreciating her efforts, the husband merely questions her character. She is also beaten up brutally, while the young kids are scared to death watching their father beat up the mother. Even the women from the neighbourhood remain mute spectators, absolutely helpless. None of them move forward to stop him, but only plead with him to stop this atrocity. These kinds of acts further strengthen the notion that man, the head of the family, is at a free will to behave the way he wants, while women have to bear with him. The children are socialized into the belief that women are subservient to men and that nothing can be done about it. They grow up observing this dominance of man over the woman and accept it as normal in the society. Thus, such interactions act as tools for perpetuation of gender inequalities in the society.

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