

**Narratives of Lesser Known Women- A Review of Their
Representation in Syllabus and Curriculum**

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Abstract

Women have made history by looking at challenges as opportunities to overcome centuries of patriarchal conditioning. They are known for their ability to be resilient and for working in a system that is more powerful than themselves - a system which was created of and for men. But this is not the same case with a majority of lesser known women who are marginalized and whose voices are not heard. The narratives they represent give ample scope for exploring the opportunities and challenges in teaching and making them a part of the curriculum. The credibility of a woman lies in her adherence to the accepted norms of the society. The lesser known women are those who have through circumstances lost their credibility and therefore their voice and thus rendering them marginalized. They are women who have had no choice and for whom decisions were made for them. This paper is a study of women represented in such narratives from the Biblical Literature. A review of women writers from the post-medieval period through the post-colonial period in India will show the extent to which women writers and women represented in narratives have been lesser known in teaching and in research. The problem of why these women are lesser known and what characters define them as the lesser known will be explored. It is seen that the lesser known are not only absent from most religious discourses, but they are also not recognized as being a part of the main-stream courses or curriculum.

Keywords: patriarchy, abandoned women, narratives, post-colonial, empowerment, gender

Introduction

Narratives are ways through which men exercise control over the lives of women. As long as women had no voice or representation in narratives their perspectives went unheard. For centuries women have maintained this silence even as their stories were written by the pen of patriarchy. Such narratives crafted by patriarchy have alienated women from their self and from their bodies. These narratives promoted the ideal which posed problem for women when they were confronted with real life issues related to health, education, sexuality, career, womanhood, and motherhood- issues which were swept under the carpet of silence or adjustment. It was

expected of her to keep silence and endure pain until the scan report showed that she was in the last stage of cancer. She had to balance the roles of being a dutiful housewife and a career woman. If at all she gathered courage to express herself it was drowned in the tumult of expectations forced upon her by patriarchy. This paper will trace the instances where women have been able to break the bonds of patriarchy and have been able to create their own narratives.

The importance of narrative has been stressed by Heide Baumann where she responds to three commonly perceived notions about women's role in society, very specifically in roles of leadership. The three notions are that there is no need for gender equality as it is already achieved, what is essential is parity than equality and finally that women do not choose to aspire for top leadership positions because they are not interested in becoming leaders. Referring to Post-structural philosophers such as Foucault and Guattari she says that narrative is an important human function in knowing human action and that the idea of self is constructed and deconstructed through narratives. (Baumann)

Problem of Women's Empowerment

Although the problem of women's empowerment is relatively recent its acceptance in mainstream society can be traced back to the time when our ancestors were living in Agricultural communities. In the *Anthology of Women's writing in India* Susi Tharu and Lalita have explained that before the interaction of the Vedic Age with that of the agrarian society the female deities in the Vedic religion were not so prominently featured. The agricultural societies were materialist in which *prakriti* or the female principle was fundamental. It was only after the interaction of the two cultures that more female deities were introduced into the Vedic pantheon. The female deities of the agricultural communities were depicted as possessing (what we today refer to as) masculine traits. Thus, the concept of masculine and feminine was introduced in the more recent cultural development (Tharu and Lalita 54).

As industrial revolution swept the world there was a drastic change in production and many Indian industries were affected. As a result self-sufficient economies were transformed into capital economies which provided opportunities for men. However, women who had been working alongside with men were now forced to remain at home and support the family in the changing economic system (147). The Indian Independence movement and the concept of Nationalism that followed furthered the process of creating the ideal woman. Many women were involved in the process of Nation building before and after the Indian Independence movement. It eventually fell upon the women to uphold the culture and tradition of India and that resulted in the creation of the "...respectable middle-class housewife, the *bhadramahila*..." who had to uphold the family values, customs, tradition and in turn the identity of an evolving nation (155, 157). Today as we stand at the cross roads of a redefinition of Nationalism women are considered the agents of preserving the National flavor.

Throughout history women have had to wrestle with the challenges and overcome patriarchy in order to succeed in life. The noble queens of the Mughal period, the Women Saints of the Medieval Period and Women who were involved in the Freedom movement are shining

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018

Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Editor: *Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Research in English Language and Literature*

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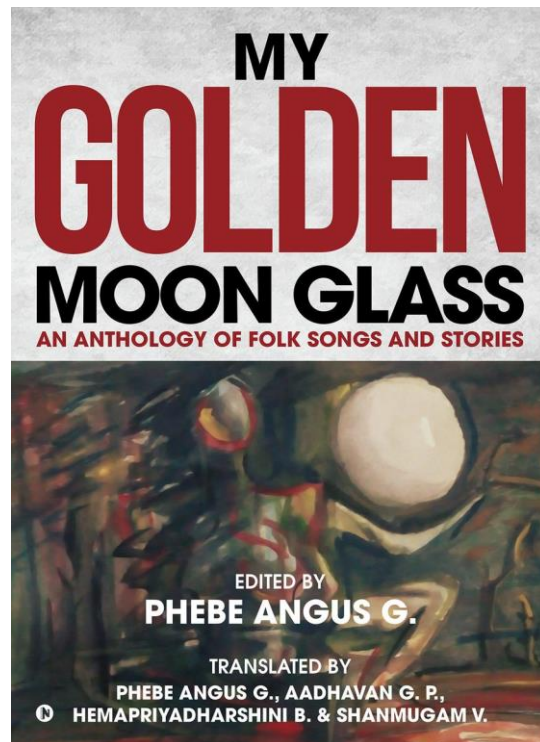
examples of women who had made history by breaking the barriers created by patriarchy. They are renowned owing to their courage and determination to make their own choice.

Did They Have Equal Opportunities?

However, the underlying question is whether all women had equal opportunities and if not what were the conditions in which they lived? Were there narratives that depicted the plight of these lesser known women? History records the achievements of women who have become a part of popular culture and literary discourses. The scope of Literature should be to identify narratives of lesser known women and to explore the conditions in which they lived. The outcome of such a study is to critically evaluate the conditions in which these narratives were written and to include them in the intellectual discourses of the academia.

Discussion

Stories and songs that have been a part of the narratives of ancient cultures and of the village communities contain information about the collective struggles, aspirations, meanings and realities of their life. *My Golden Moon Glass*, an anthology of Folk Songs and Stories, is a collection of oral narratives translated into English. Most of the songs that feature in this anthology are sung by women. They narrate the lives of the village community from birth through death. Folk narrative passed on through oral tradition has been predominantly preserved by women. It is therefore very interesting that in a world that silences or ignores the narratives of women, these narratives thrive in the villages. (G.)



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Women in village communities are more open about their feelings which find expressions in their songs: be it the grief expressed through songs of lamentation or the joy expressed during the time of harvest; the joyous community activities surrounding the ritual of puberty or the exuberant celebration during the time of harvest; the strain of hard work while sowing or removing the weeds under the hot sun- women have made use of oral narrative in order to express their emotions. Literature should reflect these songs and stories.

Silence of Women as Admired Quality

Women by and large have been lesser known in India and that was considered as an admirable quality. A book written in 1928 by one Otto Rothfeld titled *Women of India* seems to completely silence the inherent voice of women. He explains how women were attractive only because they were well hidden and seldom ventured into mainstream society (Rothfeld 8). Here is a typical example of glorification of the manner in which a typical Indian Woman behaved, how she addressed her in-laws, her duties towards her husband, how she keeps the household and how she adorns herself. In being incognito these women have gained acceptance in society. Through this book the author has set perfect standards for women to aspire to. Some portions where he describes women are very unfortunate such that it feels like watching a film song which is typically an “item number” that in glorifying the female body it also objectifies it.

He also claims that in those days women could pass through crowds or streets without being molested. A simple explanation is that as per his terms of describing women, they seem to be almost invisible and even if they ever ventured out they were not significant enough to attract attention because of their marginalized position. They were not a threat to the society because the society does not find a silent woman as a threat.

Vulnerable Spaces, Beautiful Narratives

It is in the most vulnerable spaces that the most beautiful narratives are born. Narratives surrounding wells are very significant examples. Contrary to the idea expressed by Rothfeld that wells are spaces where women gossip, in the Biblical narrative, wells are places where significant events happen. It is near the well that Christ meets the Samaritan woman and enables her to see how she has been used by various men in her life. While Rothfeld has emphasized the gossiping role played by women, he has failed to explain that it is also a space where a woman struggles to bring life into her family by drawing water from the well. This is a social space- a space of conflict where the woman is most directly exposed to a male and has to assert her right to live against his.

For a woman to craft her narrative and to defend her space is a challenge. For instance, when Moses flees from Egypt to Midian, he stops near a well and finds the women who have come there to water their flock being chased away by some shepherds. He rescues the women and eventually gets married to one of them. (Exodus 2: 15-17). Genesis 24 narrates the story of Rebecca who was willing to not only draw water from the well for a stranger named Eliezer but who was also willing to give water to his camels. The incident became an answer to Eliezer’s prayer to find a bride fit for his Master Abraham’s son Isaac. Thus, narratives surrounding wells

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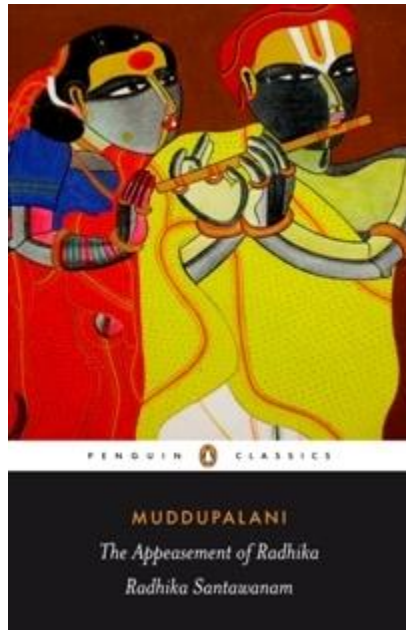
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give ample scope to explore the social space of women which is a reflection of their inner turmoil.

Narratives that describe women's desire are more or less silent about it. One narrative however stands out which earned a lot of criticism for its apparent overt sexual expressions is *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika) written in the 18th Century by Muddupalani, a Telugu Poet and Translated by Bangalore Nagaratnamma in 1910. It was banned by the British government and was later published with a lot of censorship. This text is unique, in that, the woman is more assertive about her love and her need to be satisfied by her lover. She describes boldly how the man has failed to love her and how she must be loved and in what manner she should be loved. Thus, when it comes to asking for love and affection she is not passive and submissive but bold and outspoken (Tharu and Lalita 1-7). This is hardly possible in our times because of the mindset associated with sexuality and/or sexual/reproductive health, menstruation, menopause and so on which is also the reason why women fail to be open about their sexuality or health issues related to their sexuality until it is too late for treatment.



Courtesy: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13425104-the-appeasement-of-radhika>

Abandoned Women- Scourge of Patriarchy

Abandoned women are lesser known in a patriarchal structure because it is her association with the man that gives her an identity and makes her a human being worthy of protection, respect and accessibility to privileges. Till very recently there was no provision for a single mother to gain acceptance in the society. Many women face abandonment by their husbands and by their lovers. Literature should reflect the stories of these abandoned women. Their narratives should become subjects of discussion in the class room. Narratives of abandoned

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women are very important in that they show how women have forged an identity outside the framework of patriarchy and thus have become empowered.

Parthasarathy in the introduction to the Translation of *Cilappatikaram* quotes Kannagi's example and says how an abandoned woman becomes the scourge of patriarchy (Parthasarathy 7). After her husband Kovalan is killed, Kannagi is distraught and vows never to rest until she has extracted her vengeance. She undergoes a complete transformation in her personality that she is referred to as a vengeful goddess. We know that until her husband dies, her voice is hardly heard in the narrative. But once she loses Kovalan to a grievous oversight of justice, she is bold and assertive to walk into the King's palace and to address the king as "Impetuous..." in order to demand justice for her husband's unjust punishment (188). She asserts her husband's innocence but the king states that Kovalan was a thief. She then she breaks open her other anklet and the gems scatter on the king's face. The effect is immediate: the King in response accepts his guilt and dies with the words "Let my life crumble in the dust" (189). Kannagi's vengeance is not yet complete as she goes to curse the city of Madurai and burn it down. (195-198).

Hagar, a single mother was pushed to the position where the society was not accountable for her life or for the life of her child. She is an example of a woman whose body was colonized because she was a slave. Given by her mistress Sarah to her master Abraham, Hagar had no say in this matter and it was not her choice to bring forth the progeny of Abraham. Thus, Ishmael was born. But very soon Abraham had a son through Sarah as well. In the conflict that eschewed between Sarah and Hagar, Abraham sends the slave woman Hagar into the wilderness. She is sent off with only a bottle of water and with no other means of sustenance. Sensing hopelessness she leaves her son to die while she looks away and weeps. At this point of distress she finds her only voice- the voice of appeal to the divine. She is also an example of a woman abandoned by the community. (Genesis 16 & 21).

The problem of needing a son to carry forward the lineage and the consequence that it has on a woman can be seen in the narrative of Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law in Genesis 38. The patriarchal custom is to ensure that the woman who marries has a child by that marriage. In the event that the woman's husband dies without leaving behind a seed to carry his lineage, the woman would have to marry the younger brother of the deceased husband. Thus, Tamar is pushed to a position wherein she had to marry her husband's (Er) brother (Onan). But Er's brother Onan also dies. Judah is now afraid to give his third son Shelah in marriage to Tamar. Since Shelah is not old enough to marry, he tells Tamar to live as a widow in her father's household until then. As he stalls the process Tamar begins to realize that she is not going to be given the third son in marriage. It so happens that when Judah, Tamar's father-in-law goes to visit a prostitute, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and has a relationship with him. Eventually she is pregnant with Judah's son. Word spreads and the community is ready to stone Tamar for playing the prostitute. But Tamar had in her possession the personal effects of Judah when he had come into her. She produces these before the people and Judah realizes then that he had erred by not giving the third son in marriage to Tamar as per the law and custom of the land. This makes him remark about Tamar that she was more righteous than him.

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These narratives are an example of the lack of choice women had over their own reproductive choices. While being refused a mate, Tamar decides to take matter into her own hands thereby taking a huge risk. A woman's credibility depends on her virtue and values. Tamar's position is dangerous, in that, if she had no evidence about the father of her child then nobody would have believed her words as she was already accused of being a prostitute. It would have been their word against hers. Crimes against women go unreported because women are expected to prove their virtue before appealing for justice for a crime committed against them such as rape, sexual assault, eve teasing or molestation. She has to establish her credibility by vouching for her chastity, modesty, silence, obedience, humility and what not! A rape survivor stands accused of why she allowed it to happen rather than being empowered to identify the criminal and bring him to justice. The physical trauma she had undergone fades in the crushing mental assaults and ordeal to which she becomes subject to while she tries to fight against a system that insists on her proving her innocence and the extent of her involvement in the crime.

Conclusion- From the Margins to the Centre

Literature should be a reflection of narratives of women who have been silenced because they have apparently lost their credibility. For this to happen there needs to be a drastic change in the mindset which education can achieve provided it moves outside the cannon. An attempt to reconcile the intellectual and the marginalized should take place. Here is where activism plays a very important role. When Philip Sydney defends poetry, he emphasizes that Literature has the power to move people into action (Sidney 10). By incorporating narratives of lesser known women the academia can provide agency for marginalized women.

Vaibhav Sankala, Director, H&R Block Pvt. Ltd. has identified five key areas of tax exemptions for women: single mothers, daycare expenses, domestic help, self-defense training and for specified diseases (Financial Express). This is an example of how women have begun to look more closely at themselves - an attempt that requires a narrative of the self. The concept of single parent was unthinkable perhaps a decade ago. But today as more single mothers speak out, a narrative is created.

Today, by virtue of their profession, education, knowledge, success and achievements women have come a long way and have moved from the margins to the center. However, crimes against women today proves the fact that when women aspire to be equal to men they are looked upon as a threat to patriarchal power and so are struck indiscriminately assaulted, molested, raped or worst even killed. If being anonymous and silent are the criteria that offer a mantle of protection for women, we have failed as a society to implement equally to men and women the principles of humanism and the very basic right for a person to thrive and to live. We still have a long way to go in terms of conceptualizing women's empowerment to incorporate working women, lesser known women and the marginalized. While we pride about our glorious past, the present and the future for women and children seems bleak under the shadow of an overwhelmingly discriminating patriarchy. 'Let women be' should be the order of the day in order to enable women to evolve holistically.

Women have begun to reclaim their spaces in popular culture. When more women add to the narrative the narrative is heard. This is how change is made possible. These narratives also enable women to find each other and share their stories. The “Me Too” movement has brought out many intricate issues associated with women into the open. In sharing our stories, we break the barriers of silence and begin to share our side of the story. Such a sharing enables us to identify with and unite in a common ground to demand justice, for the demand for justice comes after the voices are heard. Narratives that question the cultural conditioning created and maintained by patriarchy should be recognized and studied. (Joho)

While there are instances where women are abandoned, in India we also find women who have abandoned or come away from their families. The Medieval Bakhti Saints are a good example of women who have left families to fulfill a higher calling or for the quest for spiritual truth (Tharu and Lalita 57- 60). *Women’s Writing Volume 1* has a brilliant collection of poems which were written by these women. Sadly we find many women who continue to live in abusive marriages for the sake of the children and the society. Most of them cannot walk out of domestic violence, dowry harassment, marital rape and infidelity because they are not economically independent. Very rarely women who call it quits find a support system to rely on.

Challenging existing narratives must be done by unlearning and relearning narratives of authority such as religious texts. Narratives of popular culture should also undergo a paradigm shift which should be reflected in academia and in intellectual discourses taking place within the class room space. As women aspire and get trained to take up leadership positions they have to create their own narratives in the corporate world that will break the glass ceiling and will enable them to establish themselves in roles defined not by the society but in their own terms. Above all as long as women are against women there is no scope for a greater change in India and in the world at large.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018
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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018
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