

RESEARCH ESSAY ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND LITERATURE

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Abstracts:

It may sound funny to you but my paper starts with a joke—which is the most dangerous alphabet?—it is a tension generator...because all the worries start with “W”...Who? Why? What? When? Which? Whom? Where? War...Wine...Whisky...Wealth...Women...and finally...WIFE!

A good laugh, which is what, was expected of you. But have we ever thought that this laugh has turned the plight of half of the population into a miserable, beastly joke, a joke that arouse nothing but disgust and fear and so long it does not happen with one of our family members a sense of gratitude for the God almighty—thank God—we are spared.

Aren't we women and human too? Can't we marry the person of our choice, can't we opt the field in which we can explore our genius, can't we have a little fun in our life, and don't we have the right even on our womb so that we can birth our little daughters? Or, is the crime so great that the punishment meted out to us is beyond any human or beastly territory. Perhaps I am wrong, when I talk about beasts or beastly crime. In animal kingdom no she-animal is raped by a flock of animals for choosing a mate outside her clan, or acid-attacked for not complying the love proposal of a he-animal. What a great relief! At least animals do not infect themselves with the behavior of the 'noble savage'.

The aim and objective of my paper is to show that apart from rules and laws another most potent tool to establish human rights in society is literature. For, it is literature which reveals myriad forms of lives and a deep understanding and respect for them as well.

The methodology of the paper will be based on the analysis of some of the Indian and African-American literary texts.

Keywords: Fiction, Identity, Human Rights, Respect, Literature, Woman Rights etc.



Human Rights originate from the self-respect and significance of human being. Human rights are inherently available to all human beings. They are natural in a human person. But they are recognized and protected by the legal systems of all the civilized states. They are the result of harsh experience of the Second World War that led to all nations to agree to an international uniform norm of human rights.¹ After the Second World War, they accepted the importance and worth of human beings and they became the subject of the International law. They did not meet any difficulty in achieving harmony for preparing the universal norms of universal application. The notion of equality and non-discrimination on the ground of gender finds its place in all international instruments dealing with human rights.² Women who comprise half of humanity are frequently subjected to mistreatment and violations of human rights. The International Instruments direct an obligation on the member States to integrate provisions for the elimination of sex prejudiced and discriminatory laws and practices and for granting equivalent rights to women with those of men. All differences, limitations and prohibition which are present traditionally, impairs the true enjoyment by women and implementation of rights of women by states. The documents have initiated to provide fundamental freedoms by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979. It also required the Member States to take steps to

eliminate all customs, traditions and sacred practices that discriminate against women.³

'Swayamsiddha' we are not. No human being can be. And how to make you believe in the concept of 'Ardhnaarieshwar' we have failed to. Does it hurt someone so much if someone who happens to be a woman, wants to live like a human being? Or, was the crime of Eve (to taste the forbidden fruit) so great that all the coming generations of her daughters will have to pay ad infinitum? An overwhelming question it sounds. But the solution is so simple. Live and let live. I am not a feminist who believes in equality. But a humanist I am with staunch faith in humanity and dignity of life in any form.

Before presenting my paper to you I would like to read out for you a piece of paper that might have crossed your vision but then I hope your kindness will allow me to repeat and in doing so, my only objective is to know from this eminent audience that what is the message we are getting from this article by a very eminent columnist. (Chetan)

For me human right means access to such an atmosphere where one can explore one's maximum potentiality irrespective of differences whether of biology, caste, class, or creed. To reflect my point-of-view I have explored some of the literary texts and have done a close textual analysis. The first text is Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the second one is Anita Nayar's *Ladies Coupe*. The first one is an African-American fiction and the second one is a penned by a well known Indian author. Both are women-centric and deals with women characters who do not conform to the social prescription laid down by the male

¹ Roland Burke, Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. P. 264

² Tenzin Gyatso, H.H. the XIVth Dalai Lama, Human Rights, Democracy and Freedomm available at <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/world-peace/human-rights-democracy-and-freedom> accessed on 28th February 2016

³ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> accessed on 14th February 2016



society. They live impermissibly however painful it may be.

I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is new world black and new world woman extracting choice from no-choice, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female (Toni Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* 1-34).

This is what, in the words of Toni Morrison, Sula is for us. She is the 'dangerously female' protagonist of Morrison's second novel *Sula* that was published in 1973. Like her first novel *The Bluest Eye* the focus in this novel is on women but in different context. Lyrical and gripping, it is an honest look at the power of friendship amid a background of family, race, love, gender and the human condition.

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* was acclaimed as the work of an important talent written... as John Leonard said in the New York Times...in a prose " so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry." Her second novel *Sula* has the same power, same beauty. The novel spells out the story of two women-friends since childhood, separated in young adulthood, and reunited as grown up women. Nel Wright grows up to become a wife and mother, happy to remain in her hometown of Medallion, Ohio. She conforms to the role society has assigned to a woman. On the other hand Sula Peace leaves Medallion to experience college, men and life in the big city, an exceptional choice for a black woman to make in the late 1920s. But Sula makes this exceptional choice to get out

of the Bottom, the hilltop neighborhood where "beneath the sporting life of the men hanging around the place in head rags and soft felt hats there hides a fierce resentment of failed crops, lost jobs, thieving insurance men, bug ridden flour...at the invisible life that cannot be overstepped... (where)...the laughter was part of the pain". [Morrison, *Sula* ,4).

Sula fails to inhabit the social place that has been forged for her, or for that matter a female. She is being introduced for us in appropriately strained manner for her reappearance in the neighborhood is full of foreboding. Armed with a college education and an edgy cynicism, Sula is an outcast from the start. Her status as a woman without a man and a woman without children simply does not translate into a life that the Bottom understands. Sula's grandmother, Eva, speaks for the whole community when she tells her granddaughter to have some babies, that it will "settle" her. When Sula responds defensively, they argue:

"I don't want to make somebody else.
I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around.

"Without no man."

"You did".

"Not by choice".

"Mama did".

"Not by choice, I said. It ain't right
for you to want to stay
off by yourself"(92).

Eva (like Eve, the first woman) has been the reigning matriarch of her own family/community for years and she is powerful and independent and fierce in the role. Even though she is not part of a couple herself, to simply reject the notion out-of-hand is incomprehensible, even to her. It is accepted template for women's lives, even though it is, more often than not a failed or malfunctioning model. Furthermore, to Eva and to people in



the Bottom children is part of the order of the things, the literal outgrowth of a concept of a womanhood that is valued by what it produces and tends. To Sula, however, being a wife and a mother are not pre-requisites for selfhood. Her own “business”...the business of being, of living...is not dictated by family or community. She simply does not accept gender stereotypes or roles. And this questioning attitude or rather challenge exasperates her community.

From the vantage point of the Bottom, the adult Sula thwarts community's mores surrounding gender, race and vocation / avocation, generating a tension that is three-fold. Her disinterest is interpreted as selfishness; she believes in self-nurture as an end in and of itself, whereas for Eva, Nel and other women in toe, mothering, care-taking and running a household are non-negotiable women's work. And third, she is not ready to exchange her selfhood for any of the prescribed social-security, a norm which no Eve, black or white, is allowed to break. She wants to have her own rights to live, which is nothing but evil to be cured.

The question that can a woman survive alone is the pivot of the novel *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair. It is a fiction that spells out the facts of a woman's or rather women's life regardless of their geographical, cultural, religious, social or economical differences. Whatever they are or whoever they are they share one thing in common. And that thing is “affliction” and the first site of this affliction is family itself.

Sula escapes Bottom to evade the prescription of her society, black African society for a woman. The novel *Ladies Coupe* opens with ‘a sense of escape’ for Akhila, an escape from the inevitability of her life which demands her to do ‘what is expected of her’

(Nair, Anita. *Ladies Coupe*, 1). She can dream about the rest if she wishes so. Akhila, the dutiful eldest daughter of the family is not allowed to think of her own. Her dreams and desires always take a back seat when it comes to her family. But the family consisting of her mother, two brothers, and one younger sister never appreciated her sacrifice. “Which is why she collects epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs? To her, hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires.” (1) “So this then is Akhila. Forty-five years old... Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect” (2).

Tragedy at very early stage of her life makes her a pre-mature adult forbidding her to dream young. Akhila's father, the bread-winner of the South Indian Brahmin family meets an accidental death, leaving his family forlorn. Akhila, being the eldest one puts on the yoke on her tender shoulder, becomes an income-tax clerk and looks after the needs of her family. She fulfills all the responsibilities of her family by providing her younger brothers education, getting her younger sister married and even establishing the families of her brothers too. She always play role of a daughter, sister, aunt, provider and but never she is allowed to live her own life, never asked what ‘she’ wants. Being the earning member and also because the job demanded long hours and tedious journey from home to office Akhila was unable to perform the house-hold chores. She also imagines that will she be able to cope-up alone if needed? The family tries their best to make her believe that a woman cannot survive alone and even if she tries it will be a kind of hell for her. For long she accepted this without any question only rarely being disturbed by this ‘Yaksha prasna.’

Another aspect of the fiction, though related to the same question of woman's



individuality is the special ticket counter on Indian railway station that was in existence before the early 1998. Those special counters were meant for senior citizens, women and handicapped. So, this was a kind of leveling of woman along with the two other categories. Not only that, but ladies coupés in most overnights trains with second class reservation were also in practice putting women on the same footage with senior citizens and handicapped. This practice was also trying to give a woman the same message that a single woman cannot take care of herself and like the elderly and handicapped people she needs to be looked after by someone, in this case of course a male. Hence, the journey of single, very much adult Akhila in this all women compartment in search of an answer for her perennial question, 'can a woman without a man be happy and contented?' For all the time she is being admonished by her family 'A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone' (16). She further says that at this juncture of life "marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman can't live alone. What do you think? Can a woman live by herself?" (21). She finds herself in an enclosure in which she can move round and round without arriving anywhere, or at any conclusion. But as we shall see, it is some of the women who help her to step out of this vicious circle and go ahead in her life.

Akhila boards with this question along with five other women of different age groups and diverse backgrounds to the train for Kanyakumari in search of a viable answer. But meanwhile what she is 'trying to do is convince myself that a woman can live alone' (21). Other travelers in that ladies coupé are Prabha Devi, Janki Devi, Margaret Shanti, Fourteen years old Sheela, and Marikolanthu. Lives of these ladies are lived in diverse

economical, cultural, social environments but somehow or somewhere all have been denied their natural self to grow. In the intimate atmosphere of ladies coupé Akhila listens their stories and shares her own with them. While listening to them she is drawn into the most private moments of their lives, seeking in them a solution to the question that has been with her all her life : can a woman stay single and be happy, or does she need a man to make her complete? When she tossed the question to ladies the wisest answer comes through the character of Margaret Shanti. She says: "You should trust your instincts...You have to find your own answers. No one can help you do that" (21). She is a chemistry teacher who is well aware of the poetry of elements. But she is married to an insensitive tyrant who is too self-absorbed to recognize her needs. Prabha Devi is a perfect daughter and wife who recognize her own worth after having a glimpse of a swimming pool. After learning to swim she was able to 'triumph over her innate timidity and rise above tradition to float' (208). Janki Devi is a pampered wife and a confused mother who leads a very sheltered life. Then there is fourteen year old Sheela who is more mature than her parents and knows the people and their inner urges. Marikolanthu is another character who is not very educated but then she is educated in the school of life. Her life is destroyed by one night of lust of a man. She becomes an unwed, unwilling mother, who bears her life as a kind of use me but do not abuse me attitude. Other women characters whose lives come into dialogue are Karpagam, Sujata Akka, Chettiar Amma etc. It is only Karpagam, Akhila's school friend who asserts herself as a woman without any guilt and it is she who plays the catalyst in Akhila's life, and it is she who prepares Akhila to look for a new dimension in her life. She says to Akhila that I do wear colorful clothes and jewelry though I am a widow. "Would you rather that I dressed in



white and went about looking like a corpse ready for the funeral pyre?" (202). Akhila denies but when she asks that how her family reacts Karpagam says emphatically, "I don't care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose...It has nothing to do with whether...her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn't bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive..." (202). And "Akhila realized with shame that while she had in the manner of a docile water-buffalo wallowed in a pond of self-pity allowing parasites to feast on her, Karpagam had gone ahead and learnt to survive" (202). This meeting with her friend worked as a catalyst in the life of Akhila as it brought her "out of...the dark and dismal hues of the world she had lived in for so long now." Now she was sure enough to do 'what she intended to do with her life.' What Akhila hated most was not having an identity of her own. "She was always an extension of someone's else's identity...Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being...what Akhila most desired in the world was to be her own person...To do as she pleased. To live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure...she didn't want a husband. Akhila didn't want to be a mere extension again" (200).

Now Akhila defines happiness for Karpagam. She says 'Happiness is being allowed to choose one's own life; to live it the way one wants. Happiness is knowing one is loved and having someone to love. Happiness is being able to hope for tomorrow' (200).

Now Akhila is ready to face the truth when asked by her brother Narayan, 'How will you cope?...How can any woman cope alone?' (206) Akhila had her answer ready. "I know I can. I did once before when you were children. Now I can for me, for Akhilandeswari. Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother" (206-7). Akhila wants to be herself; wants to live for her 'own self.' Sula also wanted the same but she was not allowed either by her family or the society and she had to die but Akhila is ready to face another tomorrow without any baggage of expectations, free to explore herself confidently.

To live one's life without disturbing the other's one is the bare minimum one can expect from the society which holds the flag of Human Rights and Human Rights should get translated into Women's Rights as well. For, it will be suicidal for any society to ignore its half of the population to lag behind in search of growth and glory.

References

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