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Sexual and Emotional Repression of Women: A Portrayal

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Post-colonial literature consists of a body of writing emanating from Europe's former colonies. It addresses the concerns of history, identity, ethnicity, gender and language. An important consequence of post-colonialism has been the acknowledgement and re-appearance of women's experience after being concealed in the histories of colonial societies.

Most of the time when we read literature it has been written from a male point of view so we do not get to know the other version of the story. But some women writers have broken the conventional norms and have come out into the open and have written/spoken about their thoughts. There are only a few writers who can break the boundaries of time, culture and obligations of patriarchal society because from the beginning of human existence society has always been dominated by males. These women writers belong to different strata of the society, have different cultures and traditions, yet when we read their works, emotions and expressions, they are the same everywhere. It is so horrifying to read and feel all that which happens to a woman/girl within the so called safe confines of a house and the sanctity of the institution of marriage, which eventually in the longer run cripples their emotional and sexual life. 'Women across all regions, ages, religions, classes and political affiliations are vulnerable to violence, their safety is guaranteed neither in the home nor in public spaces.' (Sweetman,8) These women writers are from different places with different cultural backgrounds. But the points they present are almost the same.

'Violence against women is the most pervasive human rights abuse in the world, and is present in most societies. It occurs domestically and within the general community, and includes rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, and violence's perpetrated or condoned by the state.' (Manderson and Bennet, 62). Celie, the protagonist and narrator OF *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year-old black girl living in rural Georgia. Celie starts writing letters to God because her father, Alphonso, beats and rapes her. Alphonso has already impregnated Celie once. Celie gave birth to a girl, whom her father stole and presumably killed in the woods. Celie has a second child, a boy, whom her father also steals. Celie's mother becomes seriously ill and dies after which Alphonso brings home a new wife but continues to abuse Celie. As a young girl, Celie is constantly subjected to abuse and told she is ugly. She decides therefore that she can best ensure her survival by making herself silent and invisible. Celie does little to fight back against her stepfather, Alphonso. Later in life, when her husband, abuses her, she reacts in a similarly passive manner. Celie's letters to God are her only outlet and means of self-expression. To Celie, God is a distant figure, who she doubts cares about her concerns.

Celie and her bright, pretty younger sister, Nettie, learn that a man known only as Mr. _____ wants to marry Nettie. Mr. _____ has a lover named Shug Avery, a sultry lounge singer whose photograph fascinates Celie. Alphonso refuses to let Nettie marry, and instead offers Mr. _____ the "ugly" Celie as a bride. Mr. _____ eventually accepts the offer, and takes Celie into a difficult and joyless married life. Nettie runs away from Alphonso and takes refuge at Celie's house. Mr. _____ still desires Nettie, and when he advances on her she flees for her own safety. Never hearing from Nettie again, Celie assumes she is dead. In the meantime Shug falls ill and Mr. _____ takes her into his house. Shug is initially rude to

Celie, but the two women become friends and it is she who eventually saves Celie from her husband's beatings and leads her to emancipation.

The first instance of painful sexual violence against the protagonist is shown at the opening of the book where Young Celie is raped by who she believes to be her father, while her mother is at the doctor's office. This physical act of violence is Celie's first experience and introduction to sexuality. Here I would like to quote some lines from the text describing the horrifying experience of the young Celie:

“ She went to visit her sister doctor....Left me to see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't . First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. ...When that hurt I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it....”(3)

The second instance that we come across is when Celie marries Mr._____ in a loveless, rapid ceremony. The first evening of their marriage is spent with Celie working and Mr._____ pleasuring himself sexually.

The work is full of examples of domestic violence faced by the protagonist in the course of her life. The book opens as Celie describes her family. Her father beats her mother and rapes her. She lives in constant fear of "Him" and hopes to protect her sister, Nettie from his violent wrath.

Celie's father impregnates her and when Celie gives birth to her first baby, her father takes the infant out into the woods and kills it, or so she thinks. Celie fears he'll do this to her second newborn baby, as well. Instead, he takes the baby to Monticello and sells it. He takes both babies from Celie, allowing her to believe he's killed them, and sells them in the town. Later on her wedding day, which should be celebrated with love and passion, Mr._____ beats his new wife, Celie, Furthermore, his violent streak has been passed onto his children, for they also taunt and beat her. One child throws a stone at her head, causing her to bleed.

Celie's husband infact believes that beating one's wife is a manly and husbandly duty. He beats her because she is his wife, and furthermore because he believes she is lazy. Celie narrates one instance of her beating as:

“ He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.”(23)

In his mind, these are proper and reasonable reasons for such brute violence for he says:

“ Wives is like children. You have to let'em know who got the upper hand.Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating.”(35)

In her second novel *By the light of my Father's smile*, Alice Walker portrays the violent behaviour of a father towards his elder daughter, Magdalena when he learns of her sexual behaviour. This attitude of his has a very repressive effect on his two daughters ,Magdalena and Susanah, due to which they are never able to lead a normal life. On the other hand he was ready to be a slave for his wife to gain sexual responses from her.

The story is told through the perspective of various characters, often changing from one chapter to the next. Opening the novel is Mr. Robinson, the father. He is an anthropologist who gets funding to study a Mexican tribe called the Mundo under the guise of doing missionary work. This is a band of people created by Walker. They are a mixed race, neither African nor Indian but a blend of the two.

Magdalena is a young child when the family moved to Mexico, and she grows up with the Mundo children. Their open sexuality terrifies her father, who seems to her a hypocritical figure. He is a man intensely intimate with his wife, a professed atheist who becomes increasingly the missionary he pretends to be. This is a critical point for the young girl, who turns away from her father when he beats her for becoming sexually involved with one of the Mundo boys. She turns away from her father, becoming emotionally distant and carrying a weight that will eventually kill her. The critical moment in this family story comes when the girls' father, after discovering his teenage daughter making love with her boyfriend, locks her in a room and beats her bloody with a belt. The beating traumatizes both daughter and the younger sister who observes it through a keyhole. That act turns all the other members of the family against him. Magdalena, known as Mad Dog by the Indians, becomes sullen and obese. Susannah, forced to take sides, blames her father for estranging her from Magdalena. The girls' mother, Langley, sleeps in another room, though the father wins her back.

Susannah is the second daughter. She is the favoured child, close to her father and deeply confused when she witnesses his beating of Magdalena. Feeling forced to choose between the two, she also closes herself off to her father's affections. Walker explores the role of the father through the effect this separation has on each of the two daughters.

In the same scene we can see two very different facets of the personality of Mr. Robison where Alice Walker forces us to think that men and father's the world over are the same no matter what the cultural differences are.

“Manuelito had given me a silver belt---rather, it was a leather belt that was covered with small silver disks. He'd made it himself. I kept it in bed with me, underneath my pillow. It was with this that my father punished me.

This is not an unusual story, I know that now. Fathers attack their children around the world, every day. But I did not know this then....Apparently Sussanah sobbed for both of us. On her knees outside our bedroom, her eye to the keyhole; my mother behind her.... (26)

After the beating she was warm to me and cool to him for several weeks. Then it simply evened out again. The temperature in our housebecame normal. He moved, finally, into the big bedroom where she slept alone at night. Sounds came from that room, voices, late into the night. Within a month, or less, my father loved my mother back to himself. (27)

In her third work even though the plot revolves around a black girl *Meridian*, Alice Walker very realistically portrays the plight of women, who have a great number of children, through the thoughts and circumstances of Meridian's mother. Here she says:

“ He cried as he broke into her body, as she was to cry later when their children broke out of it.

She could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children. For a year she had seen some increase in her happiness: she enjoyed joining her body to her husband's in sex, and enjoyed having someone with whom to share the minute occurrences of her day. But in her first pregnancy she became distracted from who she was. As divided in her mind as her body was divided, between what part was herself and what part was not. Her frail independence gave way to the pressures of motherhood and she learned- much to her horror and amazement-that she was not even allowed to be resentful that she was "caught." That her personal life was over. There was no one she could cry out to and say "It's not fair!" And in understanding this, she understood a look she saw in the other women's eyes. The mysterious inner life that she had imagined gave them a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children. They, too, had found no one to whom to shout "It's not fair!" The women who now had eight, twelve, fifteen children; people made jokes about them, but she could feel now that such jokes were obscene ; it was like laughing at a person who is being buried alive, walled away from her own life ,brick by brick."(41-42)

The next author we touch upon is Katherine Sussane Prichard who despite being a white herself writes about the plight of a black woman depicting very truly the emotional and sexual repression that a woman undergoes. *Coonardoo* is the moving story of a young Aboriginal woman trained from childhood to be the housekeeper at Wyalaliba station and, as such, destined to look after its white owner, Hugh Watt. Despite their racial differences Coonardoo and Hugh fall in love which eventually leads to a chance sexual encounter between the two and the morning after Coonardoo sat 'stirring ambers of the fire' that had been for once in her life and Youie's and was never to be lit again. Later when Coonardoo's husband dies, Hugh marries her to protect her from other men. But the strange thing is that he never touches her.

Living on his verandah, she waited for him to take her as a man takes his woman, but she did not know that this was never to happen, even if Youie felt a pull towards her. Sadly though she was never to feel the love of Youie, for he even though master of Wyalaliba, he was not master enough of himself. He cared more about what the white people of his community thought and expected than what Coonardoo, that slave of endless devotion desired and who had been waiting her whole life to be wanted and loved:

'Coonardoo lived on the veranda at Wyalaliba and was regarded as Hugh's woman. Only she could not imagine why Hugh did not take her as his woman. His woman, he had said she was to be. She watched and waited, knowing his loneliness, the deep surge of his drawing to her.

Sheer cussedness, Hugh thought, deterred him from doing what everybody expected him to. A sullen anger grew in Coonardoo's eyes because of it. She had come one hot night and laid her head on his feet and Youie had pushed her away. She did not understand it. Hugh's hunger was in his eyes when he looked at her; he did not wish her to go away, and yet he would not touch her, moved away if she stood near him.'(167)

Coonardoo's love for him, had made a proud Aborigine to fall so low. She wanted him to love her, but could not say it, for she had never said anything to him about her feelings. Only her actions said everything. Her laying herself at his feet was like begging, to be taken by him!

Hugh did not want her to expect anything from him and wanted her to be satisfied in what all she got from him. He did not expect her to say anything to him and somewhere inside him he could not accept her to change her position from a slave to a partner. She was only supposed to wait upon him(as a servant) and for him(as her man) for the whole of her life.

Years pass by, but Hugh did not touch her, only her presence was essential at the homestead. With the rains came Sam Geary, another white landowner and rival of Youie, when Youie was not at Wytaliba. He had always wanted Coonardoo and now he got the opportunity. Coonardoo tried to avoid Geary for she knew from the very beginning when Geary had set his eyes on her, that he wanted to love her. But with 'that consciousness came the stirred weakness and desire of her waiting for Hugh. She had been half dead in her sterility....Hugh did not want her. Why did he not take her'. (215)

When Geary took her, after he had made her drink wine, she gave in ,as if in a dream like Tess, which became the cause of her undoing, as it had become Tess's. When the next morning Geary tried to take Coonardoo as his woman, as Alex had tried with Tess, she hated him likewise, but like Alex, Geary had written Coonardoo's doomed fate on her body, the night she gave in to him.

Being a woman Coonardoo's body is exploited but Youie is a greater culprit than Sam Geary, for Geary had only exploited her body whereas Youie had exploited her both mentally and physically. When Youie came to know that Coonardoo had given herself to Geary all his male ego and rage burned inside him, for Geary was his rival who always wanted to show him down. For Youie, Coonardoo was his property so how could she give herself to him. Youie demands complete loyalty and submission from her, without himself being committed in a similar manner.

Such is his outrage that he throws her into the fire. She is punished for not being committed enough. A symbolic irony can be read here: Coonardoo's and Youie's relation had begun by the fire and now it ended also by it. Coonardoo had been symbolically consumed by the fire of his passion and now she bodily became the food of that fire, the fire which had burned inside them, but had found no release and now she became its sacrifice.

Tehmina Durrani, the author of *My Feudal Lord*, gives minute description of the Pakistani society where the muslim patriarchs dominate and the entity of the women is that of inferior beings, both intellectually and socially. A woman's role seems to be an instrument for the satisfaction of the man's sexual desires and perpetuation of the species.

In the first part of the work Tehmina's husband is portrayed as a man who revels in the total subjugation, repression and oppression of his female counterpart.

“ Throughout South Asia, it is generally accepted that men have the right to control their wives movements and behaviour, and, if a woman challenges that right she may be punished. In his role as husband, a man is legitimately expected to be always superior to his wife, the initiator of authority and the recipient of deference from his wife. A man is expected to demonstrate clearly his husbandly authority at the beginning of a marriage, and not to relinquish it.” (Manderson and Bennet, 64)

Tehmina's conventional upbringing conditioned by her patriarchal social environment in which she lived, made her accept her husband Mustafa's physical assaults and sexual brutality; enduring these attacks as a part of her destiny. That was the social ethos which

inculcated itself into her being. For according to Mustafa , a woman like land is-- power, prestige and a property-- a commodity meant for utilization and consumption in whichever way the owner or master deems fit.

“ The occurrence of explicit violence within the family in South Asia is complex, often considered taboo, a private matter not to be discussed publicly. Women subject to violence do not talk about it openly; nor does the wider community. The extended family rarely intervenes to protect women, as violent episodes are generally regarded as instances of her “waywardness” or “ disobeying orders”, or rightfully claiming his “ conjugal” rights.” (Manderson and Bennet, 64)

Surprisingly , when Tehmina becomes pregnant as a result of Mustafa’s violent rapist tortures he takes a lot of personal care of her. However a close reading of the novel makes the reader realize that it is not out of love for her but in the hope of a male heir that Mustafa is attending to Tehmina. Her endurance of Mustafa’s tortures is the result of an archaic patriarchal value which inculcates a sense of slavery into the essence of womanhood. This extends to sexual domination of the wife by the husband. Patriarchal discourse does not regard sex as a means of mutual physical enjoyment but rather as a tool of domination. This is why Tehmina tries to perpetuate her marriage bond with Mustafa realizing fully well that in her society, a divorced woman is the most despicable of the human species. Her heart rending description of her loveless marriage is revealed as:

“ There was not a day that Mustafa did not hit me...I just tried my best not to provoke him....I was afraid that my slightest response to his advances would reinforce his image of me as a common slut. This was a feudal hang up: his class believed that a woman was an instrument of a man’s carnal pleasure. If the woman ever indicated that she felt pleasure, she was a potential adulteress, not to be trusted. Mustafa did not even realise that he had crushed my sensuality. I was on automatic pilot...responding as much as was important for him but never feeling anything myself. If he was satisfied there was a chance that he would be in better humour. It was at these times that I realized that prostitution must be a most difficult profession.” (106-107)

The most gruesome experience that pregnant Tehmina narrates is:

“Suddenly he threw me down on the bed and jumped on me. Sitting astride my belly, he slapped me in the face repeatedly with his open palm, forehand and backhand. The sounds of his blows seemed too loud to remain confined to the four walls of the room. I fought to stifle my screams as he pulled at my hair, thrusting my head from side to side. One hand clutched my long, braided hair and jerked me off the bed and on to the floor. I felt a wetness run down my legs, but had no time to realize that my bladder lacked the strength to face this kind of fear. He threw me against the wall and threw me against another one again, and again, and again. I no longer knew what was happening. Something burst in my ears. I felt an agonising pain in my eyes . Something split. Something swelled. Then the pain merged into one deep, enthralling sense of agony.

I did not know how long the beating lasted. It could have been ten minutes; it could have been two hours. The intensity made it an eternity. Then, quite suddenly, it was over. His fury was sated.

I begged in a weak voice, ‘ Please,God! I need to go – I need to go-to the bathroom.’ He allowed me to stagger off.

I leaned heavily against the sink top and struggled to catch my breath. Slowly I raised my eyes to the mirror. I gasped in fresh fright at the monster who gazed back at me. A shiver ran through me. My teeth chattered. My body shook. My braid had opened and my long hair was wild and strewn, like a witch’s. The right side of my nose had disappeared, merging into a swollen cheek. My lips protruded in an exaggerated and grotesque pout. My eyes were deeply sunk into huge, purple patches; one of them hurt badly and was bloodshot. A piercing pain screamed in one ear. The left side of my scalp was matted with blood. I pulled at it and tufts of hair came out in my hands. I rinsed my mouth and tasted blood.”(102-3).

Population Reports incorporated in the work ‘Violence Against women in Asian Societies’ by Manderson and Bennett say: “ Acts of violence may include acts of physical assault such as hitting, slapping, kicking and beating, psychological abuse like constant belittling, intimidation and humiliation and coercive sex. Intimate partner abuse almost always includes psychological abuse and forced sex; it is rarely an isolated act of physical aggression. Most women are abused by their partners many times, with an atmosphere of terror permeating the relationships.” (63)

Blasphemy by the same author is based on the real life experiences of a young woman exposed to the Pakistani *maulanas* and depicts the struggle of a Muslim Woman against all that is contrary to what Islam stands for. It is an amalgamation of fact and fiction, blending to disguise and protect the victims of a horrible human tragedy, while exposing the powerful religious imposters who prey on wretched and powerless people. A shocking tale of cruelty, sex and violence.

It gives a horrific account of how the custodians of religion are using their 'special knowledge' to exploit the illiterate masses. The central character, Heer, is one such victim of this form of designed oppression by the antagonist Pir Sain. It’s her exceptional beauty that catches Pir Sain’s eyes at first. After abusing her body on the night of their marriage, Pir Sain sets out to control her mind and soul as Heer is forcibly adapted to a life alien to her and unbearable to any human being. *Blasphemy* is a tale where day after day the body keeps surrendering and the soul keeps rebelling as Heer searches for a moment of peace.

Through Heer’s experience the author brings out a blasphemous way of life, unknown to the layman, practiced not only by Pir Sain but also by his followers. Pir Sain’s abstinence from going to his wife during Ramadan is the action of any orthodox Muslim. His beating of Heer for missing her prayers further secures his image in front of the extremists. But then there is his demand that Heer aborts their child so he may satisfy his carnal desires, demands immediate retribution. Despite all his vices, he is holy and almost divine to his followers:

“ To me, my husband was my son’s murderer.

He was also my daughter’s molester.

A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night. He was Bhai’s destroyer, Amma Sain’s tormentor. He had humbled Ma, exploited the people. He was the rapist of

orphans and the fiend that fed on the weak. But over and above all this, he was known to be the man closest to Allah, the one who could reach Him and save us.”
(143)

The worst marriage experience that a young dreamy girl could have gone through has been given words by the author as :

“Stripped naked, I felt a mountain of flesh descend on me. A fisherman, hopeful of profit and safety, had set out to sea on a bright day. Suddenly, clouds thickened and collided. Black rain poured into the ocean. Thunder and lightning drove the vast expanse of water wild. Its volume and water swelled. The noise up above was loud, the noise down below even louder. The air was solid. There was no escape.

None.

With only sheer will to be, I remained, alive, barely.

He had commenced our wedding night with an animal haste for food and ended it satiated....

The preparation, the rituals, the ceremony and the slaughter. I had been sacrificed to God on Earth. The contract had signed away my life. Its terms were specified by a faith, sealed with social and familial norms and this, our first night, had been its first dawn. Was this repeated in every corner of the world over and over again?.....

I was hurting and I was petrified.

Which was worse, I did not know....

I staggered into the bathroom. Standing under the shower, I stared as blood mixed with water, turned pink and collected under my feet. Sobbing for Ma, I felt my aching body and caressed it for what had happened to it. (39-40)

...

In the grip of a nightmare again, I could no longer distinguish which part of my body was which.

Under him I winced, and wondered why if all women went through this torture they still married off their daughters. No one had ever discussed the subject in front of me but no one had looked terrorised either. How did they recover from the madness?

Why did I never see this terror in Ma's face?

He turned me over on my stomach and I stuffed the bed sheet into my mouth to control a thousand screams. Pain ripped through me.

Every day of this and a whole week passed by.

I realised that my concept of love was wrong. It had been so different. I had thought lovers talked to each other and laughed and sang songs together like in the movies I had seen. Nothing I had learned or read in the school was true. Poets, passion, and love letters were all false. *Liars*, I cursed under my breath, they delude the young. The contrast between what it should have been and what it was, was too stark.

Where could I run? (42)

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