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The Schema of Gender Roles: A Study of Select Poems from K.V. Raghupathi's *Orphan and Other Poems*

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Abstract:

K.V. Raghupathi is an eminent voice in contemporary Indian Poetry in English (IPE). His ninth poetry collection *Orphan and Other Poems* contains 36 short poems. The collection stands out as an amalgamation of various literary themes. This paper critically evaluates the first three poems of this collection. They are “Orphan”, “The Bud in the Bin” and “Broken Image”. These three poems muse over the sympathetic conditions of life and death of orphans under the changing roles of gender. Gender issues involve many complex things. Gender schema theory refers to the theory that children learn about what it means to be male or female from the culture in which they are born and live. It suggests that Social or cultural influences largely enable children to develop their ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman. This paper focuses on sociological, feministic and deconstructionist approaches to explore comprehensive ideas of changing gender roles.

Keywords: gender, socialization, feministic, deconstructionist.

Introduction

Gender schema theory states that children learn about what it means to be male or female from the culture in which they live. It suggests that social and cultural influences largely guide children to develop their ideas about what it means to be a man or woman. Now-a-days a surge in the schema of gender is shaking the world. As a result, a great

imbalance between the genders has been noted. This has contributed to dominate one gender over the other or imitation of each other. Contemporary women are mimicking men and have become more masculine in their disposition. Sometimes they are extremely violent and take part in status offences. According to Chesney-Lind, 'Girls often run away from abuse, and once they are on the streets, several negative outcomes are possible' (*Sociological Theory/Feminist Theory*) The poems "Orphan", "The Bud in the Bin" and "Broken Image" are pathetic replication of a surge in the schema of gender roles towards the care taking of children. These three poems address the sorrowful condition of an orphan, a new-born babe thrown in a dust bin, and the orphaned baby at the death scene of a raped woman respectively. These poems deliberate over the sympathetic conditions of life and death of orphans under the changing roles of gender. Also these poems describe vivid shades of women that lead to different facets of orphanhood. These poems stand out as good examples of such negative outcomes. They are analyzed with reference to social construction of gender, changing gender roles, and the feminist stand point with Derrida's deconstruction.

The differentiation between gender and sex did not arise until the late 1970s when researchers began using "gender" and "sex" as two separate terms, with "gender" referring to one's self-identity and "sex" referring to one's chromosomal make-up and sex organs. The binary of male and female leaves out everyone who does not fit into these categories either because of genital make up, chromosome, or hormone levels. Gender is represented through an individual's masculine or feminine identity. These gender normalities are often created based on our co existing features and needs. Society and culture establish gender roles, and these attributes are prescribed as ideal or appropriate behaviour for a person of that specific gender. Studying gender entails learning about both men and women because of their interdependent nature. Social construction is the way that society keeps individuals and provides certain privileges for one group over another. Most people are unaware of these social constructions, as they occur subconsciously. Points of differentiation in social construction include race, class and gender. Social constructionism is a general term applied to theories that emphasize the socially created nature of social life. The basic theories of social constructionism is applicable to any issue of study pertaining to human life, including gender. A social constructionist view of gender looks beyond categories and examines the blurring of the boundaries between essential categories. This is especially true with regard to categories of male and female, viewed typically as binary and oppositional. Social constructionism seeks to obscure the binary and muddle these two categories, which are so frequently presumed to be essential.

An orphan is a child abandoned, deserted, or separated by the disappearance or the loss of one or both parents. A child who has been abandoned by one of their biological parents is called half orphan. This theme is applied in the poem 'Orphan.' The boy presented in the poem is a paternal orphan as his father is unknown. When the mother abandons him by throwing him into a pool of troubles and miseries, he is left with no care-takers and becomes helpless and hopeless. His plight is compared to that of 'a broken winged bird' which can never unite with its flock.

When the mother leaves
the child's world falls apart
like a broken winged bird from the sky. (Orphan and Other Poems.7)

The boy becomes frustrated and traumatized after being abandoned by his mother. It is very unfortunate that the desire to fulfil her own needs by meeting a man in a faraway land wins over her motherly affection. In spite of his pained efforts the boy could not prevent his mother from fleeing like a bird in search of more enticing opportunities. All his hopes are broken like a flower vase on the marble floor. Broken things have no value and they are useless. The orphaned boy's position in the society is similar to that of the broken vase.

He chose the path after his pained efforts
broke like an adorned vase on the marble floor
to prevent his mother from migrating
like a bird in search of Eldora do. (Orphan and Other Poems. 7)

Realizing that his mother, like a fairy woman will never return, the boy abruptly ends his life by hanging himself from a neem tree. We understand his deep anguish from the note collected from the pocket of his dead body, written to his sister and mother, through which he expresses his love and concern for them.

In the note he consoles his sister not to worry about money for his funeral. The boy, also requests his sister to study hard and not to flee like their mother: /My sister, you should study hard not to flee like mother. (Orphan and Other Poems.7)/ The poet here makes a reference to the changing roles of female gender in the society. With a view to imitate men or to surpass them, women are breaking the stereotypes by being aggressive and adventurous, and are not worried whether that finally leads to comfort and fulfilment or not. The poet in this poem presents that shade of the modern woman who aims at improving her own status even by shedding away all her responsibilities and moving on in pursuit of greener pastures. The boy feels that his mother is caught in *maya*, and hence he shows his concern for her by wishing her to take care of herself./Mom, you should take care of yourself because you are caught in Maya. (Orphan and Other Poems.7)/.

He apologizes to his sister on his parting from her. In fact, like his parents, he too is deserting his sister and escaping from all the responsibilities, though pathetically. In spite of knowing that after his leaving, his sister will be left with no care, the boy quits the world leaving her helpless. The concluding lines with a daunting expression "please, take care of my puppy the only loser and lover" evokes a kind of scepticism. It is an irony that he is leaving the burden of the puppy to his sister.

The imagery used in the poem brings all the richness to it. The similes and metaphors in each stanza convey implicit meaning. The images "Broken winged bird", "hanging from a

neem tree like a dry fish', 'broke like an adorned vase' reveal the undeniable plight of the orphan while the expressions "a fairy woman', 'migrating like a bird' depict the flaws of the mother, deconstructing her role.

The second poem "Bud in the Bin" offers a deconstruction of the social values regarding sex, gender, roles of a mother and father towards caretaking of their children. People know themselves very well whether they are male or female. They are aware of their responsibilities and accountabilities. They are also aware that others may evaluate and characterise their own behaviours. They are conscious of how they are measured in the society. Social constructionism asserts that a gender is a category that people evaluate as Omni relevant to social life. Gender as Omni relevant means that people can always be judged by what they do as a man or as a woman. This is the basis for reasoning that people are always performing or doing gender related activities and that gender is always relevant in social situations. Even though gender roles are done or constructed, they can also be undone or deconstructed. Everything is possible and we can notice such undoing of gender roles in this poem.

Derrida rejects the binary structure of essential categories. His metaphysics of presence focuses on the privileges of one category over the other. This means that there is an assumed bias in certain binary oppositions where one side is positioned over another, such as male over female. A deconstructive approach towards these traditional binary oppositions like man and woman, is focussed on the domination of patriarchal society over woman. The feminist thinking is also engaged in the deconstruction of the opposition between man and woman. To a few feminists, 'deconstruction has seemed useful. To put it simply, it works to dislocate categories or the traditional binary oppositions like male or female or masculine or feminine: the foundations of patriarchal sexuality' (*Introducing Derrida*.160). To other feminists, 'deconstruction is a deflection or appropriation of feminism. Deconstruction offers no grounds for feminist political action. It's the latest weapon in the male philosophers' armoury'. (*Introducing Derrida*.160). Feminism demands economic and political equality for women like men. But the deconstructionist approach takes us beyond this binary thinking. It analyses to restructure or displace the opposition by focussing on the consequences of the privileges of one category over the other.

The poem, begins with the pathetic condition of a left over dead body of a babe in the dust bin. The poet finds a half-worm eaten babe's body half buried in the half-baked bin. The poet compares the half buried body of the babe with "half-eaten banana leaf." However, it is not known, whether the baby, discussed in the poem, was alive or dead at the time of throwing in the bin. Studies reveal that the just born babies are thrown into dust bins due to certain reasons: living babies are thrown away when the parents cannot afford to grow them especially in case of female babies, or in case they are illegitimate or unwanted; dead babies are thrown away owing to the worst economic conditions of the parents and their inability to afford even the expenses of cremation or burial. Any how the accountability of gender towards children are diminishing.

The poet depicts the entire life of man between the womb and the tomb, in just four beautiful lines. It reminds us of Shakespeare's seven stages of man. The life requires nine months to grow from single cell stage to a fully grown foetus; it takes nineteen years to grow to maturity experiencing all the joy of childhood, and adolescence; it blooms with its profession, married life, offspring till it reaches forty years of age and ripens and falls any time after sixty years.

It takes, I am told, nine months to bud
nineteen years to flower
forty years to stay in bloom
and sixty years to ripen and fall (Orphan and Other Poems.8)

Mankind has not yet successfully dealt with the complexities of gender construction. Under the compulsion of emotions or due to the fatal attraction of one gender towards the other or the domination of one gender over the other or surrendering one gender to the other are part and parcel of life as life itself is a gender construct. The woman in the poem might have surrendered her body to a male for an object of sexual exploitation. The poet expresses his anguish in a striking image. She might have become insane and lost herself in the flood of emotions and thrown the final result of the sexual exploitation into the dust bin without realizing that she was tearing away the petals of a bud even before it blooms.

but for this unknown deranged woman
she drank up emotion in cups
and tore off the petals before unfurling. (Orphan and Other Poems.8)

Deconstruction has influenced all the fields and has drawn our attention to rhetorical and performative aspects of language use. It has not only encouraged scholars to consider what a text says but also advocates the relationship and the potential conflict between what the texts says and what it does. In the "Bud in the Bin" we don't know who has thrown the baby in the bin. Nobody knows whether it is a male or female. Due to our patriarchal thinking or male gaze we simply assume through the text that it is the fault of a woman.

The poet empathises with the woman and says she might have decided in a hurry to cast off the flesh of her own body. She must have been under the spell of emotion when she surrendered herself to the erring gods.

She must have cast off her half body in haste
in protest against erring gods
for making life gender construct. (Orphan and Other Poems. 8)

The possibility of being held accountable is important in social constructionism. But who is accountable for the baby in the bin? Is it male or female? The poem puts forth a crucial point for discussion. It is an example of unequivocal domination of patriarchal philosophy over woman:

At the end of the poem a passer-by picks up the dead body of the baby out of compassion and humanity and buries it, and plants a thousand saplings around the township in protest against the tendency of the people always finding fault with women.

A passer-by picked and buried in compassion
and planted thousand saplings
around the township in protest against
the erring woman for making life deconstruct. (Orphan and Other Poems.8)

The poem gives way to a line of thought that life is gender construct when a woman gives birth to a child. Identification of gender plays a key role in the life of human beings at the time of birth. The poet does not give any clues whether the baby is male or female. At the same time the poem ends with surprising act of planting saplings in protest against the erring woman for her insane action of making life deconstruct by throwing just born baby into the bin. Though the act of throwing the baby into the dust bin has gone unnoticed and it is not known who has thrown, it has become a general tendency to put the blame on the mother.

But feminists would say that it is the fault of male who exploit female. In fact, both men and women are held accountable for this pathetic act. Thus the poem draws us to rethink over the complexities of gender construction with a deconstructionist perspective. Ironically the poet does not make it clear whether the passer-by is male or female. But the noble act of the passer-by definitely points at the constructionist approach towards life

The poem "Broken Image" represents the crucial dimensions of male domination e.g. rape and murder. In the two previous poems the women or mothers of orphans are absent but alive somewhere. In "Broken Image" the mother is present but not alive. The marks on her cheeks, neck and hands show that she was raped and killed. The poem is a direct example of brutal male domination over female, the tendency that often leads to rape and crime. The graphical description of the dead body reveals the mastery of the poet in depicting a raped and murdered woman:

But she lay there on the wet floor
with her legs apart and hands thrown
in between two murky pillow and two displaced boxes
her breasts partially opened
nipples pointing to the partially broken roof
full and round with clotted milk. (Orphan and Other Poems.9)

Once again the poet does not reveal whether the child is male or female. It stays at the body of the mother does not know that its mother is robbed and killed by brutal male force. The baby who is under illusion and still feels that mother is alive, holds the chest of his mother with no terror on its face. It hopes that the mother would soon open her eyes.

Brown body turned to pale bluish in the passing sun
as the illusioned babe lay holding tight the chest
with no terror on its face
but the right stiff ripple in the unbitten lips
and eyes partially closed in hope
that it might meet its eyes with the mother's. (Orphan and Other Poems.9)

The image of the orphaned baby trying to wake up the mother, not knowing that it is just a motionless body, will surely shakes our deep conscious.

The social construction of gender, feminism and Derrida's deconstruction all the three theories focus on the binary opposition of male and female. The first two theories give equal status to both the genders and they consider both male and female as equal entities. They attempt to merge the traditional binary opposition between two genders while feminism tries to bring equality between the two categories economically and politically. But deconstruction theory tries to go beyond the binary opposition and studies the privileges of one gender over the other. It aims on the assumed bias of male over female. It undoes the traditional binary opposition by concentrating on the tensions that come out from the privileges of male over female. The above three poems depict the tension that prevails due to the privileges of male over the female. Thus, the paper analyses the essential categories or binary oppositions like male and female with reference to gender schema, social construction, feministic and deconstructionist point of view.

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Poems:

ORPHAN

When the mother leaves
the child's world falls apart
like a broken winged bird from the sky.

"I am sorry we are parting upset"
the note said on his chest,

his boyish body hanging from a neem tree
like a dry fish in the filtered sunlight.

Frustrated with his mother
who met another man in a far away land
never returned like a fairy woman.

He chose the path after his pained efforts
broke like an adorned vase on the marble floor
to prevent his mother from migrating
like a bird in search of Eldora do.

“You don't have to worry about my funeral”
The note in his pocket screamed
“because a man owes us money for timber.
My sister, you should study hard
not to flee like mother.
Mom, you should take care of yourself
because you are caught in Maya.
Please, take care of my puppy
the only loser and lover”.

BUD IN THE BIN

The other day
under the slanted sun
peeping through the faded houses
I found a half-worm eaten babe
lay half buried in the half-baked bin
of left over like a half-eaten banana leaf.

It takes, I am told, nine months to bud
nineteen years to flower
forty years to stay in bloom
and sixty years to ripen and fall
but for this unknown deranged woman
she drank up emotion in cups
and tore off the petals before unfurling.

She must have cast off her half body in haste
in protest against erring gods
for making life gender construct.

A passer-by picked and buried in compassion
and planted thousand saplings
around the township in protest against
the erring woman for making life deconstruct.

BROKEN IMAGE

She lay dead
like a fish on the shore.

The markings on the brown cheeks, neck and hands
in the golden thin light
through the partially closed windows
indicate either raped or poisoned.

But she lay there on the wet floor
with her legs apart and hands thrown
in between two murky pillow and two displaced boxes
her breasts partially opened
nipples pointing to the partially broken roof
full and round with clotted milk.

The little babe with no tears
sucking illusion in its mouth
as her carcass stretched from corner to corner.

Brown body turned to pale bluish in the passing sun
as the illusioned babe lay holding tight the chest
with no terror on its face
but the right stiff ripple in the unbitten lips
and eyes partially closed in hope
that it might meet its eyes with the mother's.

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