

Image of Women as reflected in Poetry Section of senior secondary English Text Books (Core Course): A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

The purpose for writing a critique is to evaluate any text (here poems) in order to increase understanding. A critical analysis is subjective writing to express one's opinion or evaluation of a text. The words may not be interpreted in same manner by everyone as they flow from ink of a poet. Intended meaning may be something else and the sense conveyed may differ altogether. Such paradox is quite common with literature especially poetry. The situation becomes more touchy and grim as the content and issues touched in poetry belong to far beyond the understanding of youngsters. On the other hand, literature hones the affective skill of any human being. So this area cannot be left unaddressed. Moreover, **issue of gender sensitization is raging high. If position, personality and perception of women is reflected in true and unbiased light, it would help the coming generation to become more respectable for each other whence, a healthy society.**

Introduction

Senior secondary classes provide the exit ticket from Indian school system and open the doors of higher studies, academics, vocational or professional. In current scenario of cut-throat competition, this level of education system is considered as milestone which makes or breaks the future prospects as per common convention.

Equally important is their vulnerability at this stage to whatever they interact with. It's very obvious that being at impressionable age, they are easily influenced by the text which is prescribed by authorities. As such prescribed content is considered as 'Bible' because it went through tight scrutiny at various levels under watchful eyes. No doubt about any objection is left unaddressed. But still one could observe lacunas, if be a bit more vigilant.

The researcher was amused by a not so conspicuous query by one of her teenage students which says that...

“Why in mathematical problems it was always asked some amount of work is done by so many men in so many days. A man's work is equivalent to so many women. So, in how many days would many women be able to do the amount of work done by men?”

The tail question, “Why the question could not be vice-versa?” This innocent query jolted the researcher to explore the representation of image of women through prescribed text books.

To delimit the study, it was decided to consider poetry section of English text book meant for classes 12th and 11th.

Secondly, the study was conducted after completion of syllabus of poetry section, so that views of students could be taken into consideration.

It was observed that readers' demands and requirements differ and transit very swiftly in fast changing scenario. The researcher, as a language teacher noticed such expectations of her students who are teenagers on verge of adulthood. Those penetrating queries by inquisitive developing minds about the relevancy of role portrayal of fairer gender in text books urged the researcher to go for critical analysis of poetry section of book ‘Flamingo’ and ‘Hornbill’, prescribed for class 12th and class 11th respectively..

Discussion

‘**My Mother at Sixty Six**’ by **Kamala Das**(1949-1992) consists of mental journey of a daughter along a journey in real time. The mere thought of separation of herself (the poet) from her mother sent shivers to her. The aging factor (mother) and preoccupation (daughter) seem like opposite poles ripping two people apart though both were very close.

There is every possibility that this poem carries experiential hint of mood of poet. When explored in depth the poet in actual life was a rebellion. She suffered a lot in her married life. She got converted to different religion to get married once again. During the tumultuous phase of life, her mother may be her only support. That is why she always wanted to be with her mother.

The protagonist of poem is representation of empowered women who could move on in life on her own, who could drive. This aspect reflects the intrusion of territory by female which was meant entirely for male domain. On the other hand, older woman (The mother) who is tired and fatigued in the evening of life has just given up. She appears to surrender herself to fate. As reflected in poem, she did nothing but only being observed by protagonist (The daughter) throughout the journey. Not a single instance of interaction is there throughout the length of poem or we can say journey barring the last moments of departure. And those words, “See you soon, Amma” are not exact presentation of thoughts that she was actually feeling. Protagonist was disappointed, desperate on having a thought that she may not meet her mother again but she tried to be bold and speak otherwise. “It touches a personal chord of looking objectively at a close relative.”¹

Interpretation

The poem reflects the strength of mind of a woman even though her intuition was telling her something very opposite. She wanted to deflect her mind from the negative thoughts by looking out of window of car. The poem carries no punctuation mark which shows that most of women

¹About the book, Flamingo (Text book prescribed by NCERT for class 12th)

lead a life of monotony, fatigued due to life of drudgery. But even among compelling circumstances, she was determined to carry on. This factor shows a strong personality of women. She does every effort to shed away the garb of negativity, which is imposed on her due to exaggerated expectations of family and society. She is strong enough to bear the mounting pressure with ease.

On the other hand, the submissiveness of women behavior is represented by role portrayal of mother. Her face carries crisscross of wrinkles which reflects the hard work she did throughout her life to sustain herself and her family.

Both the characters reflect varied hues of fairer sex and side by side genuine feeling of care and love.

Discussion

'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' penned by American poet **Adrienne Rich** (1929-2012) in 1951 is one of the poems from her compilation namely "A Change of World". "It gives expression to the voice of women stifled by institution of marriage."² This particular poem evokes the sympathy of readers as the main lead of poem was made to suffer at the hands of her husband. She remained a mute sufferer could not utter a word. The simple task that is to pull needle while engrossed in her favorite time pass that is doing embroidery, was taxing and cumbersome for her. She wanted to rebel against the oppression but could not oppose it. She took refuge in embroidery, weaved tigers. But could not dare to be like them and bear the atrocities inflicted upon her silently. At the end she died with marks of brutality on her body and mind as well. The poem is divided in three stanzas. First one shows the screen made by her in moments which were her very own. Unafraid and majestic tigers seem to be roaming around along few men. Tigers were not afraid of men and vice versa. Both were in comfortable coexistence. This is exactly what Aunt Jennifer wanted to lead her life. She never wanted to be dominated nor want to dominate anyone. The piece of embroidery reflects her mind set. But in actual life she could never resist being abused by her husband. At the heart of poem lies an image of a wife who is controlled and frightened by her husband.

Interpretation

Aunt Jennifer, the lead character was in abusive matrimonial alliance. Her plight represents the misery faced by many anonymous women, who are in unhappy marriage. She was married into a rich family. 'Massive weight of marriage band' and 'Ivory needle' are the indicators which show the abundance of prosperity. But the money and the lavish life style could not bring happiness to her. She wanted to escape from this entanglement but probably divorce was unacceptable in those times. Covertly, through the character of Aunt Jennifer the conventional institution of marriage is criticized. The extreme of her sufferings was that she could not make

²About the book, Flamingo (Text book prescribed by NCERT for class 12th)

her plight public and silently suffered and when reached the verge of unsustainability, she died. The life and the end as well both were miserable.

The last stanza is full of paradox. Her body bore the brunt of her abused and caged life. While her creation i.e. the tigers were proud, unafraid, confident and sure of themselves.

Women were expected to become dutiful wives in their adult life and ruled under tyranny imposed by their husbands. Many a woman suffered silently at the hands of their own close relatives. This is the ugliest truth hidden within the four walls of home. She could express her feelings through her art only. She has no one to share her agonies. She poured her heart out through her artistic work. Her art conveys her deep feelings. The miseries in relationships prevail in any society because of particular mannerism of gender specific grooming of the children. Actually, this poem mocks at clout and authority of men over his female counterpart.

Discussion

'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' – a realistic depiction of underprivileged slum children by **Stephen Spender** (1909-1995) was published in 1964 and later on appeared in several following collections. The very first stanza of poem reflects an explicit and dreary depiction of slum students. The girl child mentioned in the poem is probably overaged, with her weighed down head as she appears physically and emotionally drained. It seems as if the life is sapped from her body and mind as well. Though, her class mates are in no better situation. Above is the only mention of any female in this poem. "This poem sensitively brings out the disparity between the formal education system and the reality of the lives of poor."³

Interpretation

Like the tall girl, the working group is overworked, exhausted and sapped of energy. They are deliberately kept malnourished, frightened and weak to check them from raising any voice. There is very little hope of change. The poem talks about social injustice. The weighed down head of girl reflects the sadness and hopelessness. Moreover, the feeling of being shameful may be due to social positioning. She may be overwhelmed by the issues raging in her life.

Discussion

‘**Keeping quiet**’ by Nobel laureate **Pablo Neruda** (1904-1973) is a very powerful yet reflective piece of poetry. It strongly advocates peace, humanity and asserts self-actualization through introspection. Through unnecessary actions we lead ourselves in chaotic situations and embroiled in conflicts. Though, any female character is not explicitly drawn here. But the most significant ‘Mother Nature’ comes to forefront in the concluding stanza to pacify all the confrontations and conflicts.

³About the book, Flamingo (Text book prescribed by NCERT for class 12th)

Interpretation

Example of ‘Mother earth’ expressed the female depiction and its positive energy. It carries life wrapped under the layers of death. Apparently, it is silent and still but never actually inactive. Earth is symbolism of calmness, serenity and mindfulness... identity of female character. When the surroundings appear standstill; water freezes, trees shed their leaves- but actually it is not so. At appropriate time, water begins to flow, flowers bloom. Means a subtle female energy is there, which transform negative to positive. It conveys a message to stay calm and stable even during upheaval times. The message is direct and straight from heart and touches the chord of everyone who is even little sensible. It appeals the heart more than intellect- a clear reflection of most significant female attribute.

Discussion

‘**A Thing of Beauty**’ by famous romantic poet **John Keats** (1795-1821) is based on Greek mythology of ‘Endymion’. The poem equates Endymion’s enchantment for moon goddess ‘Cynthia’. A parallel could be drawn with universal pursuit for self-destructive supereminence in which a blissful personal unity with all creation is attained. “It gives a taste of classical poetry, have universal appeal and eternal value.”⁴

Interpretation

In the background of poem, the wonders of 'Mother Nature' lurks, again a female entity. She amused the people by its sheer innocence, beauty and supreme power. In short, this poem shows how nature and its wonder mesmerize us and takes away all our sorrows. It is reflection of female attributes. It hides various secrets under its wraps; appears serene but not actually.

Discussion

'A Photograph' is nostalgic poem penned by **Shirley Toulson** (1924-2018) about transience of human life, death and mysteries surrounding them. All the characters in poem are females who are very much attached to each other. The three stanzas of poem reflect different time frames. The first one represents carefree childhood of mother. Second was when mother and daughter were together and relished each other's company. Third stanza represents the daughter's longing for her lost mother. This piece of poetry expresses strong emotions and attachment between a mother and a daughter.

Interpretation

This poem is about impermanence of life. 'The photograph' is about a beautiful moment captured, which later becomes a beautiful memory for the mother and daughter as well. The

⁴About the book Flamingo (Text book prescribed by NCERT for class 12th)

affective domain i.e. emotions, behavior, feelings of women are beautifully highlighted through this poem. To coexist amiably EQ (Emotional Quotient) should be treated at par with IQ (Intelligence Quotient). The moments of reminiscence by young lady shows her strong EQ and AQ (Adversity Quotient). She knew how to cope with loss of someone beloved.

Discussion

'The Laburnum Top' by Nobel Laureate of England, **Ted Hughes** (1930-1998), is symbolic relationship between a bird and a tree. The bird, a goldfinch laid her eggs in the nest placed at the top of Laburnum tree. It provides protection to bird's chicks. Earlier the tree appears silent and lifeless. With the entry of female bird, it becomes lively. As she keeps on moving in and out of tree frequently to get food to feed her chicks.

Interpretation

The continuous efforts done by female donning the garb of goldfinch brings the entire tree to life. She runs her family with sleekness and alertness and brings in a sense of bonding, happiness and agility. In short, she is the core around whom the circle of life revolves. If she is not there anymore, the whole activity in life subsides.

Discussion

'**The Voice of the Rain**' is free verse poem by American poet **Walt Whitman** (1819-1892). It got first published in a periodical namely *Outing* in 1885, then reprinted in collection *Leaves of Grass*. The rain is personified in this short poem. A parallel is beautifully drawn between rain and poem. This poem is like ode to restorative ability of the inanimate elements of the world like rain which replenish the life. It also asserts that poetry nourishes the humanity just like rain.

Interpretation

Again the feminine version of natural entities brought to foray through this poem. The femininity replenishes, restores and enriches the world around it. It gives birth to new life. The minutest of details could not skip its attention and sure to get blessings in form of shower, happiness and serenity.

Conclusion

Critical analysis of poems entails sharing personal views regarding them and involves an effort of critique to read between lines. It is not just about the words used (Headrick, 2014). As critical analysis of image of women as reflected by poems prescribed by NCERT for senior secondary classes is exclusively taken into consideration in this paper so poems are analyzed keeping in view only the specific and relevant aspects only.

Above discussed poems reflect image of women overtly or covertly. The sequence of discussion and interpretation is kept accordingly. First two poems viz. '**My Mother at Sixty Six**' and '**Aunt Jennifer's Tigers**' clearly expressed the ordeals and sufferings of women. The similar reflections are very much visible in our society. The grandmothers' wrinkles, fatigue and unspoken pain in addition to the mothers' ordeals and efforts to balance emotionally, psychologically and physically deserve empathy and words of appreciation. The image of women drawn through this poem is that life of women is not cake walk. They have to walk on tight rope. Family and society have innumerable expectations from them. If they are empowered, expectations multiply in

multitude. But even after so many burdens, they reflect a strong personality with great emotional stability. They suffered silently like in case of Aunt Jennifer. Students could find hoards of Aunt Jennifers in their vicinity. An in depth discussion about these characters could make the youngsters understand the importance of a woman within a family. At least, they develop empathy for suffering women and would not replicate the same offensive behavior with their own spouses. Basically, these two poems are included in syllabus of senior secondary classes to develop a feeling of empathy among our youth towards women folk. Similar is the case of girl student appeared un-conspicuously in first stanza of poem. Again a negative picture of womanhood is drawn, which shows them in poor light. **'A Photograph'** demonstrates the longing of a woman for lost mother while she was solitary and no one for company. But her strength of mind let her to enjoy beautiful memories of childhood of her mother though she was missing her mother too much. The gist of poem is that women possess a spectacular balance between emotions and reality. They are very much sure of themselves to face adversities in life, thus a strong personality generally emerges.

In poems **'Keeping quiet'**, **'A Thing of Beauty'** and **'The Voice of the Rain'**, womanhood is celebrated and represented by 'Mother Nature'. Stable, innocent, beautiful, calm and composed yet strong - the qualities of 'Mother Nature' imbibed by womanhood are beautifully expressed through these poems. **'The Laburnum Top'** also falls in this category. The whole worldly affairs revolve around the feminine energy, which is fluid and cool. The feminine aspect of universal energy is always receptive.

But, it is matter of common observance that the environment the students have in their surroundings is majorly pro-male. There is every possibility for the youngsters to have a feel of aggressiveness and sense of domination towards their female counterparts, which is very natural to them. Such mindset leads to habit of coercion, which is harmful for healthy relations. But a teacher of literature could accomplish herculean task through the soft skill of discussing the poems while taking care of above discussed subtleties. Such practice opted by teachers opens great avenues for students, particularly male ones to develop a genuine understanding. It is very obvious and natural to inculcate a feeling of empathy among them, for the fairer gender. The role of a teacher is not merely restricted to delivery of content. Most important is to groom the students as sensible and responsible citizen of future. They would be able to understand that women are also human beings who have their own strength and weakness like their male counterparts. They deserve equivalent treatment by the family and society. They are also asset for nation. A teacher could play a significant role to create a positive image of women in upcoming generation with discussions. This conscious effort of teachers could usher in the whiff of freshness in otherwise stagnant and stale life of women, which is marred by preconceived

notions of society established since time unknown due to ignorance. It could aid in breaking the societal taboos and restrictions and bring forth new realms of freedom to women.

Through the detailed discussion of feminine qualities and the efforts they do for the people around them, is sure going to be game changer. As the concepts, notions and ideas about womanhood are not imposed by the teacher on anyone, they are simply shared through healthy discussion. So, possibility is there, that such positivity about women, their equivalent status and their unsung contribution may be imbibed by future MEN consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously.

Reference

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