

Intimate Oppression: A Study on Domestic Violence

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Abstract

The women writers of the current era allocate ample space in their works to discuss the problems of women, especially, the sufferings of women at home, which have been marginalized for centuries. In general, not only the society but the family also turns a woman into a victim. Gender disparity plays a critical role in placing a lot of challenges in front of women which result in deteriorating their physical and mental health. The women, though they are pushed towards a state of devastation, rather than raising their voice against the violence, remain silent as it occurs in the intimate circle. The oppression does not take place directly; society, man-made custom and defined traditional roles help men to oppress women indirectly. Oppression by the family members, gender disparity practiced at home and various forms of domestic violence and abuse complicate a woman's life. The present paper focuses on a few works of African American and Indian Women Writing and analyses the forms of domestic violence that deteriorate the life of women and victimize them.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Gender Disparity, Incessant Abuse, Oppression, Suppressed Emotions

1. Introduction

Women writing which present the veracity, not the interpreted, introduce an inimitable women world in literature. Long years spent in redefining the women's image, have slowly changed to represent the innermost chambers of women's psychological needs. The result, the women writers of the present scenario focus on the subterranean problems women face because of their family and by their own men. Most importantly, they talk about the inner sufferings which, earlier, they dare not to bring to the notice of the society. Home is a secured place for a human being, but, for some women, their home is a place of dismay. Dr. LEE Jong - Wook, Director-General of World Health Organization, at a study release in Geneva, says "women are more at risk from violence at home than in the street and this has serious repercussions for women's health"¹. The problems women face at home affect their physical as well as mental health; therefore, compared to the other types of violence, domestic violence easily moves the women into a victimized state. The present paper analyses the different forms of domestic violence, a marginalized violence, and

the losses related to it with the help of traumatic women characters.

2. African American Women Writing and Women Writing in India

African American women novelists of the twentieth century are the distinctive group within the whole of African American Literature who brought in rich and dynamic portraits of women. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor are the influential women writers who explore the themes like identity, self-revelation, bond between women and especially black woman's relationship with her men. In the same way, Indian women writers of the present era focus mainly on the problems that women face at home with their men. Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Shashi Deshpande share a similarity in focusing on the innermost problems women come across, especially because of the men at home. Domestic violence, the result of women being treated as secondary to men, is

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the common thread found in the works of all the above mentioned women writers. The prolonged suppressed state of women in the society makes the women writers to analyze the reason behind the victimization of women and as a result they state that women are assaulted and abused by their own men.

3. Rejection and Sexual Abuse

Rejection shown by spurning one's affection makes the one to go through a great ordeal in mind and affects the psyche of humans. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola, the eleven-year-old black girl around whom the story revolves, is dejected with almost everyone around her, except Claudia and Frieda, her friends. Pecola experiences rejection at her own family. Pecola's mother not only fails to protect Pecola but also neglects her, rejects her affection and love and fails to believe her words. The quarrels and fights of her parents disturb Pecola and in one such fight she prays to God "Please God... Please make me disappear" (*The Bluest Eye* 45)². The vacuum created in the mind of Pecola by the rejection of her family remains unfilled throughout her life. The cruelest form of domestic violence occurs in the life of Pecola when she is raped by her own father. Rejection and sexual abuse mar the life of Pecola than the racial discrimination shown by the society.

4. Incessant Abuse

Abuse at home spoils the life of many African American women. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), an epistolary novel, which focuses on the life of Celie, an uneducated fourteen-year-old black girl, who is raped and beaten by her father, pictures how the black women are abused by their own men. Celie endures sexual, physical, and emotional abuse at her home by her father and husband. Celie was raped by her step-father when she is fourteen year old and the physical violence is followed by an emotional violence. He says "You better not tell anybody, but God. It'd kill your mammy" (*The Color Purple* 1)³. The girl obeys and buries the horrendous experience within herself.

Celie's marriage to Albert does not help her to find improvement in the way she has been treated. Celie is abused by Albert for the fact that she is Celie and not Shug Avery, the one whom he wishes to marry. The result of the continuous maltreatment by men makes Celie to say "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (5)³. The domestic abuse, verbally, physically, sexually and emotionally, faced by Celie makes her not to feel like a human, she says "I make

myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (13)³. Celie, losing her 'self' and finding it difficult to equate her with the other human beings are the result of the continuous maltreatment takes place at her home.

5. Isolation

Isolation from one's own family is a part of domestic violence which leaves a severe mental illness in women. Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) presents the life of Mrs. Nedeeds which is completely a reversal of the life of the Nedeeds who are the 'veiled rulers' of the place Linden Hills. The wives are not given a significant role at home and they are expected to be the shadows of Nedeeds. Mrs. Nedeeds are not the adored wives of the Nedeeds, instead, they are the slaves of their husbands and are used only to deliver a child, especially a male. "Once this son is born, the wives are no longer necessary and are therefore erased from both the father's and the son's lives" (Costino 44)⁴. All the three are referred to only as Mrs. Nedeeds and even the son "had to pause a moment in order to remember his mother's first name" (*Linden Hills* 18)⁵. Mrs. Nedeeds are isolated from the society, friends and relatives and used just like "disposable machines for replicating men" (Homans 369)⁶. Home is a place of suffering for the three Mrs. Nedeeds and male supremacy and continuous negligence turn them into victims who lose their life at their own home.

6. Gender Disparity

Ammu is the most victimised among all the women presented in *The God of Small Things* (1997) written by Arundhati Roy. Ammu is a daughter of ruthless father and pitiable mother. Her life at Ayemenem, her native, presents her nothing but emptiness because of the restrictions and limitations made, especially as she is a girl. Deprived rights at home, including education, alienates Ammu from her own house and she waits around for a husband to taste freedom. The reason behind Ammu getting married is that "anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (*The God of Small Things* 39)⁷, her native. Alcoholic addicted husband and his atrocity in asking her to cater to the carnal needs of his English boss Mr. Hollick makes Ammu to go for divorce and she comes back to Ayemenem as an unwelcomed guest. She faces verbal abuse as a 'divorced daughter at home'. Though she works equally like Chacho, her brother, she doesn't have any rights to claim profit. She undergoes emotional torments throughout her life because of the indifference shown by the family members. The psychological trauma that she

undergoes makes her to search for love and she finds it in Velutha and again the family fails to support and protect her. The result she loses the man she loved and becomes completely isolated from the world and dies alone in a dirty hotel room. Ammu's life is emptied not because of the society, the people in her family, like, her father, brother, her husband and the other members of the family ruin her life by various forms of domestic violence.

7. Emotional Abuse and Marginalization

In countries like India, women are suppressed for a long period under the name of tradition and culture. The society, imposes a number of unwritten rules for women and the same make many women to lose their 'self' and take up the defined roles. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) talks about the silence of Jaya, an educated middle class woman, who leads the defined role 'dutiful wife'. Jaya is unable to perceive her dream of becoming a writer as her husband wishes her to be a submissive wife. Jaya's husband, Mohan cares for nothing except money, status and comforts. He expects his wife to be a woman who can care for him. In the seventeen years of married life she has not been consulted by her husband to make any decisions, but made to join with him when he is exiled for his malpractice in the office. Forgetting one's own identity and leading a life for others makes Jaya to think about her sanity and she compares her with her relative who is mentally sick: "Am I like going crazy like Kusum" (*That Long Silence* 125)⁸. The suppression Jaya faces in her life makes her to believe that "A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine" (147)⁸. There is no physical or sexual abuse, but emotional abuse and marginalisation that takes place indirectly at her home silences Jaya and makes her feel an emptiness in her life.

8. Gender Difference and Defined Traditional Role

Sudha, the protagonist of *Sister of My Heart* (1999), is a victim of a tradition bound family that treats woman not equal to man. As Simone de Beauvoir says "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman"⁹ (283) Sudha is brought up as a girl, according to the norms designed by the society. Her interests and aims are not considered and even education is denied to her when marriage is considered as important for a girl. The loss is irrevocable and in most part of her life

she is financially depended. The marriage does not bring her recognition; instead, she is treated like a subordinate to her husband and mother-in-law. She suffers humiliation and harassment in the house of her in-laws. The family expects Sudha to deliver a boy baby, but, when her mother-in-law comes to know it as a girl she forces Sudha to go for an abortion. Her husband, who should come forward to protect the child, remains silent. She asks him, "I need you to help me to protect our daughter. But he plucked my fingers off his arm as though I was speaking a strange language he'd never heard before and walked out of the house" (*Sister of My Heart* 260)¹⁰. Sudha is made to choose between her husband and unborn child. "If he doesn't want her (child), then I am not for him either" (268)¹⁰. Sudha saves the life of her daughter by losing her own life. In America also, where she moves to help her friend and sister Anju, Sudha is not unable to escape from the clutches of the harassment that takes place in the name of sentiments. In her relationship with Sunli, Anju's husband, she becomes a prey to the advances and seductions and moves out of the house in search of economic independence. Deprived education and freedom, negligence shown by her husband, and authoritativeness of her in-laws turn Sudha into a victim of domestic violence who suffers because of insecurity and unreliability.

9. Conclusion

The women characters taken for the analysis prove that home is not a secure place for them as domestic violence, in different forms, deteriorates their life. Alienation of one's own 'self', behavioral disorder, loss of physical and mental health, carrying a vacuum within one's own self, and a complete aversion towards the male gender are a few problems which arise because of domestic violence and they make women to come across irrecoverable losses. The problems women generally face in the society make them to face miseries and misfortunes but the problems women face at home move to the extent of turning them into victims.

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