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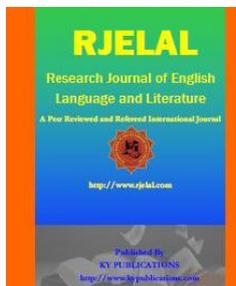
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CONSTRUCTION OF FEMINITY IN POILE SENGUPTA'S MANGALAM

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ABSTRACT

The current paper makes an attempt to highlight how Women especially in India face violence and exploitation all the three sixty five days in a year. Sometimes the exploitation is explicit and raw in the form of Physical violence, genital mutilation etc and at times it is very complex and sophisticated that it is hard to see with ones naked eyes and sometimes in the grossest manner which again makes it difficult to see with one's eyes. The play under study is "Mangalam" by Poile Sengupta and an endeavor is made to show that a soul suffers more in our society just because it dwells in a biological body that is gendered as female .It also tries to show that how a victim of a crime gets no end to its sufferings because the victim is a female and the culprit goes free again for the same reason because the crime that he had committed was against a female.

KEY WORDS: Rape, Identity crisis, sacrifice, hypocrisy.

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Women especially in India face violence and exploitation all the three sixty five days in a year in diverse forms, some are very complex and sophisticated that they are hard to see with ones naked eyes and sometimes in the most gross manner which again makes it difficult to see with one's eyes, its sources are also diverse it could vary from an altogether stranger on the road who treats her as an object meant for sexual pleasure, or from the nearest or closest members of her so called family or from our hypocrite society that treats her as an inferior being when compared with her male counterparts. The violence again is multi faceted: not merely physical, it is more often mental and emotional, subtle and indirect, often insidious and hard to recognize, presented in the guise of respect, idealization, concern, protectiveness or passion. The consequences and the repercussions of violence on

a women's psyche are deeply complex difficult to comprehend and overcome

Many authors, novelists, poets and dramatists have written about the painful pangs of violence that a woman has to face throughout her life and one such work is the play under study ie Poile Sengupta's "Mangalam", which talks about how a young and innocent girl is raped by her brother in law in her tender age , which means a sin is committed against her , and the irony is that it is not the culprit who gets punished but the victim herself who suffers all throughout her life and in the end is not left with any other alternative than to end her life .Poile Sengupta has raised a big question mark on the otherwise very revered social institution of India and that is Marriage, its purpose, the responsibilities, rights and duties that come along with it, and how gender determines and decides who shall get the privileges and who shall

bear the pain. The female characters in this play are not rebels like the ones we see in the plays of feminist writers like Shashi Deshpande but the only solution that they can find is quitting life itself because life ceases to exist in their otherwise dead bodies that have become cold with pain and absence of care and concern from the so called their halves.

Poile sengupta has used the technique of Play within a Play so as to create a platform of discussion and present her own views and dilemmas through the mouthpiece of the characters who go and watch the play, on the the questions and problems related with being born a girl and a woman and becoming a woman eventually and then entering the institute of marriage which looks very different from the inside and has no remote connection with the flowers and lights associated with it.

In a nutshell and on the surface the play deals with the unhappy marriage between Mangalam and Durai as there is absence of trust and understanding between the couple ,rather a misunderstanding that gets its roots in Duri's heart and soul which makes suspicious about Mangalam's character and loyalty towards him and this embitters him towards her , which in turn makes the already painful existence of Mangalam difficult to sustain and she eventually invited her own death by not taking her medicines and making her otherwise treatable disease chronic and deadly. how Mangalam's elder daughter faces domestic violence, her own rape at the hands of her brother in law, how her younger daughter elopes away with her lover, sexual exploitation and assaults that women of every age section and status face, extra marital affair etc are some other issues raised in the play which leaves the readers deeply touched and a conclusion is drawn the everything that happens the victim is always a woman.

The play starts by hinting at the general and trifling issues like the difference in treatment by a man with his wife and the daughter of the house that is his sister. Revathy who is Mani's wife often finds her husband very partial and always inclined towards his sister.when Mani points out that women waste too much of their time indulging in

petty issues , Revathy points out that it is always her who is pointed out and never her sister-in-law and she says:

REVTAHY: Yes ,that's what you say when it comes to your wife. But what about your

Sister then Everything changes.Ayyo! poor girl.(p95)

But what we need to learn from here is that lets not always see this as jealousy, intrigue or comparison that the daughter-in-law does with her sister-in-law but she also craves to get the same attention, Care, focus of her husband, she wants the same soft corner for herself in her husbands heart. She longs for the same love and protection that she used to get at her father's house now in her husband's house too, and she only has her husband to look up to for this. So if the men understand this and strike the right balance the women of the house will be able to co exist in the house harmoniously.

Then the dramatist moves ahead and touches a throbbing issue and that is marriage. She shows how marriage is not a meeting of two souls rather a suffocating and binding rope which can even strangle one of the partners to death.Thangam who is Manglam's sister comes to the house of moaning and makes a scathing remark on Dorai when she says:

THANGAM:.....he has been like theis since the day he tied the thali around the poor Girl's neck!

Thali it was more like a rope.

The rope here has a deep symbolic significance which tells the tale of a woman's sufferings, her loss of freedom, her slavery and loss of identity the moment she gets married. a similar thread of thought can be seen in Shashi Deshpande's Binding Wine where she talks about women wo are well educated and working but cannot help facing the mental and emotional turmoil at the hands of their husbands. poile sengupta in Mangalam also shows how Mangalam (a married woman) was afraid of her husband, how she always felt throttled and suffocated. And the point to be noted here is that this rigid society of ours which treats women as inferior to men in the name of religion but how can they forget that their own religion also asks women

to respect their husbands and never teaches them to be "afraid".

THANGAM:....she was afraid of you .My poor sister .she was afraid of you. Don't I Now it? You are a Raakshasan .A Kaliyugan Raakshasan.(p99).

This exploitation and subjugation is not only confined to women of one country rather the women fraternity shares a common platform of this repression and exploitation. a strange yet true statement made by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her essay " Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse", wherein she says that "the homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on basis of biological essentials, but rather on basis of secondary sociological anthropological universals." And also that "women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of shared oppression."

If we sit back and ponder as to why a woman feels so weak and helpless in her husband's house ,then probably most of us shall feel that because she is the one who leaves her house and joins a new house and a new family wherein everybody is new to her, so probably this exchange is the reason of her weakened position ,but the reality is not this it is not the exchange that weakens her position rather the mode of exchange that does this. Levi Strauss's theory of Kinship structures (as a system of exchange of women)states that "Exchange does not include or has implications of subordinating women ie women are not secondary or subordinate because of the fact that they will be exchanged rather because of the modes of exchange and the values attached to these modes."

Cutrufelli in "Women Of Africa", focuses (about Bemba- a Zambian Matrilocal) on marital Exchange before and after colonization which shows Bemba women to be victims of the effects of western Colonisation. before Colonisation it was the Man who used to go and become a member of the girl's family , resides there , gets food in return of the services he offers to the family, this continues till the girl reaches puberty, and physical relationship grows in accordance with the girl's physical maturity. it is only after the Initiation ceremony that the sexual act of intercourse is

sanctioned. So we see that the women were quite safe in these times but now after colonization , things have taken a three sixty degrees turn , now the man takes away the girl with him with money offered by the girl's family with a lifelong contract of servitude which the girl has to abide by .so today the woman stands all alone , weak and dependent .(Cutrufelli "Women of Africa".p.43) to add to this Elizabeth Cowie Made a very interesting observation and that is:

"women as women are not located within the family. Rather it is in the family , as a result of kinship structures, that the women as women are constructed, defined , within and by the group Poile Sengupta not only informs us about the prevalent sad condition of the women in our society but she also keeps creating awareness about her rights so as to inform the readers of the same. Mani's words said as a counter response to Dorai's attack are an example of this:

MANI: This is my mother's house. It was a part of her dowry. I have more of a right to this house than you have.(p.100)

Here an important issue of maternal property is raised which talks about the children's right over mother's property then be it a girl child or a male child.

Similarly she talks about the hopes dreams and aspiration that parents have from their children, boy or girl , they want to see them coming out with flying colors, but Sengupta here gains drops a word of caution where she mouths her opinion through the conversation between Thangam And Dorai.

DORAI: my wife wanted Chitra to go for higher studies. I will see my Daughter becomes an IS officer.

THANGAM: And what happened when my sister wanted to study ? And when Usha got that scholarship? Did you allow them to study?.....(p100)

Now this conversation raises two issues, firstly a woman who comes to your house after marriage is never seen as a girl with her own little hopes, dreams and aspirations, she is forced to forget and give up her own individual self, her dreams no matter however much capable she is to fulfill them

on her own, as was the case with Mangalm . She was studious hard working and efficient and would have easily cracked the IAS exams , but she could never fulfill her dream because she was never allowed to tread this path by her husband. Secondly their daughter Usha who was an equally bright student was not allowed to pursue her dreams of qualifying the competitive exams, despite the fact that she was a scholarship holder. We see such things in our society as well where it is not the dreams or aspirations of our daughters that really matter , rather the daughters and for the matter even sons are just used to take the family name high, it is for the sake of the family honor and repute that the children are made to sit for the competitive exams or other such prestigious exams and rarely it is for the child's own growth and welfare and if they see the family honor and repute dropping in with some grand marriage proposal then why to waste time and money on education , this is what most of the parents would think especially when it is their daughter in question. This is exactly what happened in Usha's case who was not allowed to gain enlightenment or independence by pursuing her studies because Dorai lurked at the marriage proposal that came from an affluent and so called upper class section of the society. And what followed was not a bed of roses rather a never ending tale of pain and suffering, which finally led to the crumbling down of the marriage, leaving Usha entirely lost in the maze of life. Had she been given the freedom to study and develop her career and gain independence life would have been much different for her.

The chorus plays a very important part in the play and the words uttered by them are not only touching but summarize the way women exist in our society and how far is man from understanding her.

FEMALE VOICE: Women die many kinds of death;

Men do not know this.

For them, when a woman cooks

And arranges flowers in her hair

And makes place in the bed

She is alive.

But a woman can smile

She can pin flowers in her hair

And arrange a red hot dot on her forehead

And make place in the bed

Because her husband is alive.(p102)

Here the playwright talks about marriage, emotional distancing and difference in perspectives of the two i.e. male and female who are tied together in the marriage. We see how one of them is perfectly a human and the other just a attractive setting of flesh and bones. a girl who is always taught to wear a smile real or fake to keep the atmosphere of the house auspicious and pleasant ,practices these preaching's in her life smiling over her pain and distress ,she is taught to keep herself ornamented and decorated for her husband and ever ready to be served on the platter as per the appetite of her husband and this poor girl learns and follows her lessons so religiously that the people around her including her second half fail to know her, to understand her, to comprehend her fears , to acknowledge her pain. For them if she is cooks and dresses up she is alive, but they never realize how many times she dies to keep them happy. And the irony is that most of the times the woman under this so lively and pleasant cover is actually dead. This was exactly the case with Mangalam who had put on a pretence of being a happily married woman and Dorai also believed it never knowing that his wife was dying a slow death every day.so the men like Dorai fail to see the dark and remote recesses of a woman's mind and heart.

Mahadevi Verma has very rightly said in her paper "The Hindu Woman's Wifehood";

"A Woman is forced to live as an exhibition of a man's wealth and as a means of his recreation"

The pain of a woman does not end here, the mental and physical exploitation that she has to face in the dearth of or name of dowry is endless. in the play we hear that a girl like Usha who is academically very bright and efficient in the household chores, one who got the proposal from her now in-laws, her family gave a lot in the name of dowry and still keep dropping in gifts is tortured physically and mentally by her in laws to the extent that she is forced to leave her house and come back to her maternal house.

KAMALA: so? The pain is the same. Anyway, now they are making life miserable for Usha. In spite of the sacks and sacks of gifts that go to the house from here. I don't know why they got the girl married so quickly. She was only in college....(p106). Mahadevi verma in her paper talks about the mental conditioning of a girl's parents in our society that how for them the most important thing is to send off their daughter to another house irrespective of any other thing, even if she is most unwilling to go ahead with it. She says "the girl may be afflicted with leprosy, T.B. or any other illness but to deprive her of the responsibilities of marriage would be a disgrace for the family! Whether she is physically incapable or mentally unprepared for married life, she has no other means of livelihood other than marriage. In essence bribery, lies and all other means fair or foul are used to arrange a marriage for her, because that is the only means of existence for her subsistence. Though suitability or unsuitability for marriage of a man is also not seen but then marriage is a source of pleasure for man not livelihood."

Whereas the fact is that a man is so dependent on his wife for a hassle free day to day living, for getting his household chores done and for raising the so called his children, that marriage should be considered as a source of livelihood for him and not the woman who provides all the services free of cost. But then who has made these males such a privileged and prestigious class, is the big question and the answer is simpleit is us, we, yes we the girls and our families.

Even when these men show no inclination or interest towards marriage, they get surrounded by dozens of fathers of girls who are of a marriageable age, they run around the prospective groom showcasing the talents and assets of their daughters openly whom until now they had kept under veils, and the tale doesn't end here these young boys are also offered a lot of wealth and riches coupled with butter dipped flattery and still the fathers keep their heads bowed down while handing over their talented and beautiful gentle daughters. Mahashweta Devi has rightly raised a question here "How else is such a marriage to be regarded, except as an affront to womanhood"

There is a famous Russian saying "Beat your fur and you will make it warmer, beat your wife and you will make her wiser". In Russia the bride's father used to gift the groom with a new whip as a symbol of the transferred authority over the girl, i.e, gives him all the power and authority to tame his daughter according to his own ways with the help of the whip is things don't work smoothly. This whip would adorn the bedside wall of the newlywed couple. So we all can well imagine that if we as parents and guardians of the girls would treat these men like this then the plight of our daughters will never change for better.

Dorai does the same job of a traditional Indian father, where he lurks at the marriage proposal that comes from a wealthy family. Without enquiring about the family or the boy he qualifies the proposal as a fit match for his daughter Usha and the qualifying criteria here is money. He says:

DORAI:Do you know what their annual turnover is, you illiterate woman? Do you know what my son-in-law earns? What do you know.....(p113)

THANGAM: And her mother-in-law sleeps in the room with them(p113)

THANGAM: And my poor girl gets nothing to eat. Such a big house, such a big kitchen and the girl is given Kanji water(p113)

So we see here how Dorai's only criteria for a suitable groom fails terribly here and how Usha suffers everyday despite of getting married into a rich family. This points towards another striking feature of the society where they believe in getting bright girls from low income strata families so that they can dominate them and rule over them throughout their lives.

Poile Sengupta also touches a very sensitive issue here and that is of widowhood. No matter however much the times have changed but the size of the religious and social stigma that is pasted on the forehead of the widow has not changed much. Thangam herself is a widow and her presence is not welcomed by Dorai at his house and the words of advice given by Thangam to her sister Mangalam speak aloud how forbidden it is to be a widow.

THANGAM:My sister used to cry everydayI used to say don't cry, don't

cry on Friday evenings, you will become a widow, don't let that happen. it's the worst fate for a woman. (p106)

Gita Mehta's "Rer the death of RAJ" is a novel that highlights the issues of Hindu women in pre-independent and Post independent India in a very realistic manner. the novel is divided into four Books—Balmer, Sirpur, Maharani and Regent. the fourth book Regent talks about the tragic plight of the protagonist Jaya, who becomes a widow after the death of her Husband king Pratap. She is declared unclean and upto 13 days she keeps away from the kingdom away from her only son. "your mother cannot be with you at this time. She is unclean" (p310) her widowhood is thus a curse on her. She is treated thus:

"there were no bangles to be slipped onto her wrists, no long Minutes to be spent on combing the thick hair that had once fallen to her knees, no sindoor to mark the circle of matrimony on her forehead. she did not even have to cover her cover her shaven head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky. (p312)

so we see how the sufferings are intensified by a multifold just because one is a female. Be it her dreams, aspirations, security, dignity, self esteem, self of belonging, love and care everything is shattered because she is a female. Pain for her only aggravates, justice seems far fetched and nobody can come to her rescue other than her ownself. So the woman of today has to learn to stand for herself, to become strong both mentally and emotionally, she should have the strength to stand against this hypocrite society for her rights. If Mangalam would have dared to stand for herself and not accepted her father's decision of hiding the rape incident and quietly marrying a man who had no compatibility to be married to her, she could have changed her fate. She should have voiced her complaint against her brother-in-law for raping her and should have got him punished. This right and timely decision could have saved her life and also her daughter Usha's life too.

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