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Painting the horizon 'Pink' and 'Black': A Comparative Study of Shirin Gol and Okonkwo's resistance to the accepted hegemony of 'normalcy'

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Abstract

The deviancy of 'differently able' from the social thread of 'normalcy' has been untwined by the so called divine providence of the latter. While the deference could be in different forms, it manifests itself to its profundity in the "second class citizens" of 'women' and 'blacks' from time immemorial throughout the world. Hence this paper will look at two instances from these archetypes that bear the burden of social responsibility to bifurcate from the accepted hegemony of the nuanced power structure. By means of two magnum opus of completely divergent geographical locations and genres it will try to bring together these two archetypes to share a common space where they had been outcasted as 'disabled' in the thesaurus. With Siba Shakib's "Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep" and Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" this paper will try to paint the horizon pink and black with an esemplastic study of these variations in the form of social inequality faced by the agency of 'Shirin Gol' in Shakib's narrative and 'Okonkwo' in Achebe's. Both the characters takes on two different paths to find their own way through resistance and struggle against the predetermined destiny for acquiring a place not coloured by other dominating factor's supremacy.

Keywords: Differently able, Normalcy, Women, Blacks, Self constructed identities.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the shifting dynamics of disability studies has come a long way and now it is easier defining the field of study than disability itself. The accepted understanding in the social thread of "hegemonic normalcy" has created certain definitions and meanings which is part of the socially constructed framework stimulated by people's thoughts, words and the setting

making it a part of a larger historical, social and cultural scenario of defining human experiences. Since its introduction in 1990's into the fields of humanities and cultural studies, disability studies has construed the representations of people clinically considered offbeat from the "able-bodied" and are designated as "other." In some later developments, many critics also came to argue that disability is more of a social construct also encompassing the manifestation of the other in the cultural dimension, "[D]isability studies and disability culture also, therefore, aim at breaking down the perception of disability as personal tragedy, pathology, or deficiency. Some in disability culture and activism view disability as a source of pride, some as a form of biodiversity" (Magana 106). Hence in such a context this paper aims to study the representation of two such constructed socially attenuate minority groups, namely "the African blacks" and "the women" as socially infirm in reference to two particular texts, Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe and Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep by Siba Sakib.

The settings of both the texts is geographically variegated, Africa and Afghanistan, but the affliction of adversities constricting them as "doubly oppressed" has social ramifications and infers as "second class citizens" in a latent way. In Things Fall Apart, the primary character, Okonkwo has his own hamartia haunting him throughout in addition to the colonial despotism. On the other hand, in Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep, the readers witnesses the oppression of women in a war torn country through the itinerary of the protagonist Shirin-Gol. Now according to Elizabeth Barnes, belonging to these categories doesn't have a negative impact on the overall quality of life which is difficult to agree with. She says, "[Y]es, disability is the sort of thing that makes life harder, but from that we cannot conclude that it will have a negative impact on overall quality of life. Many features

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— gayness, femaleness, etc. — make life harder, but we would be loath to conclude that the presence of such features entails that anyone who possesses them will have a lower quality of life than they would have had had they lacked them” (Barnes 342). If what can be called an oversight on part of Barnes is restricting the meaning of quality of life which could have discursive formations. One oppressed female in Afghanistan under the regime of both patriarchy and war and one ‘black’ man in Africa haunted by the fear of seeming weak and colonial exploitation would certainly have cataclysmic impediment in the overall quality of life. And how both these characters reacted to these life impediments is a matter of “adaptive preference” which again was used by Barnes as a way of coping mechanism for the disabled. While Shirin-Gol was able to accept her disability of living in such a war torn, patriarchal society and led her resistance movement by being fierce in the battle of life struggles, Okonkwo couldn’t consecrate being part of a society dominated by the white culture over his Igbo bearings and committed suicide. Hence making the method selective in its appeal to endure the sub optimization of these normative categories.

The inherent and inevitable tragedy in Things Fall Apart, the death of the hero, compels to think of the groundbreaking essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she questions the universal percepts to scrutinize different cultures based on the Western “civilized” framework. During the invasion of Africa, the attempt to establish white supremacy over the native cultures is what triggered man like Okonkwo, unlike others, who couldn’t accept the imposed hegemony of the “new normal”. Harold Bloom in his book has commented on the death of Okonkwo saying, “[I]f British Colonial regime had not driven Okonkwo to self-slaughter, then his own people would have done the job” (Bloom 02).

Standing firm in the face of adversities was upheld by Shirin-Gol in Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep with consistency and continued mobility to seek shelter for her family from military upheavals and men who are waiting for every chance to devour and assault women. In search of long lasting peace, Shirin-Gol migrated to mountains, valleys, cities of Iran and Pakistan only to face some gruesome incidents of rape and abduction to keep her family alive, with no sense of justice from any institution. Spivak in her essay have also very particularly talked about the condition of women in many

countries where their experiences of exploitation and violation just gets submerged into the unknown, she says “Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected [. . .] both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 82- 83). Therefore the women in Afghanistan during and even before the Soviet Invasion were under oppression and so much of negligence that their life was always in a precarious position subterfuged with obnoxious masks of compliance to inhuman atrocities.

Okonkwo in Achebe’s text has three wives and that is a part of the Igbo culture, more wives meant more respect in the society and more power. And his constant urge to supersede by virtue of his ‘masculinity’ which is part of the masculine tradition of Umuofia defined its stand among the nine villages to be the strongest. These cultural formations made him grapple with the fear of seeming feminine and made him disabled in the face of transmutation of the chain of constant metamorphosis in society. Very radical in his approach, his obstinacy composed of protests filled with rage and prepare for a fight which his community was not ready to undertake against the white colonialists intruders. His seven year exile as a result of a misfired gunshot and killing a man forecasts the events that followed in the novel. Towards the end of it, he massacred a messenger at will to mark the start of a war which gained no solidarity and seeing a failure to instigate a revolution to fight for safeguarding their culture one last time, he took to self- slaughter. When there is a threat to own culture the cognitive sensitivities as such are natural in people but if they are making one inadvertently steadfast so much so that one is willing to go to extents of killing oneself then thinking of it as something that could be compared with congenital disorder wouldn’t be farfetched. Okonkwo’s integrity and believes made him lose sight of the larger picture to act on impulse than intellectual stimuli and this was one of the core problems associated with him.

In almost all the cultures, the most supposedly significant part of a woman’s life is considered to be marriage and it is no different in Afghanistan with more catastrophic impact. Born as a woman itself acquiesces the disability of giving marriage the priority with no choice

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whatsoever involved in many cultures, traditions like child marriages, dowry, sati and forced marriages are testimony to the same. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie expressed her concern and was found saying, “Still, I was struck by this. Because I am female, I’m expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important” (Adichie 15). That is why when we read, Shirin-Gol in Shakib’s text had to marry to pay off her brother’s gambling debt, it was not surprising, but definitely a grave matter of concern. How is a woman who is forced into an alliance because of being a liability to the family not called disabled? A woman who has to be forcefully mute in what is ironically and supposedly the most significant decision of her life is to be considered functional in a society. Even her daughter, Noor Aftab had to remarry a Talib by whom she was utterly disgusted, after her first husband’s death. It is almost as if the will or consensus has nothing to do in the wedlock determining the course of a woman’s life and where her selfhood lies.

What Okonkwo and the British Colonialist invaders both shared was the belief of ‘Ethnocentrism’ but with regard to their own cultures. Achebe has drawn a clear picture of how Igbo society functioned from hundreds of years before the arrival of the British Missionaries, and established the significance of institutions like tribal councils which settled disputes and brought order to Igbo land. Moreover, he talked about the customs and traditions in detail including the kinship with the domain of the ancestors and the religious bearing of believing in more than one god which also adhered to the philosophy of having their personal ‘chi’ or gods. Hence, with the coming of the Missionaries both the cultures were at the crossroads and in utter conflict about everything they believed in and when that happened it was Okonkwo lacking in and the Missionaries having the collective support and manipulative power which triggered the downfall of the hero and with him, his culture in the hands of the new White Masters.

The normative categorizing of being a “black” or a “woman” has been like the “cripple” Leonard Kriegel talked about in his seminal essay “Uncle Tom and Tiny Tim” where he can’t think of himself beyond the enigma of being perceived in a world he does not belong. The “hegemonic normal” has defined the parameters of omniscient existence by means of their percepts in total ignorance or deliberate refusal to see what lies beyond the

abstraction. On being suggested by a friend to get a store of greeting card or something similar, Kreigel comments how this was not the first time people deciding the heading of his life assuming his inability to take autonomy of his actions on his own, “As a man of the world, who did not need to move beyond abstraction, he assumed that he had every right in the world to decide what the cripple or the Negro wanted. He knew what I “should do” because he possessed two good legs and I didn’t. Not being a cripple makes one an expert on the cripple, just as not being black makes one an expert on the Negro. It was another example of the normal deciding how that which dared not to be normal should live” (Kreigel 429). And though the lived experience of both are completely different, the women and the blacks are as vulnerable as the cripple, exhausted of being told of their role in the society and how their lives will always be in the backseat and would be at the mercy of the conveniences of the “normal” people.

As research into the field of disability studies have enhanced its scope, the disability scholars needs to stress on the multiplicity of identities and try to provide a more nuanced understanding of race and gender as a disability which simply cannot be ignored and needs to be fore grounded. As a social recluse, not thought worthy of making their own decisions, both women and blacks as in the case of Okonkwo and Shirin-Gol feels socially paralyzed. The need to bring Christianity to “civilize” the Igbo people by the means of the “normal white civilizational strategy” and change their ways of living and Shirin-Gol’s marriage and constant struggle to protect herself and her family is testimony to the same. Any kind of disability accounts for vulnerability making the life of the individuals difficult in parameters defined within the normative structure. The graveness of the shoes the protagonists were in is implied right at the outset through the titles. On the one hand, there is going to be a society where things are falling apart and there is a country which is so melancholic that god only comes to weep over there and that advocates the readers to remember that the character’s lives are not going to be a bed of roses and hints about the upcoming gloomy settings of the texts. The fact that the story of one of the greatest man in Umuofia is just a paragraph or so in the District Commissioner’s book highlights the insignificance of an identity less African man written in a language that is not theirs is important to note, “Not only is the prominent Okonkwo stripped of his individual identity as he is transformed into a nameless African in a Western text, but the particularities of the

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sophisticated Igbo culture, which the novel has taken pains to elaborate, are also erased as they are lumped together in the essentialist category of primitive tribes” (Snyder 178) and hence marking anything beyond the enigma of the white culture to be out of place in pursuit.

The pillars on which a society stands and moves forwards depends on taking all its positives and negatives together and creating a balance out of it. In Achebe’s text, he had not shown any one culture to be having an upper hand then the other one, both are with its series of rosy glosses and pitfalls but when one culture thinks itself to be superior and totally dismiss the other, trying to take over, there is a problem. Every culture has its own set of traditions and customs which make it what it is in any date. The blacks as part of a culture thought to be barbaric and in need of Civilization accounted to protect their own integrity failing which man like Okonkwo felt threatened and led his resistance movement till he could. Women feeling entrapped in a society filled with violence and harassment in a male dominated world isn’t much pleasing an experience either with different but equally traumatizing ramifications, making them equally unfunctional, upon this Roland Wall states, “Each disabled individual is different. No two disabilities are alike, and no two personalities are alike. The combination of the two as well as whatever other subgroups a person belongs to - makes for a "class" of people who are unique individuals. In addition, societal reactions to different kinds of disabilities vary so widely that each disabled person faces his or her particular types of prejudices” (Wall 239).

To conclude, with the coming of twentieth and twenty first century, the attributes of disability studies have also changed. Along with the medical model of disability, the social model has gained diligent attention. Even those with impairment are at the peril of facing social hazards like exclusion and loathing and hence the ones who are already at the bottom of the social ladder needs hardly any abstraction to define its stand to be classified as disabled, women and blacks have been the flag bearers of this category since a long lost time and Okonkwo and Shirin-Gol are the mouthpieces for the so called sub-optimal lives, that matters no less than the mainstream “normal” lives.

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