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Contextualizing gender: a Comparative Study of *Speak* and *The Round House*

Abstract:

Feminist discourse has gone a long way to reject any fixed categories or definitions for itself. While keeping its interest in gender issue, modern day feminists reject any major generalization at the cost of ignoring diversity of various groups and identities. In this scenario, postmodern feminism has become a practice to contextualize every gender problematic to understand the subtle nuances and deeper layers behind the question of women's identity and freedom. Present paper sheds light in these different layers by comparing two different situations both of which involve a rape of central woman protagonist. While one is the case of a teenage girl from white American society, another one is a married woman from Native American culture. While rape brutally affects both the women, there are differences in the mechanisms and workings of this exploitation.

Keywords: Post-modern feminism, Native American, White American, Victimization, Alienation

1. Introduction

Postmodern feminism complicates any fixed generalization regarding gender issue. Present feminist criticism "has become a varied field of neglected debate rather than an agreed position" (Birch, 245) Feminism is not about "women but recognizing how modern discourse on gender produce human beings as exclusively 'men' or 'women'....feminism is not about even gender alone, but about understanding how gender is complicated by class (as in the case of domestic servants); by caste and by queer politics (as in the case of gay men, *hijras* and intersex identities) (Menon, 208). In this context, present paper aims at the comparative study to highlight the contextual understanding of women issue. For the purpose, two texts are taken for a detailed

analysis as primary texts: *Speak* written by Laurie Halse Anderson and, the other is *The Round House* written by Louise Erdrich.

First written in 1999, *Speak* is a very popular and critically acclaimed novel by the New York Times- bestselling American author, LaurieHalse Anderson. The novel was the National Book Award finalist. It very effectively tackles the complicate issue of a teenager's rape and consequences. As such, the novel, with its contemporary subject matter, touched the hearts of many youngsters in U.S.A who have gone through experiences not very different from that of the central character, Melinda.

Another novel that I have picked up for my research, *The Round House*, by Louise Erdrich,also revolves around the episode of rape and its consequences. Written in 2012, *The Round House* is also a critically acclaimed one and has won US National Book Award. Erdrich has further complicated her subject matter by setting it in Native American context. Now this very presence of Native American reality makes the treatment of rape entirely different from what it is in *Speak*, the latter one speaks of what rape is for a white American teenager.

Both these novels are an authentic and moving expression of horrid reality of rape as well as male domination. Set in different contexts, these novels invite a very interesting comparative study to analyze the position of women in different contexts.

2. *Speak*: A Teenager's Struggle Through Trauma and Depression After Rape

Speak is a story of young teenage girl who enters her fresh year in college with a heavy secret hidden on her heart. Over the summers, she had destroyed the party of her friends by calling the police. She, however, failed to disclose the reason for calling the police. She had been, actually, raped by her present college senior Andy Evans.Her friends now blame her for spoiling the party for some vested interests and they have distanced them from her. This includes her best friend Ivy who is her classmate now but doesn't talk to her.

From the inception, the novel highlights the alienated situation of the central protagonist. Melinda Sordino is a pariah. "I am an outcaste," as she feels deep inside (4). Each of her friends from previous class avoid her. Melinda had screwed up the party by calling cops. Everyone hates her after this. Why did she called the cops? Why did she screwed up? She wants to tell her friend Rachel all that had happened that night in the party, but she fails to do that. Her throat dries up. As if she had engulfed some poison which has now stuck inside her throat and stops her from speaking.

Interestingly, Melinda stops speaking altogether. “Every time I try to talk to my parents or teacher, I sputter or freeze” (50-51). The fact is that Melinda did not admit the truth of rape even to herself. As a result, whenever her assaulter comes in front of her, she is filled with the vague feelings of anguish but doesn’t clearly understand them. She prefers to altogether ignore/avoid the situation.

Melinda’s performance in school deteriorated as she was emotionally oppressed by the presence of people around whom she did not want to confront. She did not want to confront people because she was not ready to come terms to the facts of her rape. Her response to people around comes to a naught, bringing her down to D grade in almost all the subjects except Art where she unconsciously gives expression to the horrid reality she was living through deep inside. Thus, a bone structure with dead turkey meat becomes the expression of heart ranching horror and excruciating pain. She gets an A for art. Melinda has suddenly become a mute child. Her parents don’t pay much attention until they feel humiliated by school committee over Melinda’s declining performance in studies and her increasing absence from classes.

Melinda feels comfortable only in the presence of her Art teacher Mr. Freeman who encourages her Art. He encourages Melinda all the time: “Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting. Be the tree”(153). Other than the Art class, her friend Heather occupies her time. Heather, however, wants to use the company of Melinda to gain popularity, and Melinda was least interested in popularity. As a result, she starts avoiding even Heather.

Melinda’s isolation gives her a unique perspective to view things and feminist spirit starts developing inside her. She thus comments upon the paintings of Picasso: “Why not draw naked guys, just to be fair? Naked woman is art, naked guys a no-no, I bet. Probably because most painters are men” (119). Perhaps her alienated position makes her see things from a distance and this gives her a critical perspective over things. Feminism thus takes shape. She is full of wisdom and internal humor. “Every single day, someone asks Mr. Stetman why we have to learn algebra. You can tell this causes him great personal pain.”(38)

Melinda has been drawn in stark comparison to a boy in her class, David Petrakis who is full of arguments and explanations. He has everything that Melinda fails or her social situation takes away from her: Voice. Melinda takes inspiration by the photograph of Maya Angelou as well. With time her feminist spirit starts giving her strength and she starts viewing even her father and mother with critical eyes. She writes about her father thus: “He gets to work with his feet up. He

gets to laugh with his friends on the phone. He gets to call out for lunch. I think he deserves to be in the basement folding shirts and helping mother”(74)

Finally, by the end of the novel, Melinda gains necessary strength to voice her trouble. She reclaims her friendship with Ivy and even defends herself when confronted by her assaulter Andy Evans. She, thereby, gains popularity in school as Andy Evans had assaulted many other girls as well who had also adopted silence as a mechanism to avoid the direct horror of rape. “The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up. Me: “Let me tell you about it.”” (198)

The novel, thus, ends in a positive note!

3. *The Round House: Rape and its Consequences for Native American Family*

Just like *Speak*, *The Round House* also starts with the moment of crisis. Here, the victim of rape is a woman called Geraldine who has been brutally raped by a white male Linden Lark. Lark had tried to kill her but she somehow managed to escape. She received brutal injuries and had to go through surgery before recuperating. Her child, Joe and husband, Bazil, who was also a tribal judge, tried hard to know the identity of the assaulter which Geraldine refused to disclose. Geraldine feared the powerful position of white Linden Lark and the fact that he could do more harm to the family.

Bazil is a tribal judge, yet even after knowing the identity of the assaulter, he failed to do anything against him because the laws were not in the favor of their community. Geraldine initially buried the secret of her assaulter inside her, along with facing the other physical and psychological brutalities administer by rape. As the writer poignantly puts: “Some warm part of her was gone and might never return”. (227)

Writer has focused more on Native American context rather than on female position here. Though, female oppression is evident in Linda Lark, who was abandoned by the Lark family because of some physical deformity by birth; Sonja, who left the profession of a prostitute and married only to be used by other men and suspected by her husband; and MaylaWolfskin, whom Linden Lark killed because of jealous.

Color politics and prejudice has been reflected on in the novel. Linden confronts Joe directly and has no fear of law even committing such brutal crime of murder of MaylaWolfskin after rape

and of the rape of Geraldine. Joe narrates what Linden said thus: “He said we have no standing under the law for a good reason and yet have continued to diminish the white man and to take his honor. I could be rich, but I’d rather have shown you, both of you, what you really are. I won’t get caught, he said... He nudged me with his shoe. I know as much law as a judge. Know any judges? I have no fear. Things are the wrong way around, he said. But here in this place I make things the right way around for me. The strong should rule the weak. (189) Linden adds: “Even an Indian boy like you can have a good family and get that sort of start, I guess. And maybe it will let you draw even with a white kid of your own age, you know? Who doesn’t have a good family” (200)

When laws and social structure was not in favor, it had become imperative for the community to find support in each other. Joe, Cappy, Zelia, Zack, Angus, Mooshum, Aunt Clemence, Sonja all were there to help each other as community members. Community links and culture is highlighted by the story of Nanapush and by references to windigo and ojibwe medicine etc.

By the end of the novel, Joe, with the help of his friends managed to kill Linden. Joe had to, however, bear the trauma of managing such murder. He finds a stable and strong support in his family and community that sustains every individual member in the time of their crisis. The novel ends with the comment: “We passed over in a sweep of sorrow that would persist into our small forever. We just kept going”. (371)

In both the novels, *Speak* and *The Round House*, horror in the victims of rape zipped them. In first case, however, this is the horror of facing the reality and shame associated with the incident of rape in an elite society where social image is a big deal, in case of the Native American victim, it is the horror of impending danger and more risks of domination by powerful community.

4. Conclusion

While in case of Melinda Sordino, it was largely the psychological inferiority and shame induced by her rape that worked for her victimization, thereby impairing her normal, healthy living and caused alienation in her; in case of Geraldine, it was mainly the fear of further exploitation and injury to the family by powerful white male that intensified her victimization. In case of Melinda, it was mainly an individual’s agency and struggle who finally came up over her oppression by the final act of opening up and speaking; Geraldine is mainly dependent upon the support of her family which includes her husband and son, both of whom are further helped by the

larger Chippewa community. The sense of community belonging is, thus, strong in Geraldin's case. The paper evinces that a general/universal theory of gender is complicated by differing contexts and identities inside which women is pitted against her fixed and oppressive categorization.

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