

Breaking the Myth, Listening to the 'Unheard' in Campus Fiction with Special Reference to Rita Joshi's Novella the Awakening and Srividya Natarajan's Novel No Onions nor Garlic

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Abstract

Since time immemorial the status of women in society has been contested. She was always pushed to the margins, given a secondary position, considered as the inferior and the 'other'. As civilization developed and the importance of education progressed, the role of a woman has changed and at present there is a remarkable transformation discernible in their lifestyle. It can be considered as a myth if one says that she is marginalized in a patriarchal society. There is a general opinion that the women are under-represented in any given field. It is believed that there is gender imbalance in relation to the distribution of workload, promotions or their representation in academic bodies. It is perceived that their views and experiences are never considered when taking policy decisions and the power games played on them undermine their status. This paper aims to explore whether women, especially the female faculty in academic campuses, have a voice of their own to be on par with their male counterparts and also focuses on the factors contributing to the exploitation and discrimination which occurs in such spaces; in particular, how women battle it out. There are many novels where the women writers assert their views that women have their own rights and freedom and they don't lack self-esteem. To understand the concept of women's liberal thinking and assertiveness counterchecked by the system of indoctrinated exploitation, the paper deals with two novels written by women novelists. Miss JR in Rita Joshi's novella *The Awakening* and Dr. Laurentia Arul and Jiva in Srividhya Natarajan's novel *No Onions nor Garlic* prove that the multiple voices of women are heard and that they are not languishing in the space occupied by them.

KEYWORDS: Status of women, civilization and education, Myth, Marginalized, under-represented, voice of their own, misconceptions and multiple voices, Power politics.

The two great Indian epics, Mahabharat and Ramayan portray that the cause of all destruction as owing to the role played by women. In Mahabharat, one can discern that the great-war occurred due to the heroine Draupati's laughter at Duryodhan when he slips and falls down during his visit to his cousins. He sought revenge and then the rest of the history is well known. So also, in the case of Karna, the great warrior in Mahabharat could not be defeated by anyone, and who was loyal to his friend Duryodhan, his tragedy is also wrought by a woman. Due to a promise made to his mother, Kunti, he had to face his end. Such a great warrior's defeat is portrayed due to one woman-his mother. Similarly, Sita the heroine of Ramayan creates problem because she wished to have a deer. That led to her kidnapping and the calamity thereafter. In spite of Lakshman's warning, Surpanaka, Ravan's sister wooed Lakshman and he shows his anger in a drastic way which results in Ravan abducting Sita.

Western history too showcases events and problems arising due to the involvement of women. In the Bible, the innocence of Adam was lost due to Eve's temptation. The great wars also occurred due to either ambition or greedy or possessive nature of the historical personages. The Trojan War took place due to the beauty of Helen. The physical attraction of Cleopatra made the great warriors Julius Caesar and Mark Antony lose their warrior-like qualities and Egypt was seized by the Romans. Henry the Eight of England broke the cordial relationship with the Pope and created a new church due to his love for Anne Boleyn. Innumerable examples could be quoted from History that women were the reason for creating chaos.

The blame game on women displayed by the historians and the writers of the past and the present may differ slightly but their depiction of the role of women who were responsible for destruction has not changed much. She has been pushed aside to play second fiddle and it is portrayed that if she is given power, she would topple the whole system. The question is: do women really take undue advantage of their beauty and appeal to the opposite sex and cause destruction or is it a myth that we believe in that women are the reason for all the problems and struggles—is a matter of contention.

From 1960's feminists' movements, comprising of the first wave, second wave and the third wave, fought for the rights of women and insisted that women had no voice of their own. Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and many more writers tried to create awareness amidst the people about the position of women in society. Through various feminists' movements the status of women improved and the women took pen in their hands and voiced their anxieties, desires and anger. Owing to this, the status of women has progressed considerably and in today's world one can find women from all walks of life carving a niche for themselves. Education has given tremendous power to women to create their lifestyle and their own world.

In the past, one could accept to a certain extent that a woman had no voice of her own but in the present scenario the role of woman has changed for the better and their voice is not merely the symbol of submissiveness, quietness, accommodativeness, understanding, passion, persuasiveness, compassion, loving and caring but also scolding, shouting, and resorting to violence if required. Women have a voice of their own and they are no longer depending on their male counterparts to make their presence felt. It is a common myth that in an educational Institution, the position of women is secondary, if she is not in power, she would be submissive and if she has power, she tries to dominate others. One also hears of sexual exploitation and the promotions depending on favouritism.

This paper aims to put forth the question: does the blame game still persist in the educational institutes or do women exercise their power in reality- is this just a myth? Civilization and the importance of education has helped in changing the mind-set of all human beings. Especially education to women has set a broader perspective in their lifestyle. She is independent and the decision maker in all matters of her life. With education becoming a public good and a common currency for employment

opportunities; institutes of higher learning were elevated and attained a status of power. Campus fiction is a logical follow up, that both describes and represents the ways and means by which power is entrenched, fought over, retained, transferred, privileged, manipulated and transforms its participants. The university is an ecosystem in itself and is central to this fictive world. It simultaneously engages in the academic world of ideas while probing and providing into the social aspects of academe. An academic campus is not only the place of learning and gaining knowledge but also the venue to put on display personal weaknesses of the faculty who strive hard to maintain their ego at any cost, they use of their Achilles' heel to their own advantage. Power game is then indeed a game of one-up-man-ship and this is best portrayed in campus novels. There is no gender inequality in academic campus. Men and women are equally represented and in fact the faculty in English department have more women teachers. Power is given to the position that a teacher holds. A woman faculty is neither marginalised nor side-lined if she is confident of her own calibre. Teaching, publication of papers, research, doctoral thesis, foreign assignments and on-going projects and representation in academic bodies play a major role in a teacher's academic life. Women faculty do not let themselves down by sitting idle but flourish well in whatever tasks they take up.

Power politics is a unifying common thread in any academic campus. The talent of a faculty should ideally be displayed through his or her authority in their subject matter in teaching proficiency; but superiority herein nullifies the democratic functioning of an Institution. If a faculty has power that means he or she has the strength or determination to achieve what he or she wants. The teachers display their power in order to gain an advantage by showing that they are more powerful than their subordinates. In the academic scenario, everyone is linked to the web of power. It is the essence of an educational institute. Campus novelists draw the attention to power struggles and built-in system of oppressions and by doing so, reveal that structure of domination- a quotidian quality. Thus, an imbalance in the distribution of power is not conducive to healthy relationships.

“Physical exploitation is a common and predominant theme that appears in most of the campus novels. Deflating most of the sanctimonies associated with the myth of teaching profession, the campus novelists try to portray reality. In this process, the academician's Ivory tower crumbles down and shows that it is after all a castle built in the air and no such tower really exists,” says Gayatri Devi in her thesis titled, *Intellectual Pretensions and Reality in Select Indian English and Tamil Campus Novels*. Personal prejudices and nepotism are yet other ways in which power is used to meet personal objectives. It is in the struggle to attain power and in retaining it that the faculty assume status and wield power over the other stakeholders whereby they show a striking resemblance to despots. The thirst for power, its abuse and the moment of reckoning are the central themes in the campus novels. This is exposed by creating a positive, mindful and idealistic faculty who often fail in attracting power positions, who actually care about academics and students. In this oppositional structure the ways of description used to portray each other belies the discursive practice that either glorifies or vilifies power. The campus novelists like Rita Joshi and Srividhya Natarajan project teachers and their colleagues or teachers and students as being integrated in a complicated situation where dynamics is altered by the

changing distribution of power and its concentration at the apex of the pyramidal hierarchy.

The Awakening-a novella in Rhyme by Rita Joshi depicts what happens in a given campus in a realistic way. The novella which is written in rhymed couplets highlights the errors in judgement committed by the faculty where the faculty's preferred interest is politics rather than imparting knowledge. The novella is an illustration of the present college system where power is misused. The protagonist JR who is highly intellectual and idealistic in comparison to all the experienced teachers in the college gets frustrated and leaves the college due to the power game played by the principal –SS. JR takes up writing as her profession in spite of her colleague's requests. She affirms and lives by the principles that she believes in. Rita Joshi depicts the theory of power proposed by Michel Foucault. Power is everywhere and in everyone. Foucault calls it as, "Politics of everyday life" (Foucault 198). Power hunger and domination are the main themes of the novel. SS, the power drunk principal, sees the college as a fiefdom under her monarchy. Flattery is the only path to success for her subordinates. Although she enjoys demonstrating her supremacy and terrorising the young faculty, she is unaware that her colleagues are for all appearances polite to her but have the habit of backbiting. SS loves to trouble the temporary teachers and make them overwork, since they are at her mercy. The author puts it in a poetic form,

"On their security she feeds
And breeds on their insecurity" (Joshi 26).

SS compels JR to take up the college drama society and authoritatively commands that JR should not protest as she was not married and has time of her own. She could get the MPs and ministers for the college day so that she could be in good books with the bureaucrats. She shows her authority on her junior colleagues who are on probation by making them to work in an autocratic way. Her dictatorial manner is also seen in the way she orders the peon to puncture all the vehicles which were parked in the parking area of the faculty, provoking the faculty to hold a meeting and abuse her with impolite words. When JR writes a polite letter asking SS to find alternative parking, SS is pleased with this courteous communication and tries to accommodate more vehicles by clearing a big area in the campus.

Revolt and sycophancy are closely connected to the challenges in dirty politics. If power is given to a person his real character is explicitly revealed. SS does not bother about the examiners JR and NV, another faculty in the examination hall but helps her niece using unfair means. When the examiners protest, she goes ahead to further help while she misuses power and manipulates the system. Though being in a noble profession, she does not suffer the pangs of guilt; but, on the other hand, she demeans the faculty members. Upset and annoyed with SS, ET, a professor in the college calls for an emergency meeting and SS calls for a counter meeting to deny the accusation and she alleges it as a plot by JR to defame her. Unfortunately, some of her colleagues leak the news to the press and her image is completely tarnished. An Inquiry Committee is set to investigate the malpractices indulged by SS. A council headed by VC under a Dean of the faculty

conducts a court of enquiry. The committee does not find any recorded evidence which allows her to go scot free. But as in Greek mythology, divine justice is served with SS being disqualified as Superintendent of the examination committee, since her niece is answering the exam. She is also not given an extension of her appointment and is told to go on long leave by the committee. SS is the typical example of how power can get into the head of a person and it can ruin a person. SS is threatened by the assertive nature of JR. SS uses the blame game on JR for leaking the news to the press and spoiling the name of the reputed college without realising that divine justice would be meted out on the final day. JR, in spite of her position as a junior teacher, is firm in opposing the malpractices indulged in by the principal and stands for the right cause. Though the struggle is between two female faculties, the novel portrays that women are not deprived of voicing their opinion. In reality, women fight for their rights if any injustice is done to them.

The Awakening- a novella in Rhyme highlights the undesirable aspect of an educational institute where a principal shows the inferior nature of the academician in the normal stream of life. Negative power leads nowhere and as a qualified faculty SS never understands the consequences that would lead to her being forced to leave the campus. One can understand power as oppression. Foucault however rejects the idea of domination and subjugation; he rejects such a possibility outright. Nancy Frazer claims for Foucault, "It is misleading to think that power as a property which could be possessed by some persons or classes and not by others" (The History of Sexuality, Vol.I, 98). Through the novella Rita Joshi tries to depict how lust for power makes people autocratic, dominant and self-centred. Power politics in a campus causes isolation, conflicts, personal problems, professional dissatisfaction, psychological stress and it also leads to loss of face.

No Onions nor Garlic by Srividhya Natarajan depicts how power mongers in an academic surrounding, misuse their power and, at the end, suffer due to their arrogant behaviour. It is true that power corrupts and it attracts those who like to dominate. Master and slave syndrome is common in a dominant and dominating situation. The low caste teachers and students are portrayed as powerless in the hands of the high caste professors.

The novel is set in Chennai University and centres on the glories and travails of Professor Ram who teaches Communication paper at the university. He also communicates to low caste students his vile displeasure towards them, his venom for the reservation system and insults them by throwing their papers out of the window, calling them names, giving them low grades so that they fail thus causing them constant grief. When they eventually drop out of the course due to constant ill treatment, he treats them like lowlife. He exclaims: "that they have acquired neither the finer nuances of English grammar nor an aptitude for Sanskrit Poetics" (Natarajan 82). He opposes the university reservation policy and denies job opportunity to Jiva, his research student who belongs to the Dalit community. An academic institution should inculcate the ideas of equality and the thirst for knowledge should be the prerogative; but the caste politics among professors make them exert power on the powerless colleagues and students and thus engendering humiliation and heaping insults. This oppressive practice creates chaos in the minds of

the Dalit students especially the female students.

Gayatri Devi says, "As the teachers have the strong weapon in their hands in the form of marks, students have to be submissive. The powerless in them makes them feel inferior" (280). Prof Ram goes to the extreme by asking Jiva not to attend an interview for a teaching position in the subject of Drama and folklore which is based on her doctoral thesis. He demands of her that she should withdraw from the interview in order to ensure that the same position would be occupied by his son Chunky. He stoops to the level of blackmailing Jiva by threatening to fail her in her viva. Prof Ram schemes to disallow Jiva to present a paper at the ACS conference which he organises on the campus. He takes revenge on her by not letting her enter into the seminar hall. Jiva does not approach him to request permission to present a paper as she is scared of him, whereas he asks Sundar, a Brahmin boy, to present a paper when he is not even capable of writing a single line for the seminar.

Power corrupts those who allow power to go to their heads. Power politics is well portrayed in the novel. Politics in the department is well displayed by the professors. Prof Ram uses his power game by exploiting his status to ensure that the interview letters are sent only to his favourite students. When he comes to know that Sundar is interested in Jiva, he threatens him by saying, "As for you, Sundar, if you defy me now, I will make sure that your scholarship gets cut off. I'll ensure that you never get a university job in your life. In fact, I'll make sure you never get a job and Jiva will never get her degree, you can take that from me!" (Natarajan27).

Prof Ram misuses his power even on his female colleagues especially Dr Laurentia Arul. When Dr Arul applied for the post, Prof Ram was away on a year's sabbatical at the University of Western Ontario. As Dr Arul is an expert in her subject, she chomps up the feeble questions and goes on to take large bites out of the interviewers, correcting their errors and challenging their expertise with her brilliant teaching record, wide knowledge on literary texts and distinctions in her mark sheets. Horizontal power games are played by Prof Ram with his colleagues, especially with Dr Arul. He absolutely detests her. He knows he's beaten since she is an expert in her subject, a favourite teacher of the students and has many books to her credit so he would not be in a position to compete with her. He cannot expel her from the department; instead, he insults her at every opportunity irrespective of place and time. He takes his revenge not only verbally, but also physically. In this incident she in turn hits him back with her handbag. Uncontrolled self-aggrandized power would lead to arrogant behaviour. One can have power as long as others submit themselves but when a person misuses it the submissive is no longer under control. Prof Ram fails to understand that knowledge is power and also knowledge should be used in a right way in order to gain power. Prof Ram shows his displeasure with Dr Arul and also shows his superiority complex due to her intellectual strength. Though Natarajan brings out the humour through this incident, one gets the impression that the academic institutes which are supposed to be the symbol of sanctity are converted into boxing rings. As head of the department, Prof Ram misuses his power by abusing his female students and colleagues wherever possible for him. He even harbours doubts that Dr Arul is the reason for the degrading graffiti about him on the university walls. When a

teacher from a higher position insults the junior, it is always due to the inferiority complex or feeling of insecurity which makes him behave in that particular manner. Dr Arul does not remain submissive but returns the favour in an intelligent way.

The Vice-Chancellor neither investigates the case nor permits a hearing of her side of the story, but proceeds to type out Dr Arul's suspension letter on flimsy grounds that the male teachers exaggerate the issue with the VC. Prof Ram goes to the extent by dirtying his clothes with mud in order to prove his case against Dr Arul. She is doubly exploited by him. She has to even fight with male egoistic professors. Truth always triumphs at the end in any situation. With the intervention of Jiva and Sundar and the research scholars of the department who are the witnesses to the incident, the Vice Chancellor is then made aware about the factual details. Dr Arul challenges the power monger's despotism and battles single handedly and succeed amidst the power brokers. Power destroys Prof Ram's values in life. Educational institutes are not only meant for professors like Prof Ram but also for teachers like Dr Arul. Divine justice prevails at the end of the novel when Dr Arul is made the president of the teacher's union where Prof Ram tries his level best to become the president. He conducts the ACS conference at the university to get more votes from the teachers but his calculations go wrong and looking at the efficiency and popularity of Dr Arul everyone votes for her. It is not true that the voice of the female is unheard. Jiva is also allowed to attend the conference and is allowed to give her opinion on Chunky's paper. She does not acquiesce to Prof Ram's request, gets the teaching post and joins as his colleague. This shows that if a female faculty determines to do something, nothing would discourage her or cause her to stumble.

Srividhya Nataran in a humourous vein uses the local Tamil idiom and an Indianised usage of English. She explicates concepts like power games, internal politics, domination of research guides, plight of the research students and the hollowness of the superior feelings of the faculty, all interwoven within a wonderful plot. She illustrates the illness of the superiority complex of the male professors even in the educational Institutions and also exposes the corruption and hypocrisy in the academic circle. She drives home the point that power and status can make even the intellectuals to lose their ethical self and show their real nature. Modes of narration encompass different forms of power. Power is a soft skill that is effective in consolidating one's reputation; but in no way does it become a litmus test for character. When order prevails in the academic world after the chaos, power equations are recast. JR in the novella *The Awakening*-novella in Rhyme or Dr Laurentia Arul and Jiva in *No Onions nor Garlic* portray that women faculty do not submit themselves under the power mongers but fight and not only have their say but also get their way. Rita Joshi and Srividhya Natarajan prove that the female voices no longer remain unheard but are heard with their worth realised by other characters.

The age-old belief that women are the root cause of trouble and temptation as well as incapable of holding power positions are thus mere heresies, when looked at from the perspectives of the 21st century life and evaluation of the works of Rita Joshi and Srividhya Natarajan. Women definitely have a voice and they can make it incredibly loud if and when the need arises. Education has played a very important role in helping women to elevate their status, though therein too cases of discrimination and exploitation

occur, highlighting that the root-cause of gender-discrimination and exploitation lies much deeper. The real problem lies not in either being born a male or a female but a faulty mind-set or a system which believes and indulges in indoctrinated discrimination. Ego and power politics or even 'sexual politics' compound the problem, whether at home or at the workplace. The mind-set should change and if the ego is curtailed the concept of domination or resistance will give way to inclusion and a more democratic set up in academe. This would usher in healthy thinking where thoughts of gender discrimination or exploitation would diminish and may disappear altogether, providing all with equal opportunities to succeed. Such a scenario would truly make campuses achieve their own ideals rather than remain as canvases for the place of action.

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