

The Quest for Empowerment in Sunetra Gupta's a Sin of Colour: A Study on Gender Studies

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Abstract

Feminism is a movement mainly concerned with gender equality, the belief in social, economic and political equality between both men and women. Feminism voices out against the misogynistic perception in the society.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati. The second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement, and independent women's organizations began to emerge. Finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women in the workforce and right to political parity.

Traditionally, right from the ancient days, India was a male-dominated culture. Indian women were covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and reticence in literature as well as in life. They were inanimate objects, who followed five paces behind their men, they had to be gentle, patient, gracious, and for generations together. Bengali women were hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring verses from "The Bhagavad-Gita and The Ramayana" in the dim light of sooty lamps.

Introduction

Sunetra Gupta's A Sin of colour is a novel of many colours. Its chapters are titled as Amethyst, Indigo, Azure, Jade, Saffron, Ochre, Crimson. The motif of the colours remains undeveloped and the novel remains a colourless novel in a sense. The personality of a woman cannot be slighted. It cannot also be easily described. In writing about the passion of one man for another's wife, the author also throws light on the general attitude of men towards women of that age. It goes beyond the spectrum and is colourless.

The setting of the novel is based on the author's own residential home and her birthplace, which is Oxford and Calcutta. The novel's storyline starts just after the partition of Bengal in Calcutta. The readers will relish Gupta's choice of words made in the novel. There is a lot of word play and uneven sentences. The novel keeps on jumping back and forth in time. There is a lot of repetition but it does not affect the flow of the novel.

The novel is based mainly on the choices made by the two protagonists, in their late thirties, who remain as the victims of obsessional love; Debendranath Roy with his elder brother's wife

Reba, who is a musician; and Niharika with Daniel Faraday, who is a photographer and the last man to have seen Debendranath alive. This obsessional love complicates their lives and leads them to transgress moral codes. There are multiple sins of colour, all revolving around one sin which forms the basis of the novel. The plot revolves around the significant events like death, drowning, disappearance, which created a mystery that takes twenty years to unfold.

Most of Gupta's protagonists belong to Bengali families and are mostly educated, and they make their own decisions in life, which also displays their survival instinct without surrendering their dignity and self-respect. In the novel, only Neerupama surrenders her self-respect or dignity to the masculine powers or patriarchal dominance and faces an identity crisis in her life. Reba and Niharika survive without surrendering their dignity and self-respect, and they both also have accomplished their own 'self-image' that Reba as a musician and actress in the theatre group, and Niharika as a writer, in society. The novel portrays three generations of the same family and also the woman's mind in different stages of situation, culture and life.

A Woman's Identity in Society

Identity is related to who or what a person is. Identity changes during an individual's life. 'In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity said Erik Erikson. So also, unlike a drop of water which loses its identity when it joins the ocean, man does not lose his being in the society in which he lives. Man's life is independent. He is born not for the development of society alone, but for the development of his self, said B.R. Ambedkar.

A woman must have courage that will help her to attain her goals, desires and tackle problematic situations that will eventually lead to success. Courage protects women from depressing scenarios and helps them fight against all negativities. Women who do not have courage have to suffer under their imposed roles. They do not voice out against their suppressed position and by being silent women, they suffer much by not raising their voices against the situations into which they are placed, in a patriarchal society. A woman's courage is what helps her to improve her situation in a patriarchal society.

Marriage, which is also called matrimony, is a bond in which two individuals are united and committed to live together and share their lives. Marriage is a relationship of cooperation. Both spouses have to do their part in making a happy family. Both men and women are the back bone of the family. Marriage ensures the survival of the human race.

Due to household chores, women do not have time to visit the library, in order to educate themselves on their own. Their identity lies not in their roles only as wives, mother, daughter or sister. Women can also go out and pursue a career of their own. So the question arises: why cannot men work in the kitchen? Men refuse to accept their responsibility due to the superiority and ego they possess. Cooking was not only the female area of expertise. Men can also give them a helping hand in that arena.

The first generation woman, Neerupama, has no thought of getting herself an original self-contained identity. Her mother wants her to get what she cannot get at her age, which was denied by the patriarchal power in society. Throughout her life, she remained as an inferior person and did not take any initiative to improve her identity and to get out of the vicious circle of masculine authority. Her married life had caused her to become mad. Before marriage, she was so happy and was able to be herself, dreaming about her future life. Her marriage arranged by her father who is a patriarch, without considering her opinion or the acceptance of it, had thrown her into a state of despair. Her dreams about her future life, career and husband vanished like a passing cloud. She dreams of being a teacher and to teach uneducated women in society, who are suppressed (doubly marginalized) in a postcolonial scenario. But she fails to achieve it. She remains as the stereotypical housewife, following the orders given by patriarchy.

Like the 'mad woman in the attic', Neerupama becomes mad in the house which was an alien

space to her. In that house, where she is not the owner of her own life and is not able to express her feelings or emotions freely, Neerupama is confined to her private sphere which is Mandalay.

The second generation woman is Reba. After her marriage, she too suffers under the patriarchal institution of the family at first and then discovers a way to prove her identity as an actor in the theatre group. She reconstructs her life through her career, by getting rid of the anthropocentric life:

How different Reba's childhood must have been among those noiseless bookladen walls, alone, with her mother sleeping in her sick-room, and her father deep in his papers, and the maids whispering softly in the kitchen as they cleared up after lunch. It must have been in such a time that she had invented herself. From elements of the novels she had devoured in her childish loneliness, from images obliquely prescribed to her by her father and his friends, from the colours and odours of the silences around her, she had made herself. (Gupta 19).

She too suffers in her marital life like Neerupama, but she proves her true womanly energy or power through her dedication to art. She is the angel in the house by transforming the house into a home with grace. She is the leading actress in her company and has financial support of her own, that proves her to be the example to her daughter and other women in the patriarchal society. She had attained a space of her own in society. She succeeds in life by the transformation of self, from the housewife to the leading actress:

Debendranath Roy is immersed in the contemplation of her loneliness, it was clearer than ever to him now, as she played for hours upon the esraj behind tightly shut doors, rushed between rehearsals, and sat at mealtimes, now no longer hooded by her sari, but enshrouded instead by her almost morbid dedication to her art. She never cooked anymore in her small kitchen. (Gupta 54)

She attains her individual identity by her artistic talents. She uses her skills to find her personal space out of her alien space in Mandalay House. Reba has deconstructed the patriarchal meaning system and has constructed a feminine order of meaning in her time. She attains a women's place in the society, particularly in a male dominated society. She has the capacity and the patience to endure against the dominant patriarchal system and she is the winner in the end.

The third generation woman, Niharika, who was a talented person, is a great storyteller right from her childhood. She is greatly inspired by her mother: a leading actress who gained respect in her life. Niharika also urges herself to get that kind of respect in her life. She achieved her individual or personal identity as a writer, by writing a novel about her uncle's disappearance by understanding his unfulfilled love life, published in her own name, as she was in the same circumstance in life:

A woman writer would naturally choose themes and characters closer to her heart. Virginia Woolf observes in this context: "It is probable, however, that both in life and in art the values of woman are not the values of man. Thus when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what is, to him important. (Feminine Psyche 70)

Niharika goes a step ahead of her mother by proving her identity and attaining her self-destination. She has a life partner of her own and leads her independent life.

Women's dilemmas and alienation are caused by their marginal position in the patriarchal institution. Before marriage, women's lives are under the control of their father and after marriage, they are under the control of their husbands and mothers-in-law. In the patriarchal society, a woman loses her importance and becomes inferior to and dependent on men. A woman's identity is seen in relation to the father or husband, and not of their own individual or personal identity. Women must have a female space of their own, in order to achieve their freedom.

Reba has strived to come out of the identity crisis that she has been facing and has found a space of her own in a manmade world, through a refusal to take up the victim's position or the role of subjugation. Niharika fulfils her identity without self-degradation, subjugation and self-destruction. Both Reba and Niharika proclaim their womanhood in a bold manner. They want to

establish themselves as individuals without any support of the males in the society. Their self-definition and individual development by their own efforts and confidence, ‘transcends gender’ in the society. They created new feminine space for themselves and rose above the masculine manipulations. Both Reba and Niharika proved that the woman’s identity was not defined only by her relation to a male world and male literary tradition. They have the ability to develop a positive self-image in society.

The relationship between the men and women is initially very tumultuous. The men following the patriarchal manipulations are not able to understand the free spirit of women. They are not able to accept women in any other role, because of their ego clashes in the society. It is only later when men accept by understanding the ideals of women, and by giving enough space for their growth that a man is able to form a relationship with the woman on equal terms. Women want to establish themselves as individuals without any support from males. Their flight to freedom without the support of male power is a vindication of their self confidence in the society. It is the phase of transformation or transition towards an egalitarian society with a gender free, race free, and class free structure based upon the equality of sexes by recognizing individual differences and identities.

Education Overthrows Patriarchy

Education enlightens mankind with its numerous benefits. It helps to attain knowledge, virtue and etiquette which are considered as the attributes of a perfect man. The founder of education is Horace Mann; he has been credited with creating the foundation of our modern public education system. Macaulay introduced English education in India, especially through his famous minute of February 1835. Education gives us a knowledge of the world and also the people around us. It helps us build opinions and have viewpoints on things in life. It develops in us a smart view of looking at life.

Education also instils the concept of equality which most of the men fail to accept and this non acceptance is the result of patriarchy. Patriarchy relies on the institution of fatherhood, ‘symbolic power’ within culture and the unconscious, specific relationship between father and daughter, nuclear family, and complex relationship between power and gender.

Neerupama, who did not complete her matriculation exams, because of her marriage arranged by her father, is a concrete example of male superiority in the family space. She was locked in the domestic space of Mandalay and was expected to behave as a young bride. Her mother-in-law does not tell her to forget about her Matriculation exams, she simply says that she cannot go on that day because; a distant but important elderly relation was coming to spend the day, coming all the way from Chinsurah to see her, for he had been too ill to come to the wedding, he was expected any minute, it would not do for her to be absent for the whole day. (Gupta 44)

Even her husband consoles her, by telling her that he will engage tutors for her and she can sit for the Matriculation exam the next year. Neerupama makes up her mind and “she finally surrendered to the circumstances of her new life” (Gupta 143). Without taking any further actions, she made her own apparent free choice.

Contrary to Neerupama, Reba was an independent woman. She devoted herself to music and theatre. She had a First Class Bachelor’s degree in Sanskrit. She maintains a balance between her domestic space and her personal space. She maintains her freedom by decorating the interior parts of the house and playing ‘esraj’.

Reba, he felt, was no less composed than her mother-in-law, but hummed with a temperate womanly energy, transforming her corner of the great house into a region of easy beauty, with flowerpots on the balcony, and framed Moghul miniatures on the walls. (Gupta 14)

Womanly energy represents the feminine presence. Neerupama represents the early stage of feminism, as she maintains her own freedom in some small ways and also rebels against the injustices done to the women in the society by the male supremacy in her time. She was a woman who engaged in her small ways inside the house and radiated grace. Her identity is somewhat preserved, that she maintains her own freedom by engaging herself as an actress in the theatre and a musician, in the patriarchal institution. She enjoys freedom within the house in her own way. And by seeing Reba's attitude, Neerupama becomes mad, as she is not able to enjoy that sort of freedom in her life.

Niharika thinks about her Mother as a Powerful Woman, whom she Saw in the Theatre Group

It was clear that her mother was quite different and she wondered if one day she too would command the same kind of respect, whether she too would cause the occupants of a room to draw their breath as she entered, as her silence filled its corner like storm light, as her fragrance swept across their faces like the wrath of god. (Gupta 66)

Niharika admires her mother by the way that she was shown respect while entering the room. Everyone remains silent on seeing her. There was a sudden hush and the silence filled every corner of the room. This state of silence represents that she is the most important person in the play. Everyone waits for her to come and it is through her life struggle, she had achieved this pride of place in her later life. Niharika wishes the same kind of respect that was given to her mother.

The third generation woman is Niharika, daughter of Reba, who was both beautiful and talented woman. She commits the same 'sin' as her uncle Debendranath Roy, by falling in love with the married man named Daniel Faraday, who is a photographer. She became close to him by discussing her uncle's death by drowning, in the Cherwell river. Daniel was the last man to see her uncle alive. Both Niharika and Daniel do not believe it to be true. Niharika comes to Oxford, England, to study, and she is working on her thesis on pygmies. She visits many places with her friend Morgan to research on the pygmy and on her literary convictions. She understands about her uncle's disappearance and writes a novel about him, in her family's mansion Calcutta, as her life story was also similar to her uncle's. She manages to construct her self-identity.

Niharika, through her education preserves her identity as a writer. She also had First Class degrees in both her Bachelors and Masters courses. This proves that women are intellectually equal to men in life. Unlike in earlier years, "...many observations show a discriminating approach towards girls and boys regarding clothes, education, even food..." (John 1998). By creating a new home in England, she had surpassed the oppressiveness of the Calcutta house. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her work "A Vindication of the rights of Women" argued that women would be equal to men in every respect if they were provided the same education and opportunities as men" (The Feminist Views: A Review 6). Unlike her grandmother, who has been caged inside their house and her mother, Reba, who has enjoyed freedom but not fully, both have not decided their life partners, but Niharika decides on her life partner by disappearing with her lover in a punt in the Cherwell river. And Sunetra Gupta proves that women can do anything that men do in their lives, if they get a chance to do so. Niharika represents that education overthrows patriarchy.

Sunetra Gupta does not want women to lose their self-respect or dignity to male supremacy in society. Only Neerupama had lost her identity or self-respect by her imposed roles in domestic life. Reba accepts her own fate and maintains her own freedom, self-respect and identity. Niharika becomes independent and takes her own decisions in life.

Virginia Woolf in her work, *A Room of One's Own*, says that: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". Where Niharika achieved her identity as a writer, she

has a room of her own, that was in Mandalay. “They follow the gatekeeper to Debendranath Roy’s old room, not the one he occupied in the year that he lived here as a married man, for she has been using that as a study” (Gupta 134). Niharika writes a fiction about her Uncle Debendranath Roy’s disappearance; that she could understand it better than anyone in the family because she too has the same obsessional love like him and leads the same life. The Calcutta house Mandalay which was in ruins serves a room for her writing. A woman writer must have a room her own that she can be able to be herself with freedom, so that she can be able to get a flow of thoughts to write. A woman writer must have such a private space to call it as her own, which will be necessary for creative thinking and writing with the freedom to write about her thoughts without any hindrance. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* criticised the idea that women could only find fulfilment through child bearing and home making (1963).

‘What would happen if Shakespeare had a skilled sister named Judith?’ Woolf ask this question in her work. She cannot go to school for study and her father decided to get her marriage, so that she would not be able to study but enter into the married life. She would rather kill herself, or else she would become mad in a male dominated society. Neerupama’s life can be compared to Judith Shakespeare’s in the sense that Neerupama’s formal education was also hindered by the marital life, decided by her father’s will. She too has the desire to study, but was forcefully pushed into the marital household, like Judith Shakespeare. Finally, Neerupama becomes mad by seeing her daughter-in-law, Reba enjoying her freedom without any hindrance:

And here she was, without warning, seeking to master those precious talents by which Reba had put her stamp upon the set of rooms that had been allotted to her and her husband. Like Reba, she ordered paintings on the silk... And then came the day when he returned in the evening to find her busily instructing the carpenter to put shelves outside her drawing room where the long corridor turned and came to an end, so that she too might have a small kitchen of her own, I need jars and some pans, she said, looking up at him from the floor where she sat fiddling with a small kerosene stove, and it was then that he realized that his mother had gone mad. (Gupta 7-8)

Woolf states that the literature and history which is constructed by male society has traditionally marginalized women. All those who are talented must be given equal opportunities irrespective of their gender, to prove their intellectuality and to reveal their potential. Woolf desired freedom for women in every field they work. A woman should have a room of her own as her private space and she must also be financially independent in her life. It is the patriarchal society that makes a woman so inferior to men in all types of professions they enter. Women are preferred to be seen staying in the house to take care of the children and the household chores all day. Till date it is evident that women are considered as good mothers only if they are capable of giving up their dream for the family. Reba and Niharika prove that women are not only fit to do household chores, but can achieve and pursue their career of their personal choice in life. Neerupama was portrayed as poor, ignorant, uneducated, tradition and culture bound, family oriented, domesticated and victimized. Niharika is portrayed as a modern, educated woman who has control over her life, and has the freedom of choice to make her own decision in life. Neerupama’s experience as a victim of the patriarchal institution differs from that of Reba a generation later, and Reba’s differs from that of Niharika a generation later. Education is a mode of social transformation for women.

Conclusion

Gupta tells about the growing stages of women in different generations of life. With the help of the education of Reba her daughter Niharika is able to accomplish their self-identity in society. The self-realization of Neerupama which makes her mad towards the end her of her life and marks the transformation phase of Reba and her daughter Niharika. Reba proves her identity in the field of theatre and music. Niharika achieves her identity as a writer in society. The educated woman

creates her own space and also proves her own identity in society. The main themes of the novel are love, passion, life versus death, alienation, family, education, freedom and marital life. The novel also portrays the domestic realism of the Indian lives, especially the Bengali society. It also has hints of magical realism present:

From North Bengal, Indranath Roy had journeyed into the foothills of the Himalayas, to seek out the Japanese Cedars, with which they would line their new make of wardrobes – one of these they later had in their bedroom, and whenever she opened it, the room would fill with the fragrance of his shapeless desire to know and possess her. (Gupta 9)

The novel is filled with good emotions that are powerful and also expressed by all the characters, even the secondary characters. Gupta gives importance to all the characters and details their emotions in life. Even the characters like the land lady, the English aunt, Amira and Rahul Mitra are described with a lot of care.

Gupta's style is clear and simple. The Stream of consciousness technique is used in the novel; the narrator keeps on jumping from one character life events into another character's life events with a different time period. This brilliant book keeps the reader's curiosity alive and never makes one bored with the feeling that the storyline is true in its essence. The world of the protagonist is connected with both science and literature. The protagonists both Debendranath Roy and Niharika, use alienation. The readers are left to draw conclusions in this Open-ended novel.

Food has always been an important ingredient in Sunetra Gupta's novels. In *Moonlight into Marzipan* there is a dinner in which the food is entirely black and Yuri Sen's job is to act as the Savoy's Black Cat; if there are to be thirteen guests at a table, his role is to sit there and make the numbers up to a less doom-laden fourteen. In *The Glassblower's Breath* the characters enjoy a fully alphabetical dinner. In *A Sin of Colour*, Reba makes a different cake that;

He remembered how for the twins' fourth birthday she had made two cakes in the shape of two eyes, with candles burning in their irises, and these she had laid upon a large bell metal platter with a string of dark sweetmeats for a smile, and a tomato for a nose, but now she was not to be seen any longer fiddling about with her little blue stove, or polishing the chrome handles of her tiny oven, a birthday present from her father-in-law, which she had once valued almost as much as her musical instruments. (Gupta 54)

Women's issues can be called human issues instead. "To me, Feminism springs from the fountainhead of the human desire to be treated fairly and judged equally. It relates to accessibility to equal opportunities, equal responsibilities, and equal treatment to men and women" (Feminine Psyche 20). Men should believe that feminists are not looking to take over the world; they are simply looking to change it to a place where women and men have social, political and economic equality. "Anti-social and anti-patriarchal generates a unique energy and strength essential to the woman who tries to survive in the male world" (Feminine Psyche 111).

Margaret Atwood in her interview with Jo Brans where Atwood says, "I am defining my feminism as human equality and freedom of choice" and she also said;

Feminism has done many good things for women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights. (Feminine Psyche 141)

Raja Rao in his work *The Serpent and the Rope* said,

Woman is the meaning of the word, breath, the touch, act, a woman that which reminds man of that which he is. Woman is growth, the god's inheritance; the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born; a woman rules for it is she, the universe. (Feminine Psyche 191) education, which helps women to overcome the patriarchal rules or injustices done to them in society. It also talks about the difference between educated and uneducated women overcoming patriarchal injustices. Neerupama, who is uneducated, cannot overcome the patriarchal injustices, instead she keeps silent throughout her life. This silence maintained by Neerupama is also a kind of rebellion against the male chauvinist society. Reba, who is educated and a talented woman, overcomes the patriarchal injustices by balancing her time for her family and her personal space without being

questioned by the patriarchy in the society. This made Neerupama to realize the mistakes done in her life, without enjoying her personal space. Here Gupta uses education as an important weapon to strike down patriarchy and their rules in society, which was achieved by Reba.

Liberal Feminism aims at achieving equal rights for women, especially in the field of education. Women want to be free in every field. Liberal feminism aims to fit women into the existing society and to remove obstacles of their public advancement. The first slavery in human history began with the subjugation of women within the family, and they were assigned to do domestic roles.

Feminism is a part of the struggle to improve the well-being of human beings. It is the movement that was begun to end the discrimination and oppression of women. Liberal feminism holds values of individual rights for women in the society. Liberal feminists believe that every person should be treated equally, regardless of their gender, race, social, political power and economic conditions. The novel *A Sin of Colour* can further be studied from the Postcolonial perspective and by applying the diaspora theory.

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