

Geography of Self-Assertion and Liberation in the Works of Rita Dove and Meena Alexander

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Abstract: Gender discrimination is a global phenomenon. We have seen that though women constitute half of the world's population, for a long time, women's voices and rights were taken for granted. Rita Dove and Meena Alexander are concerned about "Her-story" or women-centered stories. As female writers, they depict vivid pictures of women- mind and body and present the world as experienced by a woman, a world of feeling, sacrifice, self-less love, and compassion.

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Gender discrimination is a global phenomenon. We have seen that though women constitute half of the world's population, for a long time, women's voices and rights were taken for granted. Women were left out and kept aside as the "other" in all fields of life. In the field of literature, male writers have written about "His-story" and they also took it upon themselves to act as representatives of women, and recorded women's experiences in society. The result of this was that these writings were partial and biased as they told the story from a male viewpoint and omitted the real voice of womenfolk. Also patriarchy binds women and set boundaries for women in all ages. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book, *The Second Sex* questions, "What is a woman", "How does one become one?" Later she answers her own question and says, "one is not born, but rather becomes one" (295). The dos and don'ts of women are constructed by men. Women have little or no mobility in the constructed world of men. Because of these discrimination against women, Rita Dove and Meena Alexander are concerned about "Her-story" or women-centered stories. Writing about relationships and women bonding, Meena Alexander says, "When there is a question of injustice to women, growing up in a woman's body, one cannot but be a feminist" (*The Hindu*, Jan 04, 2009). Along with the vast subjects and themes in their works, Dove and Alexander explore the issues of womanhood. As female writers, they depict vivid pictures of women- mind and body and present the world as experienced by a woman, a world of feeling, sacrifice, self-less love, and compassion. Dove and Alexander also weave together the bodily experiences of woman like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood and the emotions attached to these phenomenon like uncertainty, stress, joy, disappointment and so on. The experience of motherhood cannot be replaced or duplicated as it is an experience unique to women. Alexander writes, "Writing as a mother or a daughter, was female labour, involving a defining moral commitment" (*Women in*

Romanticism, 12). However, being in a patriarchal world and bounded by barriers of society, women writers face a number of challenges while writing. Also as patriarchy defines 'Femininity' as "women by the hearth", as a female writer one goes against the 'constructed' rules of femininity. Women writers face a lot of hurdles in trying to prove themselves to the world and Alexander in her book, *Women in Romanticism* writes,

The woman writer had to cut through the bonds of femininity, those structures of patriarchal authority that seemed to stand outside her, though powerfully gathered in to her intimate grasp of self, even as she set about the slow and often difficult task of discovering the sources of her own genius. (4)

As women, Dove and Alexander were also once little girls and therefore their experiences of girlhood in their works present a wider view and a broader understanding of growing up as a girl. In part IV of the book *The Yellow House in the Corner*, Dove discusses poems of adulthood and puberty. In the poem, "Adolescence-I", "Adolescence-II" and "Adolescence-III", Dove presents the curiosity of a girl child on her changing body and boys on reaching puberty. Using Husserl's methodology of bracketing experiences, Dove presents her poems by bracketing her experience as a young girl and leaving aside her experiences as a mother and a grown-up. In "Adolescence-I", the speaker in the poem recalls the time when she and her friends would hide "behind grandmother's porch" (48) and discuss boys. Their curiosity is doubled as an experienced girl tells the others that, "A boy's lips are soft, As soft as baby's skin" (48). Attraction to the opposite sex becomes more pronounced as one reaches the age of puberty and also one becomes more conscious of one's body. In "Adolescence-II", the girls' bodies are developing and so are their curiosities. In the third poem, the girl has now become mature and she likens herself to the orange tomatoes outside her house. As her parents leave for work she daydreams of her future man. She wishes for someone who would respect her and therefore imagines her man telling her "I have come for you, Madam; I have loved you in my dreams" (50). Though society expects otherwise from women, Dove shows that every girl wishes for a partner who would love and respect her and not consider her a mere object. A.L. Nielsen in *Washington Post* writes,

[...]the poems of *Grace Notes* are largely autobiographical and abound in the unforgettable details of family character. Rita Dove's *Grace Notes* are her turnings of the tunes we all hum, the tunes that pluck at our memories. (4)

The poem "Summit Beach, 1921" from Dove's poetry book, *Grace Notes*, talks of a girl of courtship age refusing to join the group of merry makers and preferring to sit by the fireplace alone. The girl in the poem refuses to join the group as she is shy and conscious of her scar on her knee. Physical beauty is a desire of every woman and therefore the girl is conscious of even the little scar. In her poem, Dove uses her experience as a woman to illustrate the minds of woman in general. Like the little girl in the adolescence poems, the girl in the poem inwardly wishes for the right

man with whom she could fly on her “invisible wings”. Men's thoughts and women's thoughts are very different. Men are always concerned about the outside world whereas women focus on the “home”. As a girl child, society sets certain restrictions in her life and she is compelled to think of the private domain and remain submissive. Though women have secret desires, as she is restricted by society, sometimes women try to silence their real desires and experience and present a more acceptable version to other. Daydreaming is a kind of remedy that girls use to explore things that they can't do in reality. As a girl reaches the age of puberty, she tries to experiment new things, things that she is ‘not’ supposed to do. She is suddenly aware of her body and her thoughts. But very often as women are “supposed’ to attend to the needs of the family, she hardly gets time for day dreaming. Like the adolescence poems, “Hully Gully” from *Grace Notes*, presents the image of a young girl who hides in bathrooms to daydream. Locked in bathrooms for hours,/ Daydreaming in kitchens(14). Alexander's life is also very much the same as the girl in the above poem. She writes,

As a child in Khartoum, I used to hide out to write, either behind the house where there was a patch of bare wall and the shade of a neem tree, or better still, in the half-darkness of the toilet. (*Fault Lines* 113)

The life of an adolescent girl is filled with curiosity for the inside as well as the outside world. As she is unable to satisfy her curiosity of the outside world, she satisfies herself in her imagination. In her novel, *Through the Ivory Gate*, she writes, “Cellars were for memory, attics for dreaming. How could anyone live without memories and dreams? (219). Bathrooms seem to be the safest place for self-assertion. Bathrooms symbolize liberation as you throw what you don't need there. The bathroom is a place of liberation for these girls. Hiding in bathroom, they can do all the things that they are restricted from doing. The various desires and dreams of a woman's life as she is passing through puberty is clearly picturised in these poems. Dove's “Fantasy and Science Fiction” also presents an image of young girl who wishes to explore the neighborhood. As her parents leave for work, she looks out of her window and imagines herself crossing the streets and entering a new house. As social restrictions bind women, she explores the street through her imagination. The power of day dreaming and imagination takes over once the physical body is restricted. Nobody can restrict the mind. One can do all the restricted things in the mind. Likewise, the girl in the poem rebels through her imagination as she crosses the restricted streets in her mind. on my knees in the dark I looked out/ the front door of my parents' house/ .../ I'll end up on my knees/ In a house my parents never owned nor dreamed of owing (15). Growing up as a woman, she is always given specific roles to perform. She is taught the roles she is born to perform. The dos and don'ts of a woman is elaborated by Grandmother Evans in *Through the Ivory Gate*,

‘A woman laughs like a saloon, a lady like a music box.’ When you laugh, hold your hand over your mouth. Don't clap it over like you're about to burp- hold it straight and a little to the side, like

you're going to whisper something to someone next to you. And no whistling. No lady's got no business walking down the street in broad daylight pursing her lips as if there weren't nothing to be ashamed of. Everything in its place, and that ain't the place for that. What my mother told me was good advice... (58)

This conditioning or rules of how one should be begins in childhood itself, and interestingly, this conditioning of the girl children is done by women. The patriarchal society uses women as tools against women. Images of a good woman and bad woman are created here based on their devotion to tradition or rules of patriarchy. Growing up into a female body, she is always expected to adhere to the demands of her society. Beauvoir states that women are not born as "other". It is men who constructed the "other" and distanced himself from women's problems and needs. Women's experience in the sickening patriarchal society is portrayed repeatedly in Alexander's work. Her society expects women to be coy and invisible, society decides how a woman should be and the role she needs to undertake in the society. Home inculcates how a child should be in society. Alexander's mother taught her the roles of a woman, "For I learnt from her too the art of withdrawal, of thinking inwards so that no one could look and tell from a woman's face what her heart might hold" (*Fault Lines*, 67). Meena Alexander recollects the time when she was taught to be a "woman". She knew that her mother was teaching her a difficult truth.

It would be wrong for you to take a job. Remember that, Meena, a woman's place is at home, by her family." As she repeated the words over in her soft words, almost as if she were teaching herself a difficult truth, I pondered the load of pain she had gathered into herself in her quest to live as a woman. (14)

Perhaps she is pondering over the fate of married women she had witnessed in her society while writing her poem, "Invitation". The poem is filled with melancholy and gloomy atmosphere. "After the Wedding" from her poetry collection, *I Root My Name*, portrays a woman's plight after marriage. After the ceremony, the woman completely belongs to the man. The woman in the poem sits "rod straight" and says, "I did not think I would try to die" (9). For many women marriage bed is a death bed. Alexander in *Fault Lines* aptly remarks,

Though you may return to give birth, once married you are part and parcel of the husband's household. You enter those doors wearing the rich makhakodi sari his mother draped over your head at the marriage ceremony. When you finally leave in a simple rosewood casket, the same sari becomes your shroud. (23)

Again in *Fault Lines* she writes, "...learn the trick of silence, of female invisibility" (106), "The first thing a girl should learn is when to keep her silence" (191). Social bondage and restrictions allow woman very less mobility or voice. They are muted by the male patriarchy. Even the institution of marriage is suffocating for a woman because many a times, marriage which is supposed to be a union of man and woman, ruins the relationship of man and woman. For many men marriage is just a license to sleep legally with a woman. Real affection or fulfilment in marriage is a

distant dream for many women. Alexander's concern with her sisterhood, accuses the institution of marriage for ruining a woman's life, "Marriage was the stumbling block, the high threshold stone over which a woman might enter. And she would either walk or fall, bruising herself cruelly" (*Fault Lines* 223). Marriage fails in many cases because,

The husband wants to find himself in his wife, the lover in his mistress, in the form of a stone image; he is seeking in her the myth of his virility, of his sovereignty, of his immediate reality. But he is himself the slave of his double: what an effort to build up an image in which he is always in danger! In spite of everything, his success in this depends upon the capricious freedom of women: he must constantly try to keep this propitious to him. Man is concerned with the effort to appear male, important, superior, he pretends so as to get pretence in return; he, too, is aggressive, uneasy; he feels hostility for women because he is afraid of them, he is afraid of them because he is afraid of the personage, the image, with which he identifies himself. What time and strength he squanders in liquidating, sublimating, transferring complexes, in talking about women, in seducing them, in fearing them! He would be liberated himself in their liberation. But this is precisely what he dreads. And so he obstinately persists in the mystifications intended to keep woman in her chains. (Beauvoir 728)

Marriage or dislocation was the beginning of all problems for Sandhya in Alexander's *Manhattan Music*. Sosa, Sandhya's mother teaches her daughter the old orthodox ideas of patriarchal society. Older women in the novel are portrayed as carriers of tradition, "What else could a woman's life hold but marriage? And a good marriage was one of the few ways to avert loneliness, the dreadful fate of women left to their own devices" (25). Alexander feels suffocated with the institution of marriage and says, "I felt I needed the peace of a place where there was no more marrying, no more taking in marriage." (*Fault Lines*, 226) Society has also made rules for the behavior of women. Women are expected to be mute spectators and blind followers of patriarchal rules, Sandhya in *Manhattan Music* ties her doll's mouth and shuts her eyes, signifying the image of society pushing women to the periphery, "I tore a strip of Mama's favorite sari, the one Grandma gave her. A pink silk strip I tied over Barbie's lips, her mouth. I sealed her eyes with wax" (92). It is also very clear that men's expectations of women guide and mould women to a large extent in a patriarchal society. A society may change in radical ways in different fields, but a man's expectation of a woman may not change. The constructed notions of femininity and the long established patriarchy remained a hurdle for women who wish to explore or to be empowered. Recalling her experience as a young girl, Alexander in her memoir *Fault Lines* recalls her teenage journals where the following words were scribbled, "If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me?". "Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life?"/ "God, why teach me to write?" (102). Dove and Alexander's works include all ages of women, and all types of women. They present the feminine, the feminist and the female in their works. The treatment of women by both the authors exposes their deep concerns for the cause of womenfolk. Since time immemorial,

women have been the victim of their selfless sacrifices, simplicity and humility. Their works show that whether it is the pre-colonial, colonial or the modern society, whatever role/s she may be playing, a woman is always the “other”, the “inferior” and “weaker” sex. Even though they have asserted themselves, they have not achieved the liberty they sought. As such the exploration of the miseries of women as subalterns by both the writers, propose their ambitions and concerns for the women-class at large.

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