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Patriarchy in Three Contemporary Sinhala Novels

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Abstract

The novel is a literary genre which depicts social reality, its discomforts, and political underpinnings. By looking at three Sinhala novels published in 2019, this paper investigates how the woman is portrayed through a patriarchal lens in literature. The chosen novels are Nishkranthiya by Sunethra Rajakarunanayake, Kumara Kobei by Shamel Jayakody and Thee Haa Thaa by Surath de Mel. They have unique narrative styles and a noteworthy representation of femininity. The study is based mainly on the following themes of feminist theory: patriarchy, sex, and gender. The main characters of all three novels are women and patriarchy plays a major role in their lives. All three novels present patriarchy as the norm and it is reinforced through issues concerning domestic violence, gender, and reproduction.

Keywords: Feminism, gender, patriarchy, sexuality, Sinhala novel

Introduction

A novel depicts the socio-political realities of a given society. Through such a literary creation, a novelist presents several characters that replicate human lives. Additionally, studying a novel enables the reader to study a culture. Novels can be dissected to study its characters through different theoretical lenses, such as feminism.

Feminism is a progressive intellectual movement seen in modern social literature. Among its many definitions, feminism can be called a movement whose objective is to effect gender equality while safeguarding women's rights and authority. Crystal (1987) states the following about feminism:

[Feminism is a] socio-political movement whose objective is equality of rights status and power for men and women. It has its roots in early 20th century struggles for women's political emancipation (the suffragettes) but has been broadened in its political scope by the influence of radical left-wing beliefs, especial Marxism which has led feminists to challenge both sexism and the capitalist system which is said to encourage patriarchy. Feminists are not necessarily 'anti men' but against any social system which produces female subordination. (p.438)

With this idea in mind, the study explores how traditional cultural views on patriarchy, which is critiqued by feminists, are represented via three contemporary Sri Lankan novels.

Methodology

This study is a critical analysis of selected aspects of feminist theory as presented in the novels: *Nishkranthiya* by Sunethra Rajakarunanayake, *Kumara Kobei* by Shamel Jayakody and *Thee Haa Thaa* by Surath de Mel.

Analysis and discussion

The protagonist of *Kumara Kobei* is Indiaka, who is a permanent resident of America who works at an Agro-Research Institute. She has passed the marriageable age and is suffering both physically and mentally, hoping for a marriage and children. Indika has a degree in Agriculture and is 42 years old and has a quiet demeanor. Through a dating website, she gets to know Kalinga who lives in California. The story presents the journey Indika embarks on, in search of Kalinga. Indika's best friends, Nirmala and Arundathi join her on the journey and discuss their past. Throughout the novel, only the women actively engage in

conversation with the reader. A glimpse to their past is given through their musings and conversations. Indika says:

During my youth, during a period when I could not say that I did not have boys whom I could have loved, I lived in fear of my brother. I used to change my behaviors in order to set an example to my younger sister all the time. Not a lot of time has passed since I realized that the time when my light would go out was nearing. It was with the speed of a devil that the fear that I would be deprived of my ability to become a mother entered my mind when my menses got delayed by days. (Jayakody, 2019, p.56)

The tragic life of Indika is presented quite well in the novel, she is burdened by the patriarchal conviction that she is incomplete without a child. Pilcher (2005) defines patriarchy as follows:

Literally patriarchy means rule by the male head of a social unit (a family or tribe for example). The Patriarch typically [has] legitimate power over others in the social unit including other (especially younger) men, all women, and children. However, early twentieth century feminist writers have used the concept to refer to the social system of masculine domination over women. (p.93)

It is evident that Indika is conditioned by the patriarchal view that a child completes a woman.

Indika's best friend Nirmala travels across the continent to help Indika realize her dream of marriage and children. Arundathie, whom they meet on this journey, was born in Badulla, Sri Lanka and had travelled from Dubai to Canada. Both have 'controversial' marriages. Arundathie, for example, had got married to an elderly White man named Steven who had been suffering from cancer. Later, she starts a relationship with Prasad, a Sri Lankan descendant, and has two children with him. After separating from Prasad, she dates a married man named Raj and leads a happy life. Indika also learns that Nirmala's Tamil husband, Vinodh has two other marriages, one in Sri Lanka and one in Singapore. Nirmala says:

Initially, I felt like killing Vinodh's women and committing suicide. Later, when I had children, I thought they are women too. Now I feel relief that Vinodh is living with them. There are young children in those families. Those children too should be with their father. (Jayakody, 2019, p.275)

All three characters are victimized by patriarchy in some form or the other.

It is noteworthy that the form, content and extent of patriarchy would change based on different contexts and time scales, as it is a historically and socially constructed concept. As per societal norms, a man is a social animal while a woman is not. This is seen in the comment by Nirmala's aunty who says: "Women always turn towards themselves. Men always turn towards the world. That is why our husbands talk about the Constitution and we make salads. Nirmala's aunty joked" (Jayakody, 2019, p. 235).

Furthermore, women always face societal pressure which limits their freedom. This is seen when Nirmala says the following:

When we were younger, we listened to what our fathers said. Then we became submissive to our husbands after marriage. Then our sons start ordering us around. This is what finally happens when you are a woman. Then we have to act in accordance with someone's orders for a hundred years. (Jayakody, 2019, p. 150)

Father used to lay down rules saying do not do this or that. Fish and meat were not brought to the home. Frying an egg at home was prohibited. We switched on the radio to listen to *pirith* chanting. The TV was put on to see the news. (Jayakody, 2019, p.133)

In the novel, two versions of the narrative are presented: One through the characters of Vinodh, Prasad, Kalinga, and Raj and the other through the characters of Indika, Nirmala, and Arundathie. The disparity between these versions shows the gender discrimination in society. Indika says:

What I did while travelling on the underground trains in New Jersey as well as when walking on the streets was cuddling in my mind, children who were clinging on to other mothers, and filled my mind with their voices. I am very used to sighing while

looking at children's clothes and tiny shoes hanging in shops. (Jayakody, 2019, p. 33)

Also, Nirmala at one point says: "I am telling you; you should quickly get Kalinga agreed to have babies. You do not recognize what love is until the day you have a baby, Indika" (Jayakody, 2019, p.209). Both these instances directly state that the main goal in the life of a housewife is to have children.

The reader meets in this novel, men and women who live vastly different lives, after migrating to America and Canada from Sri Lanka. Through them, the writer analyzes gender in society. These characters, who are influenced by both Sri Lankan and European cultures, support patriarchy and male domination. It is shown that the Asian woman considers patriarchy essential for the functioning of the family, though it makes their lives a tragedy. Indika and the other Sri Lankan women make a lot of effort to uphold patriarchy. This is seen in the histories of the characters.

The protagonist, Indika is a woman from a middle-class family in Minuwangoda. Nirmala studied at Museaus College in Colombo and is the daughter of a businessman. Arundathie is from a village in Badulla and respects the patriarchal values she was brought up with. Arundathie says:

People in our village in Sri Lanka respect the habits that come from generations. Sons who have seen their fathers assaulting their mothers get married and hit their women in an uncalled-for manner. Daughters believe that getting abused by the man she married is what is destined for them. (Jayakody, 2019, p.304)

This presents the blind acceptance of patriarchy in Sri Lankan society. Additionally, the family and the society have power structures that support patriarchy.

Indika goes abroad due to the conflicts that arose due to not finding a suitable life partner and the ownership of family property. Annulling property is a way of controlling women. As Indika was highly educated, she became less 'qualified' for marriage. This questions the belief that education gives leeway for a woman to demand social equality. Ritzer (1988) writes about the difference in the status occupied by men and women in society as follows:

Men and women are situated in society not only differently but also unequally. Specifically, women get less of the material resources, social status, power, and opportunities for self-actualization than do men who share their social location- be it a location based on class, race, occupation, ethnicity, religion, education, nationality, or any other socially significant factor. (p. 449)

This quote shows that across the world, since ancient times, patriarchy has favoured men over women. How male domination is visible in the current society is presented through the novel.

The gender of the three women in the novel defines their predicament in life. With respect to that, the difference between sex and gender should be explored. Basow (1986) attempts to clarify this as follows:

What's the difference between sex and gender? Although frequently used interchangeably the two terms actually differ in important ways. Sex is a biological term. People are termed either male or female depending on their sex organs and genes. In contrast, gender is a psychological and cultural term referring to one's subjective feelings of maleness or femaleness. (p. 2)

Kumara Kobei ends with a loving, warm meeting between Indika and Kalinga. Nirmala and Arundathie, have suffered due to their marriages but are content of having children. However, according to society, they live 'unsuccessful' marriages. Through this representation of the characters, the reader is presented a challenging turning point. In all their engagements with culture, sexuality, and harassment, gender plays a major role.

Another case in point is, throughout the story, women are regarded as being inferior to men. This model applies not only to the couples Indika-Kalinga, Nirmala-Vinodh, and Arundathie – Prasad, but also to most Sri Lankan men and women. It is noteworthy that, although the lives of these women unfold in a foreign land, the traditional conventions, values, and evaluations dominate their lives. Nirmala's aunty supports this when she says: "Men think in that manner. Women are assigned the task of bringing up children within a family, and to manage expenses and shortcomings in the home. When considering outside of the family, a woman cannot do anything" (Jayakody, 2019, p. 237).

Surath de Mel's novel, *Thee ha Thaa* presents a young couple's thoughts on sexuality. It discusses this complex psychological phenomenon while highlighting how patriarchy works in the lives of the protagonists. Geeth and Divya, the protagonists, fall in love at school. From the beginning, Geeth protects Divya but disregards and discredits her. Divya enters the Medical Faculty while Geeth enters the Arts Faculty. It is also mentioned that on various occasions, they have other love affairs. Divya has an affair with her tuition teacher Samindu, and with Pradeep who is a lawyer. Finally, she marries Pradeep and migrates. While Geeth is involved with Divya, he engages in physical relations with Hasini, Nisansala, Mandakini and Kavya. When Divya abandons him, Geeth also gets married. The story ends with Geeth being alone and Divya divorcing Pradeep. When the novel ends, Divya returns to Sri Lanka from time to time, together with her two children, and inquires after the wellbeing of Geeth.

Through the love story of Divya and Geeth, which represents youth in the post-modern era, we are presented the worldview of the Sri Lankan man and woman. Geeth says;

Divya came to see me after many years with her husband and two children with British surnames. I, who thought that I could only be friends with anyone who has female organs below the waist, had to accept Divya as a friend. (de Mel, 2019, p. 386)

The novel presents men as prioritizing physical needs. The woman, on the other hand, is in search of love. Geeth resorts to patriarchal beliefs to dominate Divya and the other women in his life. Divya, on the other hand, anticipates that their relationship would lead to marriage. When Divya conceives, she undergoes an abortion. Geeth says: "To tell you, that was not such a big decision for me. I could not destroy her life due to an unborn person. Let us get an abortion done. I spoke that word with difficulty" (de Mel, 2019, p. 143). This shows his insensitivity, stemming from his patriarchal beliefs.

Oftentimes, socio-cultural factors play a significant role in confining men and women into different roles. The biological difference of sex only determines the ability to bear children. Nevertheless, sex is a historic product with social, economic, and cultural implications and has a strong impact on the relationship between men and women. Moi (2002) writes: "The question of Sexism is a question of the power relationship between the sexes, and this power

struggle will of course be part of the context of all utterances under patriarchy” (p. 157). In the novel, it is clear that Geeth has deep rooted sexist beliefs.

Divya in *Thee ha Thaa* is a doctor but for Geeth, she is a beautiful, young, immature, emotional, obedient and tolerant person who is easily shaken and sexually oppressed. De Mel (2019) writes the following about Divya:

“When Divya cries it is as if blood is flowing from a rose.” (p. 238)

“My mother thinks I am a baby, she said angrily” (p.74)

“Divya smiled like a flower, looked the other way and turning her back on us, joined her friend who was there. Once again she turned like a sylph and looked at me without blinking.” (p. 63)

Geeth’s sexist attitudes towards Divya are seen through these quotes. Garrett (1987) comments on this presentation of women as follows:

Women are frequently compared to plants and food (examples are flower, petal, wall flower, honey, sweetie pie). According to these writers both men and women are compared to animals, but men are invariably compared to strong aggressive animals like lions or tigers while women are compared to domestic or baby animals like cows or chicks, suggesting their helplessness and need for protection. (p.36)

This comment applies to Geeth’s view of Divya, making it clear that he has sexist beliefs.

Patriarchy is a social and ideological structure that considers men to be superior to women. The writer shows how male supremacy is inherited from generation to generation. It makes Divya a victim of male dominance. Divya says:

I have told you that girls from Sri Lanka do not have a group called male friends. All men in Sri Lanka who get close to a girl, try to sleep with them, even with relatives of their brothers or their best friend’s girl. (de Mel, 2019, p.329)

Additionally, Geeth treats Divya in a derogatory manner. In the novel, we find the following comments made by Geeth.

“You bitch, you went galivanting with others, didn’t you? Now, you come back and try to be the faithful, pious baby...The disease within the body has become aggravated and is struggling to come out” (de Mel, 2019, p.262)

“Threatening women has become a habit with me. I bellowed like a lion, at a cat and intimidated her” (de Mel, 2019, p.269)

These comments show his sense of superiority over Divya.

Geeth is also violent towards Divya. Domestic violence hinders Divya from making her own decisions. The domestic violence is sometimes briefly replaced by cordiality, which again transform to conflictive violence. This is apparent throughout the novel. Geeth says:

Those who were around us knew us as an ideal couple in love. I hit her across the cheek swiftly by extending my hand, at the speed she came in and was passing me. I gave her a kick with my right foot to her naked back which was the geographical spot I most loved in life. (de Mel, 2019, p. 235)

Thus, the novel presents the male as being inclined towards violence by nature and the female as inherently non-violent and peaceful. Within this power structure of patriarchy, the supremacy of the man, his greatness and his superiority are established.

Gender also plays a major role in the relationship between Geeth and Divya. Marger (1999) writes the following on gender:

What is gender? And how does it differ from sex? These are commonly used terms often without consideration for the important difference between them. Let us consider sex first. At birth we are biologically male or female. Our sexual organs are different, our hormones and other aspects of body chemistry are different, and our biological functions are different. Women give birth; men do not. These relatively fixed physiological and biological differences are what define sex. (p.316)

In literature, gender is viewed as a social construct. Abeysekera (2001) questions gender writes; “Neither [the man nor the woman] should be regarded as subordinate to the other. Yet we still live in a largely patriarchal society in which history is “his story” – not hers! (Abeysekera, 2001, p. 389). In the same light, feminists argue that culture shapes gender

roles, to the advantage of the man. The novel reflects this by saying that giving birth is an obligation for women even at present. Geeth implies this when he says: “I did not know anything about abortions. How could I become her murderer? It would be better to be the murderer of my child” (de Mel, 2019, p. 144).

Surath de Mel attempts to portray how the contemporary men and women in Sri Lankan society surpass traditional conventions. Love is depicted as a radical emotion in the novel. Also, both protagonists maintain multiple relationships, challenging societal norms. Additionally, although a victim of male supremacy, Divya does not concede in the face of gender discrimination and violence. Geeth thinks:

I feel once again that I dedicated my entire life, not for her but for an imaginary character of a different clan or tribe, I built up within her image. Even I did not see my true self but the character that I had built up within my mind of who I wanted to be. (de Mel, 2019, p.388)

Gunathilaka and Jayaweera (1979) say that the Sinhala novel has failed to adequately portray the role played by the woman in the contemporary Sri Lankan society. As seen in the arguments made so far, this void is addressed to some extent in the novel *Thee ha Thaa*.

In the novel *Nishkranthiya*, the reader is presented only with female characters. The males who have made a decisive impact on their lives are invisible. Ranthilaka, Kumuditha, Jayamangala, and Shantha suffer from both physical and mental pressures together with Migas, Joy, Sathyayan, Gopalan, Sri Kanth and Wilbert.

The three women Ranthilaka, Kumuditha and Jayamangala are the protagonists of the story. Since the death of Ranthilaka's mother, she has been pressurized from her stepmother. Later, she marries Migas, a widower with one child. The daughter from his first marriage, Jayamangala, is brought up by her father and Ranthilaka. Jayamangala becomes pregnant with the child of Ranthilaka's brother, Joy. Joy is married and is a father of three children. Jayamangala has an independent, somewhat stubborn character. It is Ranthilaka who brings up Jayamangala's daughter, Kumuditha. Although Jayamangala gets married to a Minister named Ranabahu, due to his attempts to molest Kumuditha, she leaves him and goes to India with her daughter. Here, Kumuditha gets married to a young Tamil man named Sathyayan. Since he was involved in politics, he suddenly disappears. Kumuditha who suffered through

all these experiences becomes mentally disturbed and loses her memory. The story ends with Ranthilaka getting down Jayamangala back to Sri Lanka and handing over Kumuditha.

This novel presents the need to conscientiously understand patriarchy and its role in inflicting physical and mental agony on women. The physical and mental pressure experienced by Jayamangala, Santhosh's (Joy) girlfriend, Ranabahu's wife and Queen Kalayana at the Mahamaya Aramaya is presented in the story. The reason for Kumuditha to lose her memory is the unending grief that she, her mother and her mother's stepmother suffered. In her grief, Jayamangala says:

Even if it was my younger brother, he was wrong. This one was not even eighteen years old... Since father was a man of few words, I taught him things he did not know so that he could talk as he wanted. To bring good books, the Vesak lanterns that were required by the school, items required for plays, I was asked if only Santhosham was there to find those things. [...] Later it was said that what Santhosham wanted was to only cuddle up and sleep like a baby. But she would not have realized the fact that men's bodies could not sustain such things. (Rajakarunanayake, 2019, p.139)

The marriage of Joy to the brother of her stepmother makes Jayamangala's future bleak and Jayamangala's daughter Kumuditha is molested by her mother's second husband. Ranthilaka says:

One day you went to a party and came home drunk. Jayamangala had fallen asleep. That man, as if he could not find the room came into your room and you were not even aware of it, apparently. When you suddenly woke up, that fellow was in the bed. (Rajakarunanayake, 2019, p.157)

These incidents in the novel show that women are always unsafe in the society, no matter where they are and at what age they are.

Within the patriarchal social structure, the man is regarded as the norm and the woman is regarded as the 'other'. This is seen through all the female characters in *Nishkranthiya*. Subaddha, the female bikkuni says:

I entered bikkhuni-hood when I was about to be married off, by staying near a Manju Sri Buddha Statue Board without eating or drinking and with a shaven head. But after I was ordained, I was assigned the task of making food for the Lamas. (Rajakarunanayake, 2019, p. 294)

Gender is a social construct that oppresses the woman. Patriarchy supports this oppression. This is evident in the disparity between the rights of men and women in society. Even in literature this disparity is evident. Eglinton (2015) says:

A discourse in this context is a structure of ideas forming an intellectual body with a certain amount of influence in a society's power networks such as philosophy, religion, science, and humanities. Understanding how dominant discourses picture women can help feminist critics make sense of the way patriarchy treats women in the literary world, both as characters in books and as writers of books. It is, therefore, unsurprising that feminist thinkers frequently refer to classical pictures of women as patriarchal constructs. (p.8)

This supports the view of feminists who believe that literature reflects society's attitudes towards women, their situation, roles, and aspirations. This gendered portrayal of women is seen in Rajakarunanayake's novel as well.

From the above discussion it is clear that in Sri Lanka, women are victims of subordination, oppression and discrimination. That has been portrayed by above three novels in a descriptive manner. Through these novels, the writers have questioned male supremacy, the society's treatment of women and the blind adherence to patriarchy.

Conclusion

The three novels examined in this paper were recommended for the 'Literary Awards-2019'. They also resulted in discussions and debates in society. In this research, they are critiqued in light of patriarchy and gender. The main arguments of the paper are summarized below.

Firstly, in a patriarchal society women experience oppression, discrimination and ill-treatment. Secondly, patriarchy views women as sentimental, irrational, and timid while men are viewed as analytic, rational and brave. Finally, gender norms in society lead to social inequality. Hence, male dominance, which limits the freedom of women, should be

eradicated from society. More writing that promotes these values will help solidify these ideas in the Sri Lankan society.

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