

Using literature to create awareness about the status of women in society

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Abstract

In order to ensure that women have wider access to education, the current batch of learners ought to be better educated about the status of women in our society. Once they could better visualize the society around them, they could take an initiative to improve the conditions of the women around them. This paper proposes that Indian literary texts which portray the condition of women in society could be used in schools to make students better judges of their surroundings and hence, could be a palpable idea to achieve the same. It further explores the possibility of using SudhaMurty's Dollar Bahu and Mahashweta. Since both texts are set in the Indian context, the learners would be able to envisage the real situation and construct their knowledge of society around the same.

Introduction

According to the Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, the policy of education was last amended in 1922 and there are a lot changes which are being proposed. It beckons the Republic of India to join the process of contributing ideas to the New Education Policy one of the aims of which is to bridge gender and social gaps in higher education. The questions raised under this section relate to the caste system, giving women a secure environment such that they could increasingly be a part of higher education, and other issues.

In fact, according to me, one of the reasons why women are not encouraged to enroll for higher education is marriage and also that if they develop a broader outlook, they may not be able to uphold social values to the extent that the older generation would like them to, mainly because they would rather want to be liberated from the norms that restrict their freedom.

In order to achieve the objective of ensuring that more women participate in higher education, it is essential that an awareness of the perpetrations on women, especially the kind of torture that they have to undergo at a mental level is created and consequently, this could lead people to become more open-

mindful and inclusive in nature. This is already being done on a large scale by TV and radio advertisement campaigns. One of the other ways of accomplishing this mammoth task could be to exploit literary texts that elaborate on gender stereotypes as well as texts that break them. This would in the least ensure that the learners of this age are more liberal and impartial. It could be a greater advantage if these texts include common themes which the learners could interact with. Also, instead of choosing western texts, it could have a wider reach if the text selected is written in Indian English. This could mainly be effective since educators would engage learners in real-life learning.

In light of this solution, this paper discusses two novels by Sudha Murthy, *Dollar Bahu* and *Mahashweta* which have been analyzed from the perspective of how they could enhance the understanding of the Indian society and be a vehicle in our classrooms to help education transcend the social construct of gender.

Why SudhaMurthy?

Culture is an integral component not only of language but also literature. Literary works reflect the culture of the context in which it is written. SudhaMurthy's novels are based in India and replicate Indianness to a large extent through language, characters, setting, plot and themes that are embedded in the text. Hence, her texts could then be used to educate the learners.

Since she is born and raised in India, it could be safely assumed that SudhaMurthy is quite conversant with the culture that she depicts in her works. The works in question for this paper, *Dollar Bahu* and *Mahashweta* are set in a backdrop that the writer is familiar with. *Dollar Bahu* essentially deals with a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship and how finances play a key role in shaping it. *Mahashweta* represents a woman who endures social and familial criticisms and yet builds independently her stand in society.

A reader in class would relate immensely to the situations presented in these two novels mainly because all of them are deeply entrenched in the Indian society, in fact, (s)he may be able to make connections with his/her own family as well. Further, the language used in these texts is neither British English, nor American but Indian, which contributes further to the understanding of the text. The local language helps the learner identify with and immerse himself/herself into the text.

This paper will necessarily examine the characters presented in the texts and how they could be capitalized on to create an impact on the learners and give them a glimpse of the social issues that women face.

Dollar Bahu

Set in the cities of Dharwad and Bangalore in India and a few cities in America. The major characters are christened Vinuta, Gouramma and Jamuna. These names are of great significance to an Indian reader. Vinuta means something exceptionally new, Gouri (short of Gouramma as her husband calls her) is the name of one of the Hindu Goddesses that means highest and Jamuna refers to one of the Indian rivers. The first two names are superlatives to a large extent and the third one as a water body that is continuously in motion does not permit any stagnancy. Rivers are often associated with nourishment, fertility and selflessness. The aptness of these names is crucial to the progress of the novel.

These three major women protagonists, characters, Vinuta, Gouramma and Jamuna, of the novel reiterate the gender stereotypes in society - Vinuta models an ideal daughter-in-law, Gouramma is caricatured based on typical beliefs of what a mother-in-law is, Jamuna represents what a daughter-in-law should not do. Vinuta, unfortunately, is caught in the constraints of her typical household and finds it difficult to free from the shackles until her father-in-law extends his support. Encouraged to move away from her in-laws, she does succeed in creating a new world for herself back at her native place. Gouramma is stationed at the summit of the family; she calls the shots and takes most of the significant decisions. The plot moves towards a climax as she loses that position in the States. Though Jamuna compounds the dollars that enter the threshold of the Gouramma's household, the complexity of her behaviour is not very evident to Gouramma. These vignettes being an extract from the Indian society, could make the learners more responsive towards the attitude of the patriarchal society towards the fairer sex.

Vinuta is quite a typical portrait rather a caricature of how an Indian bahu is expected to be; obedient, sacrificial, versatile and completely malleable. The language used to describe her conforms to the same. 'Gouramma really liked Vinuta's attitude: totally unselfish and willing to adjust to any situation.' (pg. 45) Here, 'really' denotes how sincerely she had an affinity for Vinuta. However, it was not for her as a person. Her liking was limited to Vinuta's attitude.

Further, 'totally' signifies the intensity to which Vinuta was engrossed with the household chores. Further, the author chooses to use the adjective 'unselfish' rather than 'selfless' which through a negative prefix affirms what she is not. Using 'to any situation' affirms her adaptability. The presence of this sentence itself strikes the reader. Had this been obvious and did not contain a clue to someone taking over Gouramma's preferences, the writer may not have chosen to put this in. This shows a learner how language is infused with a lot of meaning, whether consciously intended or not. It could make the

learner more sentient and sensible and respond to the language that is used for women. While this text is discussed in class, it is essential to emphasise the language used by Gouramma for Vinuta and Jamuna in the first half of the plot to make the learners aware of language is a key ingredient in creating and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Analysing the text in greater detail will help the learners understand how it imitates reality.

Being educated could help escape being stereotyped is a myth that could be shattered. Vinuta has been to college and is a teacher, however, she is not free neither from the shackles of the traditional image of a daughter-in-law, nor is she able to rebel against her mother-in-law nor is she able to make her husband understand the situation and contribute to her mental well-being. Though her father-in-law is sensitive, he plays quite a passive role in the text. On the other hand, Jamuna is educated as it were, but makes no effort to redeem Vinuta; on the contrary she is the reason why Vinuta experiences discrimination. Indurate as she is towards Vinuta's situation, she constantly adds fuel to fire. However, it should also be conveyed to the students that she is not directly responsible for Vinuta's condition. The presence of Gouramma on the scene makes a huge difference; her interpretation of the situation causes misery in Vinuta's life. Nothing much has been said about her education. Hence, the idea that could be shared with learners on this topic of education is education is not the ultimate saviour. It does trigger off one's critical senses but to apply it in our daily life, one ought to be more sensitive to others' needs.

Extremely important are the episodes that take place in the States which leads to moments of realization in Gouramma. The various roles that women play and the parallels that she draws with India aid the learner differentiate between the status of women in both countries. For instance, AshaPatil earned freedom from a dominating household as she migrated to the States with her husband, the interdependence that she and her husband were committed to. She says, 'It is only because of this country that all this has been possible. There are many women like me in India, tortured by their mothers-in-law. But they do not have any option.'(124, Murthy). These words and this incident both could have an immense impression on the learners' minds. They could in fact, be motivated to reform the situation in India and create a more conducive environment for women.

Mahashweta

The blurb of the text says, 'Mahashweta is an inspiring story of courage in the face of betrayals and disappointment. This poignant tale offers hope to those who suffer prejudice in society even today.' The review in The Hindu affirms, 'Murthy attacks the stereotypes that we often live with but cannot or do not reject it...It is a book that compels you to look inwards and question your attitudes.'

Anupama is adept at translating Banabhatta's plays and putting them up for the audience of the 21st Century. Here again, like Chandru in Dollar Bahu, Dr. Anand falls in love with Anupama's voice to begin with. The incomparable and the unique then gets married to happiness and joy. The institution of their marriage collapses when a white patch is found on her foot and her in-laws abandon her as soon as they learn it is an early sign of leukoderma. Dr. Anand, in spite of being a doctor fails to acknowledge and accept that leukoderma is accidental; Anupama obviously didn't choose to be 'diseased'. The reader here could delve into the irony of the social customs and traditions the nuptial ceremony when the would-be husband promises to support and be with his wife for eternity, how his professional know-how does not help him understand a personal problem. That her step-sister's engagement is called off because of Anupama is another stigma that could be discussed in class in great detail.

The presence of a character like Hari, Sumithra's husband who under the pretext of helping her actually harbours the idea of having a physical relationship with her is significant to our understanding of social hypocrisy. This reveals the kind of treatment meted out to a woman who has been abandoned by her husband along with how a woman's beauty is perceived as an object to be conquered and possessed. So is the case with Anand as well. When he is in England pursuing his higher education and gets to know about the white patch on Anupama's foot, he concerns himself with his reputation rather than empathizing with his wife's condition. He deems her beauty as his trophy that has been tarnished. On the other hand, Shamanna has no choice but to provide her shelter by 'virtue' of being her father. However, his letters to his son-in-law are more subservient and deferential rather than holding him responsible for deserting his daughter. Till his end, he wished his daughter would return to her husband this clearly indicates the plight of women in our social arena. A woman's identity seems to be highly dependent on her husband.

Sabakka's role is noteworthy as a step-mother. Her conduct is no different from Radhakka, the mother-in-law. In fact, her role corroborates the stereotype about step-mothers being dismissive and contemptuous towards the first wife's children. The only point in the plot when she appreciates Anupama is because she is in need of her earnings.

The learners must be sensitized to the portrayal of these characters since they echo nuances of real-life. The role of educators here is to facilitate the understanding of the existence of the clichés in society and create awareness. The power of education could only be experienced if the society is free of these malicious attitudes towards women. Pertinent questions that the learners could ask their surroundings are raised when Anand returns to Anupama and coaxes her to come back to him, 'Which

mistake are you seeking forgiveness for? [...] Did you speak when you first got to know about my condition? Was it my fault...? Is it my fault that I am a poor man's daughter?' She further questions him about his commitment for their relationship.

Further, Anupama reconstructs her life and in the end refuses not only to return to Anand but also bids Vasant to pursue his dreams without her since she values her economic and social independence and would not want to be entangled in the vicious circle of societal norms again. What AshaPatil in Dollar Bahu overcame in America, Anupama makes it happen in India. Nevertheless, it required a cosmopolitan city like Bombay.

Putting the texts together

The interplay of relationships between daughters-in-law and the family that she adopts as her own is vividly described in these two texts Dollar Bahu and Mahashweta. Apart from which the issues that arise in a marriage are mirrored with great care. Also, a learner would notice that two of the three marriages Vinuta's, Jamuna's and Anupama's - in the two texts are love marriages. The common myth that a love marriage could sustain better is also broken; the expectations from a daughter-in-law especially are heightened in the case of a love marriage. In these aspects and others as discussed above, the two texts question the beliefs deeply entrenched in the Indian society.

Moreover, SudhaMurty has fashioned Vinuta and Mahashweta in diametrically opposite ways. One succumbs to the depression, as AshaPatil remarks and the other is driven to the point of suicide but a certain realization dawns on her and her life takes a different course all together. One chooses to be caught in the web of social restrictions and the other challenges the world around her and establishes her identity. Jamuna, on the other hand comes forth as someone who defies the circles of family and leads her life on her terms and conditions. However the difference between Jamuna and Vinuta and Mahashweta is the former does not have to struggle her way through since is born into a rich family whereas the other two are perennially bound to carve a niche for themselves.

In both texts, the sister-in-laws, Surabhi and Girija survive and get away from their pre-marriage affairs quite conveniently and marry into a different social background or a wealthier family. This portrayal again, is quite contradictory to the virtues of commitment and dedication that the woman protagonists embody.

When the learners are made perceptive and cognizant of the presence of these characters in society, they would be able to promote better education which is not only textbook knowledge but a more practical one which would help a woman sustain herself and fend for herself. The role of education, especially higher education would be broadened.

Another example

These fictional novels could be supported by a real-life incident that Sudha Murthy limns in her collection of non-fictional stories entitled *The Old Man and his God*. Since the author has chosen to classify this text as non-fiction, we could assume that this is a collection of real-life experiences. The second narrative in this anthology, *Freedom of Speech* is a classic example of a paradoxical situation that often is a characteristic of life. Alka, the author's friend named as the 'Queen of Speech' in her college days due to her 'bold, convincing and razor sharp' arguments was to give a speech on 'Freedom of Speech'. This introduction clearly portrays Alka as may be an upper middle class lady. The contrast in the plot lies between her and her maid, Tulsi. It is often believed that the consequences of gender stereotypes are more prevalent in the lower classes. This myth is shattered as this story unfolds. The vivid account of the argument between Tulsi and her husband on financial matters in a public place versus the silence that Alka resorts to in the four walls of her house on the same issue shows how inherent the stereotypes are in certain classes of the society as well as how acutely ingrained the duties of a wife are and also, how deep-rooted the notion of the wife as the peacemaker of a family is that she could not question her husband when he mortgaged their only asset, their flat to invest in his business which wasn't doing well; what is more baffling is that her husband had not informed her either.

Both characters, Tulsi and Alka could contribute immensely to the understanding of gender stereotypes in classrooms. They would help the learners visualize the status of women in society in the backdrop of the classes that it is divided into. It also leads the learners to examine how education may not always culminate in the emancipation of women or may be, education, through the texts that it uses reinforces the stereotypes in such a way that women are unable to break free from the same.

Conclusion

These texts show how educated women could be victims to social restrictions and are subdued to an extent that they don't extend their knowledge to real-life. Mahashweta is quite an exception in that case who reconstructs her life. When the learners are well-versed with the conditions of the society through texts of these kind, they could then make an effort to work for the women who are not privileged enough to register for higher education. These texts would in a way provoke them to work for the emancipation of women.

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