Exhibition of Traditional Gender Roles through Symbolic and Semiotic use of Language in Alice Munro's 'Royal Beatings'

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Abstract

This paper presents the feminist analysis of short story 'Royal Beatings'. It involves the beating of a teenage girl by her father who became the victim of domestic violence on her misconduct with her stepmother. The theoretical framework used for analysis is 'Feminism' and character's actions are analyzed from the two feministic lenses that are 'Traditional Gender Roles' and Julia Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic perspective of language. The paper concludes that deep rooted patriarchal structures where men are deemed authoritative, have control on their female members and a high degree influence in their lives are considered the real causes of female oppression.

Keywords

Female oppression, Patriarchy, Traditional gender roles, Violence

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Introduction:

The hands and gloves relationship of language and literature is evident from the fact that language is a medium of expression of one's experience about life. It is through language that writers bring to light the patterns of societal structures which have implied meanings and are ruled by certain ideology in the interests of the dominant group. Patriarchal structures are dominant in many societies of the world where females face oppression at the hands of their male partners. Literature is one of the ways of exhibiting such oppressive structures. Alice Munro is a Canadian Feminist writer and her short stories cover feminist themes highlighting staunch patriarchal structures, emphasizing performance of traditional gender roles and psychological effect on females. Her stories can be analyzed from different perspectives like Marxist feminism and psychoanalytic feminism. The current study involves the analysis of her short story 'Royal Beatings' taken from her short stories book compiled by Margret Atwood. This short story is based on the life of a teenage girl Rose, whose father remarried after the death of her mother. She faced extreme behaviors of her step mother and bore cruel treatment of her father. Due to her misconduct, she also received occasional beatings from him. Story's sub plot also reveals female victimization carried out by dominating and patriarchal figure of the family that is father. Becky Tyde is polio-stricken child with twisted neck, despite having sympathy for her deformity she was occasionally beaten by her father and mocked by society. It was through language that both girls faced verbal oppression which according to Kristeva presents symbolic perspective of language. Kristeva (1980) is concerned both with gender and language. According to her, gender and language are socially and politically important phenomena. It is no denying the fact that gender is a phenomenon of social importance and the exhibition of unequal power relations between men and women calls for its importance as political phenomenon. In patriarchal society, males and females are expected to perform specified functions according to their socially constructed roles as men or women and whenever they are found deviating from the performance of their expected roles they are criticized by society as not conforming to socially establish societal structures. This short story revolves around Rose who lives with her family including her father, her stepmother Flo and her half-brother Brian in a poor part of town named West Hanratty near Ontario, Canada. Rose's mother died long enough because of blood clot in her lungs and whatever she remembered about her mother were the only details Flo told her. Her father worked in a woodshed where he repaired furniture and restored the seats and backs of caned chair. Flo turned the front room of the woodshed into a grocery store and was occasionally visited by Becky Tede. Before marrying Rose's father, Flo worked as a waitress. Occasionally, she went Hanratty (west) for shopping and one day when she returned home, she and Rose got on a heated argument and it was then, when Royal beatings actually begin. Rose used slang language for her and she complained it to her husband and he kicked her with legs, hit her against the wall and banged her face with his belt. This act intensified her resentment and hatred for Rose.

The sub plot of the story involves the tale of Becky Tyde, who is sick with polio and has a twisted neck since childhood and her brother Robert works in the butcher shop. Because of deformity Becky was restricted to her home and people used to make fun of her malformation. It was said that she was also occasionally beaten by her father. One day, her father Tyde got a horsewhipping from three influential persons in town and he concluded they were after his

money, and one day news of his father's death came and the probable cause of death was reported to be pneumonia. After few days, all culprits were set free and it was also that Robert and Becky were not interested in getting justice done. The objective of this study is to analyze the performance of traditional gender roles in Alice Munro's short story 'Royal Beatings' and also to highlight the way language is used in the exhibition of patriarchal structures of society. Female oppression is an important topic of discussion around the Globe as there are many international organizations working for the rights of Women yet women are oppressed in one way or the other. The exploration of female oppression in literature helps reveal the way women are oppressed as literary stories are also based on real life stories.

Literature Review:

The critical analysis of Alice Munro's short stories had been conducted in a collective manner of analyzing themes of many stories in general. While, the analysis of individual stories is not found in common trend. Parabaker and Satish (2011) in their article 'Alice Munro's stories and Feminism' commented that Munro has revealed various barriers to women's individuality autonomy. 'In her stories Munro also reveals the barriers to. The childhood experiences of the Munro taught her how to expose the plight of women in her stories. Her stories present feministic perspective of the woman's feelings towards society. Alice Munro's stories specialize in presenting unequal status of male and females in the society and highlight gender discrimination which Parabarker and Satish (2011) pointed out in another article "Indictment of Gender Discrimination in the lives of Alice Munro's Girls and Women"' and are of the view that 'The gender discrimination is socially constructed by the parents, relatives, neighbors, environment. Culture and society slowly inject this social discrimination in the psyche of the individuals. Boys are considered strong while girls are given feminine designation of being. As a result, such expression matters a lot in shaping the personality and self-image of boys and girls. In both the articles Parabarker and Satish highlighted the role of society in restricting women's autonomy and the promotion of their roles which are socially constructed. In conforming to societal patterns women often have to undergo complex experiences which are also pointed out by Sukumaran (2000) in her thesis "Feminist poetics in Alice Munro and Anita Desai" who highlighted complexities of experiences that women faced and found themselves trapped in hostile patriarchal structures. Kalpana (1995) in her dissertation titled 'Reshaping the self: Feminine identities in the short stories of Alice Munro and Sushi Deshpande' analyzed the way Feminine identities have been threatened by colonial influence and patriarchal ideologies. Although many writers have discussed different perspectives of Alice Munro's Short stories, but hardly had anyone paid attention to the language used in her stories. Moreover, the analysis of her short story 'Royal Beatings' is not made from Feministic and linguistic perspective. That's why, this study situates well in that literature gap.

Research Methodology

The theoretical framework used in this study is Feminism. Formerly feminism emerged as movement in later half of nineteenth century characterized by first wave feministic movement associated with female Suffrage, it was followed by second wave movement of 1960s with the advocacy of political and economic rights of women and the third wave movement in 1990s sought to win social and familial rights for women. It emerged into theory characterized by the works of Judith's butler, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and many other feminists.

Feminist movements were marked with the advocacy of equal rights for women as of men and criticized patriarchal structures of society involved in social, political and economic oppression of females. Soul of feminism lies in the distinction of two concepts that are sex and gender. Sex and Gender stand in slight contrast to each other with former presenting the ascribed status of humans as being male or female that is biologically determined and the latter describes the social implications on male and female which is determined by society that what they have to do, when and how they have to carry out actions. It is basically social construction of males and females which make them fit into socially defined categories of masculine and feminine. According to Tyson (2004), 'sex refers to the biological constitution of humans as female or male while the word gender refers to the cultural programming of the same as feminine or masculine'. The expectations of society from men and women compel them to perform their traditional gender roles. Green (2010) reports that the term 'Gender Roles' or more appropriately 'Gender Identity' was introduced by Robert Stoller and according to Tyson (2004), the traditional gender roles cast men as protective, rational, decisive and strong, they cast women as weak, emotional (irrational), submissive and nurturing. These roles are also socially defined which is in fact 'Doing Gender' about which West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that gender is something that we 'perform' and not something we are and they founded a new paradigm of 'doing gender'. Eagly and Kite (1987) are of the view that 'as roles of men and women are determined by society, so how they accommodate themselves in these roles is based on their acquisition of 'skill-related roles' for instance girls and women learn domestic skills which are sewing and cooking while men learn those skills which are profitable in the paid economy'.

Another feministic theory that is applied on the short story is Julia Kristeva's language perspective consisting of two aspects which are the symbolic and the semiotic. According to Tyson (2004), the symbolic aspect is the domain where words operate while meanings are ascribed to them. On the other hand, semiotic aspect of language is that part of the language which consists of rhythm, intonation. The rise and fall of the speech direct our body language and also reveals our feelings and bodily drives'. According to Kristeva (1984) the symbolic aspect of language helps us to direct refer. It is rule-bound, propositional, systematic, and dependent on a practical separation between subject and the object, attached to the social order and can also exist independent of its reference. The semiotic dimension of language bears the trace of language user's body and also confirms the protolinguistic presence of the mother. And at times, symbolic aspect of language also signifies meanings. Groder and Kreiswirth (1997) quoted Kristeva's views about symbolic as well as semiotic meanings in their book. The symbolic is that element of meaning in which signification also does signify. The symbolic aspect is associated with syntax engenders. According to her, the relation between symbolic and semiotic aspect of language is kind of dialectic oscillation which means without semiotic aspect, language would have been empty, if not impossible. When it comes to language and gender, this signification of meanings refers to the system of control and dominance. In the same way, Keltner (2011) is of view that symbolic meaning is one that is related to power and dominance while semiotic meaning is related to natural implications of symbols. Symbolic aspects of language determine the authoritative nature of men, their desire to control, to oppress women and symbolizes patriarchy while at the same time it teaches woman to be

subordinate, be submissive and silent to whatever violence they face from their male members of the society.

Data Analysis

Alice Munro's short story 'Royal Beatings', from Atwood's (2008), Alice Munro's selected stories, is analyzed by applying Feministic framework and special emphasis is on highlighting 'Traditional Gender Roles' and unveiling symbolic and semiotic aspects of language as used in the story. Rose's stepmother Flo warned her not to repeat humming slang in the form of poetic verses, which she learned from school and also taught Brian. And she said,

"Oh, I heard you!" Flo says. "I heard that! I'm warning you!"

"So she is. Brian takes the warning. He runs away, out the woodshed door, to do as she likes".

"Being a boy, free to help or not, involve himself or not. Not committed to the household struggle".

(Atwood 2008: p. 152)

When Flo warned Brian not to repeat it, he at once obeyed what his mother ordered him to do and went into the woodshed. Here traditional gender roles are highlighted as well when writer says Brian is not compelled to do household chores and it is a matter of choice for males either they get themselves involved in such activities or not as they are supposed to do tasks related to business. While in the next line it is said, "not committed to the household struggle" it reflects the idea that boys are not supposed to involve in house hold struggles but it is something associated with girls.

Not only in the main plot of the story there is reflection of traditional gender roles but it is presented in the subplot as well. Becky Tyde was a polio-stricken girl but people expected her to do her household works and inquired Robert (her brother) about it by saying,

"How about your sister, Robert? Is she altogether better now?"

"Yes".

"Does she do the housework? Does she get your supper?"

"Yes".

"And is your father good to her, Robert?" (Atwood 2008: p. 153)

By applying Kristeva's theory of two linguistics aspects, it is observed that patriarchy is presented in various symbols of dominance, and control by Rose's father. When Rose and her step mother had heated arguments, Flo's told everything to her father and he became furious and started beating her even without inquiring the mother.

"She runs around the room; she tries to get to the doors. Her father blocks her off. Her father is after her, cracking the belt at her when he can, then abandoning it and using his hands".

(Atwood 2008: p. 155)

Her father occasionally used to beat her and the person who was behind this cruelty was her step mother. Here, woman is also depicted devilish. In this story, woman is not only an object

or symbol of victimization but she is also the one responsible for inflicting cruel treatment to other women and Flo also warned her when she said.

“All right, says Flo”. “You’ve done it this time”. “All right.”

and then went to Rose’s father and told him about her misconduct as the writer reports,

‘She calls Rose’s Father. She calls him in a warning summoning voice, as if against her will preparing him for bad news. (Atwood 2008: p. 155)

In this story, semiotic perspective of languages is also observed which intensifies the cruel actions of Rose’s father and her miserable situation.

One can find alliteration in the following line which depicts extreme behavior of Rose’s father.

“Hatred is right. Pleasure is right. His face loosens and changes and grows”. (Atwood 2008: p. 157)

At the same time, Flo made her realize about her father’s anger and depicted it by using similes when she says,

“He is coming over to Rose. He pushes her off the table. His face, like his voice, is quiet, out of character. He is like a bad actor, who turns a part grotesque”. (Atwood 2008: p.157)

Rose was well aware of her father’s temper and knew that how she will be treated by her father writer has used Anaphora to highlight her feelings when she said,

“Rose knows that, she knows everything about him”. ((Atwood 2008: p. 150)

After few lines, anaphora is used to present her terrified condition as she was afraid of being beaten.

“She runs, she screams, she implores” (Atwood 2008: p. 156)

One of the semiotic aspects of languages is alliteration, through which writer has intensified the situation of miserable girl and the way she was beaten by her father.

As she says,

“Bang over the ear, then bang over the other ear, Back and forth, her head ringing. Bang over in the face, and bang in the face again. He shakes her and hit her against the wall, he kicks her legs”. (Atwood 2008: p. 155)

And then used anaphora

“He throws rose quiet down. Or perhaps she throws herself down”. (Atwood 2008: p.155)

Writer has used language in such a way so as to depict the plight of a miserable girl who was pitilessly being beaten by her cruel father. After the beatings, her anger and rage against her step mother used to increase gradually.

Discussion

In this story, patriarchal society has been presented where performance of traditional gender roles is expected from women, even Becky Tyde, who had malformed body because of polio was also criticized for not being able to perform her duties. When Rose’ step mother restricted

her and her brother Brian for using abusive language, he at once stepped out of the house as he is not expected to get involved in household chores. This concept is associated with the application of Kristeva's theory of two language perspectives in which symbolic aspect of language reflected the underlying patriarchal structures of society where men try to control and dominate women. While semiotic aspect revealed the language through which writer has presented the misery and plight of poor girl, Rose. The psychological effect of domestic violence on girls is also revealed through language used by Rose. Being polio-stricken Becky Tyde was restricted at home and couldn't work according to her wishes. While Rose was psychologically affected because of her father's second marriage and when she was beaten because of Flo, her resentment against Flo intensified.

Conclusion

The feminist analysis of Alice Munro's short story reveals the intense demonstration of traditional gender roles through the use of two language perspectives namely symbolic and semiotics which unveiled patriarchal structures packed with dominance and control. For men, using tactics to control women can be a mere practice of patriarchal structures but it can have deep and long-lasting effects on women because it can bruise them psychologically as has been depicted in the story. This research is based only on the study of a single short story of Alice Munro while other studies can be conducted by analyzing two or three short stories of the writer. Moreover, this story can also be analyzed from the perspective of Marxist Feminism as well. The analysis of this short story presents the way language is used to oppress the women. Even in this developed World, female oppression is practiced in different areas. The revelation of female oppression is significant in order to make women aware of this interplay of language aim at suppressing and subjugating them.

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