



WHIMSICAL PATRIARCHAL PERPETRATION AND THE ALTERITY OF WOMAN IN A.K. RAMANUJAN'S SHORT STORY "A FLOWERING TREE"

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Abstract:

From ancient times, domestic violence has become one of the most dangerous issues not only in India but throughout the world. Domestic violence is such an abusive activity which basically affects the weaker section of human kind. In patriarchal society as women are considered to be more vulnerable and subservient, they are the worst sufferer of it. Now-a-days they are always facing physical and emotional violence by their family members and intimate partners who have an inclination to keep them under control. The present paper is an attempt to study how A.K. Ramanujan addresses the issue of domestic violence against Indian women in his short story "A Flowering Tree". This paper also strives to highlight how domestic violence easily victimizes the women and reduces their status as an ignored object in our patriarchal society. Apart from it, the paper investigates the theme of alterity through the exploration of transformation and the status of women in Indian society.

Keywords: *Domestic Violence, Vulnerability, Transformation, Objectification, Dehumanisation, Patriarchy, Folktale.*

Domestic violence is a common phenomenon in every society, every civilization. It is a pattern of physical, sexual or psychological abuse directed towards women irrespective of their age, race, and caste, social and economic and political status. It is a type of violence which basically happens within the home. In every patriarchal society around this world the women are treated as inferior being in many levels and consequently they are subjected to discrimination, exploitation and violence. They would not get any respect and honour. Instead, they have experienced mental illness, depression, ill health etc.

In mostly cases it has been found that domestic violence includes four types of abuse. These are: 1. Physical abuse, 2. Emotional abuse, 3. Sexual abuse and 4. Economic abuse. Physical abuse is perhaps the most recognised form of violence which is used by the intimate partner to create a feeling of threat, pain, injury or other physical suffering by means of beating, pushing, throwing, burning, strangulation and other types of physical contact. Emotional abuse, which is also known as psychological abuse or mental abuse, is occurred when an intimate partner seeks to control his/her loved one by means of blaming, insulting, humiliating or isolating in private place or publicly. In sexual abuse a partner is forced or coerced to perform sexual activities without his/her consent. Economic abuse is a form of abuse when an intimate partner uses direct and indirect means to prevent the other partner from attending a job.

In India, women have played a significant role to lead their family and society with diligence and compassionate understanding. They have an inherent ability to give birth to life and nurture it well. They serve as the preserver and transmitter of culture and tradition across generations. However, despite their multiple qualities the women are the victims of various forms of domestic violence in India. A series of barbaric superstitious beliefs and oppressive social customs have been practiced to confine them within the four walls of their homes and gradually their status begins to decline to the status of maid. Almost at every home in India the women either as daughter, daughter-in-law, or as a wife are abused physically, mentally, verbally, economically. The patriarchal dominance makes them unable to enjoy their own rights and fundamental freedoms. Thus, discrimination and oppression of the patriarchal society have led the Indian women to their silent sufferings and impede their full advancement.

A.K. Ramanujan was an Indian English poet, scholar, translator, folklorist and playwright who wrote in both English and Kannada. During the latter half of his career, Ramanujan devoted himself on translating numerous folktales from various regions of India in more than twenty languages. Folktales are oral narratives that come from different parts of the world and pass down from one generation to another through our grandmother's way of storytelling. It is still popular in this world to entertain as well as to give moral lessons to all ages of people. As India is a land of countless myths and stories, Ramanujan has a special interest in writings of folktale. This paper shows how domestic violence reduces the status of Indian women as an ignored object in our patriarchal society.

The short story "A Flowering Tree" is originally a Kannada folktale which is translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan. It is included in his 1997 book "*A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India*". The story is about a young woman who is blessed with a magical power to transform herself to a tree bearing beautiful and fragrant flowers and again back to her original human form. She performs this transformation ritual and the flowers are sold with the help of her older sister to support the financial needs of her impoverished family. Hence, the story is not simply a tale of transformation, rather it highlights the plight condition of women in Kannada society.

The story also delves into the societal perception of women, highlighting how their bodies and identities are consistently subjected to patriarchal control and subordination. When the young woman's mother comes to know about her earning sources, she suspects her of selling her body. The mother also expresses her anger against the young woman because of her efforts to violate the convention of patriarchal control over the agency of the female

body through her transformation into the tree. Few days later, the glory of flower and magical transformation of the young woman is revealed to the prince of the ruling family of the village and she is compelled to marry with him. Several days after marriage, the prince keeps himself away from speaking or touching her and tries to abuse her emotionally by asking to perform the transformation ritual against her will. When she transforms into a tree, it symbolizes the helplessness of women in the hands of men. This reflects the power imbalance of the patriarchal society, where one partner dominates the other. The young woman is treated like an object, without any control over her own life, always being forced to fulfil others' desires. Whether it's her mother's ambition of familial development or her husband's need for control, her own wishes and needs are ignored, keeping her in a cycle of subjugation and vulnerability. This shows how domestic violence dehumanizes its victims.

In the meantime, a teenage sister-in-law of the young woman discovers the transformation ritual and makes plan to take her away from the palace to display her magical transformation in front of her friends just for pleasure. Despite her abject reluctance, the woman is again coerced and manipulated into changing herself to a tree. She begs her sister-in-law not to harm her during the botanical form, but her plea is disregarded, and she faces further violence from her sister-in-law and her friends. The physical harm she endures, resulting in the loss of her limbs and ability to speak, shows the severe consequences of domestic violence. This violence is a result of ingrained sexism and indifference from her in-laws, highlighting how domestic violence exists within societal structures. Even when she is abandoned by those who try to rescue her, the derogatory comments and objectification she faces reveal the deep-rooted attitudes and biases that perpetuate domestic violence. Referring to her as "it", Ramanujan emphasizes her dehumanization, reinforcing the idea that her disability and victimization diminish her worth as a human being.

The story illuminates the vulnerability and exploitation faced by women when they are objectified based on their sexual attractiveness. Despite the associated fear, the woman in the story yearns to be desirable and blooms like a flower. However, this desire reduces her to a mere object. She is expected to fulfil her husband's desires by transforming into a flowering tree, disregarding her own autonomy and emotions. This transformation strips her of her agency and highlights her objectification, as demonstrated by the mutilation inflicted by her unmarried sister-in-law while she is in her blooming state.

Through its discussion of transformation and women's status in society, the text also touches on the theme of alterity. The word 'alterity' refers to the state of being different or otherness. In this context, the story highlights the protagonist's experiences of undergoing multiple transformations and the societal expectations and limitations placed upon women. It depicts the protagonist's transformations occurring for reasons beyond her own interests. Each transformation serves a specific purpose related to societal demands and expectations. Initially, she transforms to help her mother and earns money by selling flowers. Later, she transforms to pacify her mother and to reveal the truth that she has not lost her virginity. Further transformations occur to satisfy her husband and to prove her chastity to her sister-in-law. Finally, the protagonist transforms to regain her human form and identity. The notion of women's ability to transform is presented time and again in the story. Women are portrayed as

vulnerable by nature and deserving of utmost care. The comparison between the protagonist's transformation and a flowering tree highlights the connection between nature and women. Both are depicted as vulnerable and in need of protection. The story suggests that just as nature is compressed in the hands of humans, women are compressed within the patriarchal society.

The protagonist in the story through the medium of alterity represents the plight of both nature and women in this society. Her suppression and lack of control throughout her life symbolize the oppression faced by women. It implies that women are expected to embody purity and are limited in expressing their own feelings or defending themselves. The loss of the protagonist's ability to speak after her transformation as a tree further emphasizes the silencing and disempowerment of women. It highlights the vulnerability of women and the oppressive nature of patriarchal society.

To conclude, it can be said that through this story A.K. Ramanujan underlines many types of domestic violence which are encountered by woman at every stage of her life from birth to death. The protagonist of the story is badly suffered from physical and mental violence in the hands of her own family members throughout her life and completely surrendered to it. The pains, sufferings and mental agony of the protagonist are the evidences which show the smothered and fettered existence of the Indian women in this male dominated society. Because of her gender an Indian woman is perceived as vulnerable and is forced to perform anything without her approval. In this story the protagonist also transforms herself several times, as the occasion requires, without her least intention. In every moment she is objectified and exploited by the autocratic nature of her in-laws. This transformative forces reduce her to a domestic subject who has been denied the gender justice and given no voice of her own.

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