

ACTUALISATION OF 'SELF' IN SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN'S *NATIVE TONGUE*

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Abstract: The journey to self-determination is undertaken by all and sundry, but not necessitating a success every time. It is the hunger or the desire which compels one to risk all that one possesses for a chance at victory. Many falter at different stages of the journey depending on the impediments and the perils that present themselves especially if the lives lived are in a feminist dystopia wherein women obviously are the underdogs striving not only to keeping their sanity but also clinging on to their identity and looking for ways to assert it.

Index Terms - Linguist, government, dystopia, patriarchy and revolution

Science fiction though a curious amalgamation of contraries, science and fiction is a genre with the power to not only depict future possibilities but also comes with the strength to bring about a drastic change in the foreseeable and also speculated future. Apart from raising curiosity about the 'could be' scenario it also imparts knowledge to bring about a 'would be' scenario. Feminist utopia and dystopia are the sub-genre of science fiction allowing greater depth and dimension to a 'perfect' and 'imperfect' world order especially in respect of the lives lead by women in such futuristic societies.

The focus of the present paper is on Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* [1] a feminist dystopia. Dystopia present the nightmarish version of a life in which inhumane living, brutish nature, struggle for power, violence, deceit, treachery and loss of humanity is a marked feature. Such a living is visible in the social, political, economic and cultural structures of the society. It creates a world where the weak and helpless are cast aside without remorse. Faith and culture become the disguise beneath which all the nefarious activities get a pious sanction. *Erewhon* (1872) by Samuel Butler, *The Time Machine* (1895) by H. G. Wells, *The Iron Heel* (1908) by Jack London, *The Trial* (1925) by Franz Kafka, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury, *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding, *Tunnel in the Sky* (1955) by Robert A. Heinlein, *The City and the Stars* (1956) by Arthur C. Clarke, *Minority Report* (1956) by Philip K. Dick, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) by Anthony Burgess, *Planet of the Apes* (1963) by Pierre Boulle, *Riddley Walker* (1980) by Russell Hoban, *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler (1993) are some examples of a dystopian order.

Feminist dystopia is an imperfect society which victimizes women, reduces them to a pitiable state, entirely at the mercy of the patriarchal forces. Under the use of threat and force women compliancy is ensured to sustain specific roles. In such societies women are denied the right to be an equal human being. They are reduced to sexual objects, breeders or domestic workers. *Walk to the End of the World* by Suzy McKee Charnas, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, *When She Woke* by Hillary Jordan, *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin are few examples of feminist dystopias. The dehumanised living lead to fight for limited resources at the cost of faith in relationships. Every person lives for himself/herself alone.

Native Tongue by Suzette Haden Elgin is the first part of a trilogy, *The Judas Rose* (1987) and *Earthsong* (1994) are its sequels, in which women use language to liberate themselves. The narrative of *Native Tongue* is based in 2205, in a futuristic United States of America, where science and technology has made great strides. Trade and commerce is a booming inter-galactic business. The communication between the humans and aliens is conducted by the Linguists. The linguist families are rich, powerful and genetically related. They are despised by the common people who do not have a decent living. To assuage the general thought process the linguists live frugally but are still loathed. The common factor between the Linguists and the commoners is the degraded living of the women, reduced to performing three assignments—providing sex, providing babies and providing services of linguists. Despite their services “women were a nuisance with their unending complaints and their fool illnesses. . . . Puny creatures, women, and hardly worth their keep—certainly not worth their irritation” (NT 16). At work the achievements by women are ignored, they are “sufficiently hidden from view to spare the delicate egos of the males the humiliation of really seeing the women . . . on whose services they were completely dependent. . . .” (25) The credit was always given to the men on the claim of incapability of the female linguists. Nazareth as a linguist knew: “Her place was to interpret and to translate, to respond as best as she could to direct questions posed to her regarding the language and the culture of the Aliens involved in the negotiation, and otherwise to be silent. It most emphatically was not her place to suggest strategies or diplomatic policy to anyone present” (NT 180).

The misogynistic mindset got its credibility from the repeal of the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution (the nineteenth amendment gave women the right to vote), under which women are reduced to dependents of their male family members. The damage by Twenty-fifth Article was that women will not serve in any elected or appointed office. The loss of the right to vote not only made the women unequal but also reduced their position to being a minor (NT 7), incapable of rationality, decision-making, employment (or if permitted employment by male family member, she had no right to the money she earned!).

Language acquisition is a valuable talent in the dystopian society. At three or three and half years a linguist baby is interfaced with an alien being, after confirming its humanoid nature. For a year or more interaction takes place resulting in the child becoming a native speaker. The language attainment is the monopoly of the Thirteen Linguist families whose face is Thomas Chornyak, head of the

Chornyak Household. A very powerful man, he intimidates the Government itself “That man, all by himself, can just give an order. And every single Linguist in government contract service would just stop what they were doing. . . . that man, may he fry especially slowly, holds this government hostage” (NT 64). There is a tug-of-war for power and dominance between the government and the Linguists. The verbal duel between the government liaison Smith and Thomas Chornyak expose the child abuses of kidnapping and throwing innocent babies to interface with the aliens to gain an upper-hand by the government and Thomas overlooking this dastardly act which resulted in the child’s death. On hearing the chiding of Thomas, Smith retorts, “You violate the child labor laws before the poor kids are even out of the cradle” (93) None is concerned of the hapless mother whose baby was kidnapped from the maternity lab for experimentation. The poignant words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning [2] suitably describe the patriarchal social-political order:

‘How long,’ they say, how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart, —
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart? (*The Cry of the Children*)

The poem is an account of the work that endangered children with exhaustion and death. Similarly, in *Native Tongue* the babies were drugged with hallucinogens and then sent to interface with the aliens. Motherhood is seen as a mechanical activity to be performed by women without any emotions attached to it by patriarchy. Also, the reproduction of the women in the Lines are managed by the male Linguists, with women made to marry as early as fifteen years and continuously act as receptacles for bearing innumerable children. The worth of women is in her body, “Let us not confuse the pot with the potter . . .” (12), as one male linguist tells another.

Women are efficient workers, Nazareth as a linguist is made to work hard since childhood. She, similar to other children is deprived of her right of being a child with its accompanied joy, carefree nature and innocence. Earning money to fill up the coffers of her father and later her husband. She is denied a voice in her own marriage (married off at fifteen years), and married off to a man Aaron Adiness whom she hated! On the protest of his wife Rachel, Thomas the father of Nazareth asserted his will “I am not ‘suggesting’ this marriage—I am ordering it” (148). By the time she reached forty, she had nine children. Similar to a breeding animal female Linguists begin having children (assets for their Household’s lineage) at a very young age apart from the usual work of encodings, translation and communication with the alien species. The non-linguists women too did not have life easy with domestic work, giving birth to young ones, caring for them and working as well to survive. Both the types are bereft of decent living and rights; whether it is of property, freedom, say over their children, or even the right to express their sexuality.

Aaron treated his wife Nazareth with cruelty, a violent temper and varying degrees of private and public humiliation. Women for him were ‘genetically inferior organisms’ (11) needing the authority of the male. He was particularly sensitive to the truth that his wife, Nazareth was a better Linguist than him:

His feelings were so easily hurt that she rarely knew what had bruised them; but he would say, ‘You know very well what’s wrong, you smug bitch!’ and sulk for hours, until she had apologized not once but several times . . . If she didn’t apologize, she could count on humiliation, because he would make her the butt of his wit—and it was fearsome—on every occasion offered him, the more public the better. . . . jokes about her faults and her weight and her one front tooth that was crooked and any tiny miscalculation she might have made. . . . (NT 175)

Men found him entertaining and women laughed at his jokes to stop getting verbally assaulted themselves and to earn derision from their husbands for being foolish enough not to understand! Nazareth’s escape was the time spent in her work. Any praise of her made him angry. Nazareth could not complain as her husband was a prime stud according to her father Thomas Chornyak. Only Barren House was the place she looked forward to after the end of her fertility.

Elgin’s shows that expansion in knowledge and high standard of living does not ensure a liberated mind! Cancer cure and breast regeneration in medical science; computer locked entrances, wrist computers and flyers; unmanned Robobus and Servomechanism (like servants); and technology for inter-galactic communication and trade are part of this dystopian society. Yet, women are limited in servile capacity. Sexuality is limiting for women. Nazareth bad luck of suffering from ‘cancer’ of the breast is acknowledged to avoid media accusation of being inhuman but the procedure of breast regeneration, whose technology is present is rejected citing irrelevant expenditure, but the reality is as Nazareth’s brother explains, “She’s nearly forty years old, and she was no beauty even when she was young. What earthly need has she got for breasts? It’s absurd. It’s a non-issue” (NT 12). Her husband Aaron opposed her breast regeneration treatment, selecting her disfigurement so that he could rightfully claim another woman. Thomas presented him a young girl of sixteen ‘Perpetua’ so that the ‘stud could serve again’ (233). The men sexual needs was even looked after by an agency. Michaela, was bought by Ned Landry to see to his meals, house, comfort and sexual fulfilment. Yet, when she got pregnant with his child, Nick without letting Michaela know, sold their child to fulfill his sexual needs over her motherhood!

The Barren House was the communal living space where all the women from the Households lived after reaching menopause, as the name announced. In the small Barren House ‘forty-two’ (NT 122) women lived a packed life. The end of the reproductive age, and the arrival in the Barren House was an altogether beginning of a new life for the residents. The women, talk with other and the children, do things at leisure and indulge in hitherto unknown creativity like knitting, gardening and teaching children etc. This freedom makes the women yearn for barrenness more than fertility!

Language and literature has always been seen as a male turf. To provide legitimacy to patriarchal viewpoint female anatomy is generally the culprit. Dr. E. H. Clarke in *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* (1873) [3] contended against education for girls especially when their ovaries were developing, which would be psychological stressful and effect their reproductive health! (386-387). Robin Lakoff [4], states that certain features help to distinguish the language between the two sexes. Women thrive in the use of non-decisive words as ‘kind of’, ‘sort of’; hollow adjectives ‘adorable’, ‘divine’; polite choice of language, talk less, approach

indirectly, convert sentences into questions thus showing the power structure in the society. In *A room of one's Own* Virginia Woolf [5] states that women serve as 'looking glasses' for the men to boost their pride, "Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. . . . For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks . . ." (37).

Some are more definite in their declaration of women in literary writing: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation" (Robert Southey, poet laureate, letter to Charlotte Bronte 12 March 1837) [6]. Samuel Johnson likened a woman preacher's preaching 'as a dog walking on its hind leg though not done well yet one is surprised that it is done at all' (Boswell) [7]. The purpose behind such attacks is the terror of women expression, the terror that women are smart beings accomplished of seizing away the gender based honors of men. Showalter in *Towards a feminist Poetics* (1979) demands a interrogative spirit based on women's viewpoint, as a outline of studying women's literature or gynocritics (184-198) [8].

The truth behind the language and literature dominance of patriarchy is that the language is a powerful tool to subvert. Unknown to the supporters of this patriarchal arrangement, a silent revolution is going on. The women linguists are building their own language, to express all the emotions felt by women but not expressed in the language by men. The linguists believe the existent language is voice of patriarchy and does not give voice to women. The female linguists of the Barren house, are involved in the construction of La'adan, the women's language. The male linguists trust that it is outside the potential of women to construct a language (encoding). Thyriss elucidates that their defence, "is that no one has ever taken us seriously. The men have always thought we were silly females, playing silly female games . . . they must go on thinking that" (NT 126). The ridiculousness offered in the form of Langlish, is believed by the men linguist. The effort was directed to start a non-violent revolution whose seeds were sowed by Nazareth as a child when she innocently started writing Encodings while at work, "New language shapes, for concepts not yet lexicalized in any known language . . . Encodings. . . ." (NT 25). Aquina to facilitate the revolution poisons Nazareth to make her sterile and ease her entry in the Barren House at a very young age. But her actions started 'an investigation' by the male Linguists threatening a search which would reveal a horde of illegal activities and contrabands. Faye's 'surgical instruments and medical lab' would be found 'whose only use was for performing abortions' (124); contraceptives; and forbidden books of liberation, equal rights and blasphemous stuff would be found. Belle-Anne, sacrifices herself as the culprit, aware of the gullibility surrounding her image as the spontaneous sperm killer and she confessed it was done under the guidance of 'God'. Another contribution was done to safeguard the rebellion by Michaela killing of her lover Thomas Chornyak to safeguard the language La'adan.

The passage of time saw pleasure of secrecy draw young girls closer and La'adan becoming the language of their dialogue to express womanly emotions and thoughts. It was noticed that, "Women . . . do not nag any more. Do not whine. Do not complain. Do not demand things. Do not make idiot objections to everything a man proposes. Do not argue. Do not get sick. . . . No more headaches, no more monthlies, no more hysterics . . . or if there still are such things, at least they are never mentioned" (NT 275). The women deliberately became mechanical in their replies and talk. The men could not fault or accuse the women without any cause. The young girls spoke making silly distinctions with each other which a female would make. A young girl expressed her 'love' for her brother but it meant 'love for the sibling of one's body but not of one's heart' (NT 276). James Nathan Chornyak, the next head of the Households along with the other associates decided that women should live in separate houses as a form of punishment and good riddance, similar to the Barren Houses.

Though the words realisation and actualisation are generally considered synonymous, yet they include many milestones in between. Realisation is the first step in the direction to the destination called actualization. It is the process of understanding, acceptance and sharing for all, rising above one's narrow individualistic expectation and aspiration. Realization is an individual internal process but actualization is in respect of universal application for all the women. The growth of women in the Barren House to rise above themselves, think for all the women and children and help them to achieve their worth in a non-violent manner is the true nobility of spirit. The silent revolution by the women linguists would be a game changer with its expansion among the women masses. The women linguists work in the role of the intellectuals, for the creation of a new societal order having a working class ethos. The remarkable aspect is the involvement of women in united capacity irrespective of their status, in unison raising a voice against repression.

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