

Women as progenitors of culture: A study of select novels in English and Indian society in general

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Abstract

From times immemorial, probably from the Paleolithic age to Neolithic age to the establishment of modern civilization, women have been the forbearers of culture. When man was still a hunter or when he learnt the art of growing crops and developed an agrarian society, women due to a number of reasons, stayed behind to look after the household activities and raise children. It was while undertaking domestic responsibilities that women embarked upon the art of storytelling, folk tales, folk songs and folk dances. Culture, until it was represented in the Oral tradition, was more or less a domain of the women. But with the advent of the written form of culture, women took a backseat and the reins passed over to the men who propagated the concept of "writing with the phallus". Culture like many other fields became the dominance of men and women were relegated in the subordinate position. Men became the torch bearers and pushed women to the backdrop thus negating their role in the culture formation. However, a close look at the oral tradition of culture and the study of folk songs and dances is proof enough to establish that women have been the progenitors of culture. A simple example from our own culture reminds us that women have always been master story-tellers. Whoever heard of "Dada/Nana ki Kahaniyan". We always say, "Dadi/Nani Maa ki Kahaniyan". Similarly, "Dadi Ma ke Nuskhe" is a much prevalent term as women have lived in close communion with nature and have known the medicinal value of the common ingredients available in and around the house. Many such examples can be culled out from our very own Indian culture which shall be discussed in detail in the paper that follows.

Keywords: Dada/Nana ki Kahaniyan, Dadi Ma ke Nuskhe, Culture

Introduction

According to *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Culture is "A set of beliefs, practices, rituals and traditions shared by a group of people with at least one point of common identity (such as their ethnicity, race or nationality). At its core is the sense that it is different from nature in that it is a product of conscious choice and not the instincts." (Buchanan, 105)

As a thumb rule it has been observed that though women occupy a central role in the domestic sphere, the same is not true about the society. When it comes to the social set up of the times the women have always been found to be in subordinate position as compared to their male counterparts of the same times. As a result women everywhere lack a generally acceptable social and cultural acknowledgement as well as authority. Why have women been relegated to the position of the "second sex" is the question that needs to be deliberated upon. Women who have been source of life, society, culture, art forms have receded to the hind quarters.

Along with many women today we are trying to understand our position, and to change it. We have become increasingly aware of sexual inequities in economic, social and political institutions and are seeking ways to fight them. A first step in that direction involves the recognition that in learning to be women in our own society, we have accepted and even internalized, what is all too often a derogatory and constraining image of ourselves. (Rosaldo and Lamphere, Introduction)

Indian culture and ethos have always supported women empowerment right from the times of the Vedas with almost all the important functions delegated to Goddesses. Goddess

Saraswati for education and art forms, Goddess Lakshmi for wealth and prosperity and Goddess Durga for strength and power. Somewhere down the line, however, women became objectified and though they were considered to be the marks of respect of the society, they also became easy targets for male vendetta. Whosoever, wanted to prove his male chauvinism or wanted personal scores to be settled, they took it out on the women and women's molestation became the easiest way to exact revenge on the opponent. And when the country started looking towards West for approval during colonial rule, the Western concept of women as marginal inhabitants entered the Indian social set up. Western societies though considered to be advanced did not allow women to enter into the spheres of knowledge-related or technical and scientific arenas for as late as the 19th century. Literature and culture were also such fields where women were looked down upon and the theory of writing "with the phallus" was prevalent. It is at this point that Cultural Studies played a significant role in trying to highlight the role of women.

Cultural studies has directed attention to the importance of analyzing cultures within their context - both locally and globally. It has also suggested that cultures may be conceptualized not simply as habits, customs and mores of a particular society - but, rather, that culture refers to "structures of feeling" - that is, that culture may best be analyzed when it is understood as the lived experience of people in a society. ("Women, Culture and Development")

Looking back at some of the aspects, I would like to bring to the forefront the role of women in being the progenitors of culture. When the human civilization finally settled down

from being hunters to an agrarian society, men started spending their days out of home tilling their fields and fending their crops. They no longer had to hunt around for food, so they could settle down, build a home and lead a settled existence. This led to the fact, that since women were physically not as strong as men with their energy being dissipated by their monthly menstrual cycles along with the confinement during child-bearing and child-rearing, women were allotted the role of caretakers of the domestic domain. Not all their time was consumed in domestic activities, hence, they would gather together in groups and discuss their day-to-day activities, their collective hardships and sometimes share their funny experiences with each other. Slowly and steadily this took the form of songs, dances and other tales, fables, parables etc. A close study of some of the literary works reveals how women efficiently churned out yarns and yarns of tales to pass their idle time as well as educate their children. Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe's famous novel *Things Fall Apart* is an apt example to prove this point. During rainy season when the children could not go out to play or during cold Harmattan nights, the children would sit around the kitchen fires, listening to the fables of their mothers. The mothers would thus dole out important lessons of life to their young ones through funny yet informative tales. A number of such tales have been incorporated into the texture of the novel. Dina Nayeri, an Iranian-American author, weaves magic realism through her path-breaking work *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*. Like a master story-teller she weaves pure magic in the fabric of her fiction mixing the art of "Eastern storytelling with straightforward Western prose". The protagonist of the novel, Saba Hafezi, the daughter of a converted Catholic landowner, loses her mother and twin sister at a young age. She is brought up by three elderly ladies of the neighbourhood. One of them, Khanom Basir, is a woman who is deft at the art of storytelling. Rather at the very outset of the novel, Khanom Basir acknowledges the fact that all women of her community excel in the art of story weaving. Born and brought up in an orthodox environment, she represents the modernist woman of 20th century. She acts as the mouthpiece of the author when she says, "Every woman has a talent, and if you ask me, every talent is worthwhile and important." (60) She goes on to confess about her own talent—the power over words—in the following words:

You know, I too have a gift—the best one, a power over words, over legends, truth, and lies. For money I weave rush into baskets and hats and small rugs, but for my friends, I can weave a tale so subtly, so beautifully, with such rises and falls, such whispers, that children and adults are lulled like snakes in a pot. They sway with me, allow me to carry them away. (62)

It is under Khanom Basir's guidance that the protagonist Saba too turns into a natural storyteller. Story weaving comes naturally to Saba and through her stories she is able to turn a new leaf of her life, through her stories she is able to escape from the gory existence of her life in Iran. Quite obviously, women have over the centuries proved to be better storytellers and hence better propagators of culture in the society. Again I would like to take up a few examples from our own culture which would substantiate how women could generate different cultural forms from their day-to-day experiences. We all have witnessed the mesmerizing and enchanting dance

forms from Rajasthan like *Kaal Beliya* and other dances. A peculiar feature of these dances is the flexibility of the dancers who are able to lift multiple pots on their heads, and while bearing this heavy load they are able to pick handkerchiefs or other things with their mouths. Another particular feature of these dances is the dancers dancing on the edges of a metal plate or dancing on top of nails or sharp metallic things. All these features are a representation of the hardships faced in the lives of these village belles to which they have become so accustomed that they can enjoy themselves through all this. When the village girls had to go fetch water in a desert state like Rajasthan, they had to travel far wide to find water which was not easily available back then. Taking a single pot like in plains would bring all their efforts to naught, and therefore, they would carry multiple pots on their heads and in order to balance them they would be in variable sizes which were placed in descending order. While travelling back home, they again would have to traverse long distances and if on the way some of their objects like handkerchief or some anklet would fall, it would be impossible for them to lay down all their pots to pick it up and replace all the pots one by one. So, they mastered the techniques of picking up objects with their mouth, lips and sometimes with the help of their eyelashes. It is also interesting to note, that the metallic plates on the edges of which these women dance or the metallic nails are symbolic of the hot desert sand which would pierce or hurt the soles of their feet when they would walk on it bare feet. The soles of their feet would harden so much that the sharpness of the metallic edges or nails would no more hurt them and thus became a source of entertainment to them.

Having discussed the above factors, it now becomes mandatory to try to understand that if women have been the progenitors of culture since times immemorial, what made them take a back seat. The closest answer to the above inquisitiveness is that until the time man lived in close communion with nature, men and women were considered equal and rather men depended upon women for their multiple roles but as and when man drifted away from nature, "culture" became distinct from "nature" and assumed a much greater role. As a result, there occurred a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture which began to represent the idea of human consciousness and its products. As Ortner puts it, "...culture at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform—to "socialize" and to "culturalize"—nature." (Rosaldo, 72) Also,

...women, their pan-cultural second-class status could be accounted for, quite simply, by postulating that women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress them. (73)

Celebrated Canadian author Margaret Atwood in many of her seminal works presents the above theory that women and nature have been in close communion since ages and man in order to ascertain his supremacy pushed them into the backdrop. In many novels of her, she presents the exploitation of both women and nature at the hands of man, thereby,

associating women and nature symbolically. Constance Classen and David Howes describe the aim of Atwood's writings in following words:

...the Canadian identity is represented in Margaret Atwood's writings, but rather it provides a guide for the exploration of how different aspects of Margaret Atwood's work and life can be interpreted as expressing and reflecting the Canadian concern with dualisms, boundaries and self-other definition. Or, to put this exercise in more Atwoodian terms, it offers "wilderness tips" for negotiating a Canadian course through part of the vast Atwood forest. (Classen & Howes, 4)

Ultimately, it can be seen that the whole set up is cultural rather than natural and women are no closer to nature than men are as both have consciousness. Various roles and attributes of women like physiology, reproduction and her psychology contribute to her being close to nature but in no sense can she be ordained to be away from culture. Both men and women should be equally involved in the projects of creativity and transcendence. Only then women will be given their rightful importance in the production of culture and will be seen as aligned with culture.

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