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English essay

“Are the women in 2 texts portrayed as victims?”

In “Heart of Darkness” by Joseph Conrad and “God of Small Things” by Arundhati Roy, women are victimised by the largely patriarchal worlds of these novels. In “Heart of Darkness”, women are actually marginalised, leaving the most of the novel's spotlight to men and the main character of the novel, where as in “God of Small Things”, women are featured more often on the main plan of the novel, but only to show how oppressed by the patriarchal world they are.

In Joseph Conrad's novel, women can be considered as “filler” characters, largely remaining silent, but that is how they convey their messages. They “speak” not with words, but with their silence, like the two women knitting black wool: one does not say anything, and the other's words are not mentioned by the author. Instead, Joseph Conrad concentrates on the atmosphere these women create: “Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool... not many of those she looked at ever saw her again...”. Marlowe's aunt also plays a secondary role, appearing only once at the beginning of the novel, setting up Marlowe with a job at the trading company, and out of touch with what was happening in Africa by saying “those ignorant millions from their horrid ways”. Conrad in fact shows in his novels that women live in their own world, ignorant to what happens outside. Yet still, women in “Heart of Darkness” are largely ignored, while the novel concentrates on other aspects.

On the other hand, in “God of Small Things” women are much more present, occupying one of the primary topics of the novel. But that increase in visibility comes with a cost: with women way more visible, the reader can see how oppressed they are by the patriarchal society. The novelist analyses the gender oppression through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. All these female characters are resourceful, smart and belong to the affluent class but they are deprived in fully realizing their capabilities. They lack guts to openly defy the social order and are torn between traditional norms and modern attitudes. In their attempt to challenge the customs, laws, values of social and cultural boundaries, they commit moral transgressions which ultimately lead them toward their demise and destruction. Starting with Ammu, an educated bourgeois woman, the reader finds her as a victim of a failed marriage: “Her husband turned out to be not just a heavy drinker but a full blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic’s deviousness and tragic charm.” She was beaten and humiliated by her husband, so she left him only to come back to more abuse and insults from her family members. She remains heavily self-confident, constantly outsmarting her Oxford educated brother, Chacko, who is bent on marginalising her, and “she did nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them.” And the constant rejection by her relatives pushed her into seeking refuge in Velutha, a low caste carpenter, and even developing a sexual affair with him. That relationship was frowned upon by the traditional norms and the indian society, further pushing Ammu into everyone's disgrace. In the end, after she dies, the Church refuses to burry her. Thus “Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat lodge in Alleppey… She died alone. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age.” In the long run, Ammu is disowned by her society, separated ruthlessly from her children and faces a lonely death. Another mistreated woman is Mammachi, also coming from an abusive relationship. She created her own pickle factory, but she was refused all support from her husband, Pappachi, and she ended up losing the factory in profit of Chacko, thus marginalising her from her clan and gender. She also had a talent to play on a violin, but Pappachi cut her off from her lessons because he didn't want her wife to surpass him. Baby Kochamma is yet another victim, having her dream to marry an Irish priest crushed, and then plotting against Ammu and Velultha. Her negativism reflects how she was refused fulfilment earlier. It is also worth noting that both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma apparently submits to the patriarchal social norms without any hesitation but if closely examined she puts up a line of implicit resistance against the biased socio-political and economic order in the post-colonial India.

Where as in “God of Small Things” women are clearly portrayed as victims, in “Heart of Darkness” that question is more debatable: women are heavily marginalised in the novel, yet they still do appear in the story and sometimes they even heavily influence the setting of the scene.