

PRECARIOUSNESS OF BEING A WOMAN: A STUDY OF THE SELECT POEMS OF JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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Abstract

Jean Arasanayagam, a Sri Lankan writer of Dutch Burgher descent is well known for her works on Ethnic conflict. Identity forms the basis of a person's life, but women lose their identity during every walk of their life. Women are marginalized, subjugated and exploited irrespective of the nation they belong to. India is a nation which reveres women as goddess on one hand and on the other exploits them sexually and in the guise of dowry. Arasanayagam tries to expose this exploitation through her poems. This research paper entitled **Precariousness of Being a Woman: A Study of the Select Poems of Jean Arasanayagam** explores three poems from the collection *The Alms Giving: "Poems for Nirbhaya- Brave Heart – Part One," "India's Daughter – Brave Heart Part two," and "The Evil Asuras."* These poems record the death of humanity and the dangers of being a woman. Life for women becomes precarious when it is in the hands of the other. The notion that women are weaker sex is the root cause for exploitation. Women are denied the right of their life. They are just toys in the hands of men. Arasanayagam through her poems lament the pathetic condition of two women Nirbhaya and Pravartika, these women are just one in thousands, similar fate is faced by many in India and all over the world. The poet raises voice against the injustice meted out to these voiceless creatures.

Key Words: exploitation, marginalization, precarious, injustice, voiceless.

Jean Arasanayagam is a Sri Lankan writer of Dutch Burgher descent and married to a Tamil in Sri Lanka. Jean is a prolific writer, teacher, painter and batik artist. A writer always takes to heart what happens in reality and then adds on to imagination, but Jean focuses her attention more on the day today happenings and records it in her works. Though she lives in Sri Lanka the poet writes about the incidents happened in India, which she has come across through media. The poems of Arasanayagam unleash and ignite the reality of life. The poems: "Poems for Nirbhaya- Brave Heart – Part One," "India's Daughter – Brave Heart Part two," and "The Evil Asuras" record the death of humanity and the declining sanctity of human life, and reveals the dark road ahead of society.

The present world has given equal rights to women yet the crime against women are at an increasing pace. Women are still subjugated. The term 'Feminism' is still in papers rather than in real life. Every day the crime rate against women is increasing. In spite of the strict enforcement of law these crimes take place because the

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society is a patriarchal. Moreover, women are considered weaker sex and angel of the house, the biological difference between man and woman give a privileged place for man in society. As Wally defines “Patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit woman” (20). The patriarchal system is rooted in power, dominance, and hierarchy. Thus through the social structures man dominate oppress and exploit women. The subordination experienced by woman takes various forms like discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence and sexual harassment.

“Poems for Nirbhaya- Brave Heart part one” dedicated it to the suffered woman soul, with the pathetic situation of Nirbhaya – a girl who was gang raped in Delhi. The brutal nature of men who were involved in the bawdry act and were devoid of pity is expressed by Jean. The violators have not only violated her body but also her inner self which suffered in agony. The men who tortured her satiated the appetite of flesh rather than humanity, neither did they heed to her pleas nor did they worry about the pain inflicted on her. They were heightened by the emotion of sexual pleasure:

Of blood, her naked body stripped and violated
Beaten, battered, flung with her companion
On the compassionate grass (96).

The poet here insists the term “compassionate grass”, to personify grass and give human attributes to it and to differentiate it with the man who is supposed to be compassionate is aggressive for a fellow human being. Man tries to satisfy his bodily appetites, and gives importance to sex which is an animal function rather than to love a human function. Erotic men do not adhere to this human experience rather go in for animal function. The poet regrets for the death of a brave heart who wants to avenge the violators. The poet says:

May her ashes regenerated avenge the monstrous
Forces of evil that attacked her with unbridled
Ferocious passions. (98)

Nirbhaya was a brave heart who wanted to survive despite the smash with the iron rod. She stays in the minds of the Indian people “far beyond mortality” (98). Legally rape is considered as an offence and in committing rape or threat of rape “the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt, and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately appropriate to sexual politics” (Kate Millett 44).

Modern World has redefined and remodeled the responsibilities of women yet from ancient times until now women have been violated and discriminated. Even in the greatest Epics of India, The Ramayana and the Mahabharata women were under patriarchal domination. Draupadi in The Mahabharata was exploited in the court of Duryodhana. None of the men in the court opposed to it. Sita in the Ramayana had to succumb herself to fire to prove her chastity. Today also when something wrong has been done to a woman no one raises voice against the injustice. Only a few like the poet speak out for the voiceless. Indeed, women are in a position to compromise with the patriarchal mindset.

Jean Arasanayagam being a woman is able to feel the excruciating pain of a little girl and registers the act in another poem “India’s Brave Heart: Part two”. The incident has broken the inner and outer self of many girls like Nirbhaya. Candles are lit every year in fond remembrance of Nirbhaya to pay homage but that has not melted the hearts of the perpetrators still incidents like this occur repeatedly, these men have made:

To disfigure the route, you took through the,
Horror filled darkness of evil, no lessons

Have been yet learned nor can they ever be,
The rape and murder of children go on and on
Dumped in the wilderness. Let their sleep be
Gentle uninterrupted, the world's sorrow, never theirs. (98)

According to Kate Millett the rape done by the assailants, "... is also a male assertion . . . of dominance over weak, complaint and unintelligible female. It is a case of sexual politics at the fundamental level of copulation" (6). Little ones like Nirbhaya do not have a peaceful death. Arasanayagam invokes that at least their life after death be peaceful without any worldly sorrows. Nirbhaya becomes a victim of discrimination and violence. Such violence instills a sense of insecurity in women. The poet calls these perpetrators who do not have pity in their hearts as evil asuras. Thus woman's life is precarious. As Butler states in "Precarious Life, Grievable Life":

Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. (14)

The sorrow Nirbhaya suffered was by an outsider who she was not accustomed to whereas in the poem "The Evil Asuras," Jean Arasanayagam speaks about the dowry death of Pravartika Gupta who was burnt by her husband and her in laws. Home is a place of peace and shelter away from all dangers but for Pravartika the danger was in her home. She becomes a bonded slave in her in-law's family. There are many Pravartikas who are "sacrificed without guilt, without atonement" (101). J.S Mill delineates that "Woman is no more than a bonded servant within a marital life; and a husband is sovereign in his household. He has right so as to kill his wife; and no law condemns him for that because in doing so he is only executing his right (461). Even the sacred water of the Ganga cannot cleanse the sins of these people and cannot purify the "ashes of the murderers" (101). Dowry system still prevails in the society and many women face death, both the rich and the poor. Being in a middle class family Pravartika was endowed with all the riches only to be consumed by fire. The poet says "you were destined to be a sacrifice to kali/ the sacrifice of the evil asuras" (102). The poet is of the opinion that the family members risk nemesis by inflicting pain to the young bride.

These poems of Jean Arasanayagam cast light on the evils meted out to women in a patriarchal society. In the first two poems the poet focuses on the lust of sexual pleasures and in the third poem she focuses on the lust for riches. The victims of this misanthropic crusade are the most vulnerable. The intrinsic valuable humanity is denied to women in a patriarchal society. In all walks of life women have to face hardships and marginalization, Millet in this regard writes, "Patriarchy has God on its side. One of the most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and the evils it imputes to sexuality (51). Many critics, scholars and philosophers have raised their voice against the injustice meted out to woman but to remains voiceless. The patriarchal society on the one side respects and reveres woman on the one side and on the other they are respected, revered and idealized and on the other side they are oppressed and subjugated. Women is treated as a commodity and handled like toys in the hands of men. Jean Arasanayagam through her writings brings out the vicious circle that encompasses women.

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