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Western Memoir of Marginality: A Feminist Analysis of Educated (2018) by Tara Westover

Abstract:

Rethinking the gendered experiences of a Western female narrated in the memoir Educated (2018), this paper points out the contradictions between the theory and practice of gender equality in the West. De Beauvoir's (1949) idea of female passivity and Butler's (1999) challenge to the stability of the category 'women' are utilized together with the discursive strategies proposed by Van Dijk (2007) to conclude. through the use of actor description, situation description, hyperbole and distancing, for the feminist analysis of patriarchal influence on the female under the cover of paternity, whereby the female subject is conditioned to consider herself impure due to her gendered identity, sartorial practices and desire to be educated. On the contrary, the memoirist by employing the strategies of polarization and situation description shows that the female subject can only challenge the patriarchal dominance because of the changed consciousness that came out of the personal resistance to patriarchy.

Key Words: Feminism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Memoirs are the part of the life writings. They are different from autobiographies, as they deal with few events and a small period of time (Zinsser, 1987). Buss (2002) describes certain features of memoir. According to Buss (2002) memoir “uses a style that is at the same time narrative and essayistic, descriptive and imagistic, factually testimonial and anecdotally fictive” (pp. 2-3). This statement shows that the style of memoir can incorporate essay style, imagery and realistic description. Memoirs are also gaining popularity. According to McDonnell (1998), the reason behind contemporary preference for memoirs “is that they not only ‘show’ and ‘tell’, give scenes and summary, but they also reflect on the very process of telling itself. These books show an ‘examined life’ in a particular sense of the word. A flexible form of writing, memoir can combine the techniques of fiction with essay writing...”(p. 14) This shows that memoirs are becoming more and more popular among readers because they mix the style and techniques of different genres like essay and novels. Along with this quality, memoirs also describe the life of the person who writes it. This provides the readers a different experience. Women are also interested in memoirs and have used this form of writing to describe their experience (Buss, 2002). Some famous memoirs written by women are: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* written by Simon De Beauvoir (1959), *An Unfinished Woman* (1969) by Hellman and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou etc.

The memoir selected for this study is *Educated* (2018) which depicts life of a girl named Tara who lives in America. She is highly influenced by her father. Her father is against school education and therefore, Tara does not receive any formal education. She works with her father since an early age and believes every word of his father. Her brother Shawn also tried to influence her in different matters and even hits her several times. When Tara turns seventeen, she decides to leave her house and get education. This education and experience transform her life. The reason behind the use of memoir as a text is that memoirs depict the real life of its authors. According to Adams (1999), “A mix of the personal with the contextual, an autobiographical narrative intersecting with history, memoir gives its readers an author as guide, an informant whose presence lends a

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unique perspective to the historical moment or event or actor being recorded". (p. 9) As, this statement shows, memoirs contain the description of any historical event or any event in general belonging to real life of the author and therefore, the memoir selected for this research provides a glance into the real life experience of its female author.

Western countries often claim that they offer equal rights to both men and women in the countries. According to Hayes in the Western countries, people consider their culture as having the ability to execute the rights of women. Dixon (2011) is of the view that there are some stereotypes in all societies but, "American women have strived to overcome these stereotypes and have gained a position of near equality in many societal constructs" (p. 1). This statement means that now, equality exists in America. [Dixon \(2011\)](#), also argues that for the protection of women from violence and harassment, there are laws in America. Women also have gained a position equal to men in America. This study confronts this idea and asserts that there are still some families in West where women live under patriarchal authority and face patriarchal influence up to the extent of effecting their conception about character. This study argues that even in Western societies, patriarchal authority exists as the female subject in the selected memoir is influenced by males and this influence is so great that the female subject starts considering herself as having low character. Patriarchy refers to a societal system in which men have superior position than women. [Rawat \(2014\)](#), while referring to patriarchy says that: "Patriarchy imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women" (p. 43). It means in a patriarchal system, certain stereotypes and norms are imposed which keep women in an inferior position and become the cause of inequality in society. De [Beauvoir \(1949\)](#) also asserts that biological differences are emphasized in patriarchal thinking so that men could have superior roles. In patriarchal rule, women are made to remain voiceless which is also accepted by most of them ([Ifechelobi, 2014](#)).

This study analyzes the discourse of memoir *Educated* (2018) from a feminist perspective. There are different memoirs that have been examined from a feminist perspective. For instance, [Spacks \(1976\)](#), in his study, asserted that the life writings of women in the eighteenth century reveal the fact that culture influences the identity of women. Mason (1980) argued that females' autobiographical works deal with the idea of describing self in relation to other. Mason (1980) reached this conclusion by examining the texts of four feminist authors. The names of these authors are Julian Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish and Anne Bradstreet. In another study, Beauvoir' works: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958) and *A Very Easy Death* (1964) were analyzed by [Fell \(2000\)](#). Fell (2000), argued through analyzing these texts of both these works, the relationship between a mother and her daughter has been presented as fractured and this is due to Beauvoir's rejection of matriarchal codes and her mother's inclination towards these codes. In another study, the memoirs written by Kerouac and Frazer were compared by Kurtulus (2016). Kurtulus (2016) examined both these texts and asserted that the image presented about women is unconventional in Frazer's *Troia* (1969) which is quite different from the portrayal of woman as sex object in *On the Road* (1957) by Kerouac. According to Kurtulus (2016), there are traditional views about females in *On the Road* (1957) while the portrayal of women in *Troia* (1969) is not stereotypical as it presents them as having adventurous beings like men.

As the above review of literature shows, although the issue of identity has been examined in different autobiographies and memoirs but the self-image of females with respect to their character has not been studied. Therefore, this study fills this gap. The method of critical discourse analysis has not been applied to memoirs, so this study adds new knowledge to the existing one. This study asserts by analyzing the discourse of the selected memoir that patriarchal influence also exists in advanced countries which often claim about equality. The patriarchal influence on females is so great that it can even effect females' conception about their character and purity. Females, under the influence of males, consider themselves impure. Females also set certain criteria like dress to judge their purity. A change in these females occurs after leaving patriarchal authority and they assert themselves as having value in themselves.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism forms the theoretical perspective of this study. Feminism is a wide ranging philosophical approach, which deals with the issues women face in a society. It confronts the stereotypes related to gender and strives for the development of women. Feminism refers to “a rejection of inferiority and a shining for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity”. (Chukwuma, 1994, p. 19) This statement shows that feminism is a philosophy that challenges the inferior position of females and strives to make them aware of their worth and value. Feminism works for the progress of women. It prefers individual development (Frank, 1984). Feminism also creates consciousness about existence of patriarchy as Rawat (2014) says: “Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation, and oppression...” (p. 43). Feminism also strives for equality of women. According to Nayyar (2009), “Feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analysis when reading cultural practices and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice” (p. 117). It means feminism deals with the cultural practices existing in society which focusing on the subject of gender. Gender is central to feminism as the central aspects of feminism include the notion of gender as pre-determined by the society and the assertion that society regulates inequality between men and women (Nayyar, 2009).

The works of two feminists, Simone De Beauvoir (1949) and Judith Butler (1999), have been used in the present paper. Both these theorists consider gender as a social construct. It means that the attributes and meanings assigned to a female gender are not natural but are constructed through society. As this study examines the influence of males on females' conception of character and a change in such conception after leaving patriarchal authority, therefore, the concepts provided by both these feminists have been utilized for the present study. De Beauvoir (1949/2010) says: “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (p. 267). The word ‘woman’ in this statement refers to the qualities and attributes associated with females in a society. They are perceived as ones, who are not male, thus as ‘other’. The biological differentiation of a female from the male becomes the prime factor behind her biased social, cultural, economic and political status in the society where patriarchy rules. She is seen, understood and treated as a subordinate to her male counterpart. So, through this statement, De Beauvoir (1949) points out that the norms and attributes associated with the term woman are not natural but are preferred by the society in which a female is born. According to De Beauvoir (1949), it's not “biological or psychological fate” (p. 267) which makes a woman, but instead “civilization” (p. 267) that produces this entity called woman. It means the terms associated with female gender are socially determined while not inherent or natural. De Beauvoir (1949) also asserts that women are given inferior position in society and all negative attributes are associated with women. They are subordinate beings and are “no more than a servant” (p. 113). It means women have lower status than males. Butler (1999) also suggests that “the term woman is a term in process” (p. 33) which leads her to conclude that this term is “open to intervention and re-signification” (p. 33). It means that the meanings and attributes associated with females are not fixed. Certain norms and meanings associated with this gender can be changed, as this term woman is a term in process, which means modification can be added to this term.

Methodological Framework

The method selected for this study is critical discourse analysis. Discourse refers to text and talk in a social context (Potter, 2004). [Weedon \(1987\)](#) also argues that discourse is “a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance” (p. 108). It means through discourse, power can be regulated and a resistance to such power can be articulated. [Wodak and Weiss \(2005\)](#) asserts the importance of context in understanding a discourse by saying that “we understand “discourse” as “text in context” and this means that discourse is an interdisciplinary perspective” (p. 127). As the context varies in different situations, therefore discourse is interdisciplinary. There are different ideologies which are reflected in discourse (Van Dijk, 2007) and therefore it can help in understanding the patriarchal authority and

ideology hidden in a text. Critical discourse analysis, on the other hand, “focuses on social problems and especially on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination” ([Van Dijk, 2001](#), p. 96). It means by using critical discourse analysis, the discourse of power can be examined. Khan (2015) is of the view that critical discourse analysis provides “different theoretical backgrounds, variety of grammatical approaches and set of principles and analytical tools” for understanding the idea that discourse joins “reader with the text, context, writer and the socio-cultural contexts” (p. 79). This statement shows that there are different tools, principles and theories provided by critical discourse analysis. It means critical discourse analysis is a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary approach which can help in understanding a discourse in various contexts. According to [Lazar \(2010\)](#), critical discourse analysis also shows the ways through which assumptions about gender are produced and challenged through discourse. As the present study deals with the influence of patriarchy on female's conception of character and her challenge to this influence through her discourse, therefore this method is appropriate for this study. According to Van Dijk (2007) different discursive strategies are used by speakers or writers to reveal their ideologies. These ideologies, in turn reveal the identity of a group of people. The discursive strategies, selected for analyzing the selected memoir are:

Actor Description

According to Van Dijk (2007), actors are the people who are explained through discourse or are discussed in discourse. He says:

Actors may be described as members of groups or as individuals, by first or family name, function, role or group name, as specific or unspecific, by their actions or (alleged) attributes, by their position or relation to other people, and so on. (p. 62)

This shows that there are different ways of explaining about a person like through the role, through the traits or through his actions.

Situation Description

According to Van Dijk (2007), the actions, entire situations and experiences are necessary in ideological discourses. Van Dijk (2007) says: “Indeed, 'definitions of the situation' are crucial to make a point, because the way they are described may suggest implications about causes, reasons, consequences and evaluations” (p. 83). It means situation description can imply different meanings and are therefore, important in a text or talk.

Polarization

Van Dijk (2007) asserts that in argumentation, people polarize things and divide things into two extremes. Van Dijk (2007) says that:

Polarization may also apply to 'good' and 'bad' sub-categories of out groups, as is the case for friends and allies on the one hand, and enemies on the other. Note that polarization may be rhetorically enhanced when expressed as a clear contrast, that is, by attributing properties of US and THEM that are semantically each other's opposites. (Van Dijk, 2007, p.80)

It means during argument, in order to emphasize a certain point, positive qualities are attached to one group and negative qualities are attached to the other group. Through this, they are divided into two different groups.

Hyperbole

Hyperboles refer to the exaggerations which emphasize the good qualities of one group and bad qualities of other

groups. Van Dijk (2007) is of the view that: “As is the case for DRAMATIZATION, hyperboles are semantic rhetorical devices for the enhancement of meaning... Sometimes such forms of hyperbole are implied by the use of special METAPHORS” (Van Dijk, 2007, p.73). It means hyperbole is rhetorical device which enhance meaning.

Distancing (Meaning, lexicon)

According to Van Dijk (2007):

One of the ways US-THEM polarization may be expressed in talk is by the words that imply distance between in-group speakers refer to out-group speakers. This familiar socio-cognitive device may for instance be expressed by the use of demonstrative pronouns instead of naming or describing the ‘Others’. Also in this debate, thus, Conservatives will often refer to refugees as “those people”. (Van Dijk, 2007, p.67)

This statement reveals that distancing is used to differentiate people. The example given in the above statement is related to racial discourse but it explains the point that through the use of demonstrative pronouns, groups of people are represented as different from one another.

Implicatures

This is a device through which a writer or speaker says something implicitly. Van Dijk (2007) says: “large part of discourse remains implicit, and such implicit information may be inferred by recipients from shared knowledge or attitudes and thus constructed as part of their mental models of the event or action represented in the discourse” (p. 74). It means that there are certain statements whose meaning is not clearly stated but is implied.

Victimization

Van Dijk (2007) is of the view that in any discourse with ideological underpinnings, the members of one group are represented as victims. He says:

When the Others tend to be represented in negative terms, and especially when they are associated with threats, then the in-group needs to be represented as a victim of such a threat. This is precisely what happens, as we also have observed in conversations about “foreigners” in which ordinary speakers apply the move of inversion in order to emphasize that not the Others are discriminated against, but WE are. (2007, p.84)

In this statement, the example of discourse based on the issue of immigrants has been given. Through this example, Van Dijk (2007) has shown that in order to give a negative image about immigrants or foreigners, the local people are presented as victims in the discourse. This example reveals that in order to present the members of one group as having negative attributes, the members of other group are represented as the one suffering and getting harmed.

Feminist Analysis of the Use of Discursive Strategies in Educated (2018)

From the very start of the memoir, it becomes obvious that the female subject Tara is influenced by her father. While describing the personality of her father, she says: “he was able to command a room. He had a presence about him, the solemnity of an oracle” (p. 6). Here, she uses the strategy of actor description to portray the personality of her father but the use of this strategy also reveals the fact that her father can command others. She also once says: “I saw the world through my father’s eyes” (p. 60). The use of the words “through my father’s eyes” (p. 60) are implicature and imply that Tara trusts her father blindly. The technique of situation description has been used here to reveal the situation of Tara who believes her father and therefore, follows his orders. Tara’s father influences every area of her life. For example, Tara’s father is against school education. When she is offered to go to school, she says “I wouldn’t like it” (p. 7). Tara has never gone to a school therefore this statement shows the influence that her father has on her. Later on, she herself realizes this fact as she says:

“My life was narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, and absolute.” (p. 184); the technique of situation’s description has been used here as Tara explains about her experience. The word “other” in the above mentioned statement refers to her father and her brother Shawn, who influenced her life. The technique of victimization has also been used in this statement to show that Tara is influenced so much by her father and brother that they decide every step of her life. Under the influence of her father, Tara is always anxious about her dress. She hears her father criticizing a woman because of her tight clothes and because of this, Tara comprehends that: “Righteous women do not wear tight clothing.

Other women do that.” (p. 107) Tara’s statement shows that she is using dress as a criteria to define woman. In the above mentioned statement, the use of the word “Other” shows that the technique of ‘distancing’ has been used. This technique has been used to elaborate the ideology of Tara that women who don’t wear tight clothes are pure and righteous while those who wear tight clothes are bad. Due to her father’s criticism about woman wearing tight clothes, Tara becomes obsessed with the idea that she might not become a woman of wrong sort. While pondering over her father’s words, she says, “more I considered them, the more I worried that I might be growing into the wrong sort of woman. Sometimes I could scarcely move through a room, I was so preoccupied with not walking or bending or crouching like them”. (p. 107) Here, the technique of situation description has been used. Through the use of this technique, Tara’ situation has been described that she has set a certain standard about her being “righteous”. She is pure and righteous if she is bending or walking in a right way or wearing right clothes. This example also reveals that in the patriarchal society, certain norms are fixed and women are forced to follow these norms. The above mentioned statement made by Tara also shows that she does not consider herself as having any worth. Instead, she considers herself an object that can be defined as good on the basis of her dress i.e., the norm of the society.

It is not only Tara’s father, who influences Tara in considering certain things or norms as criteria of her purity. Tara’s brother Shawn also influences her. When he sees her doing makeup, he says: “I thought you were better....but you’re just like the rest” (p. 109). Here the technique of distancing has been used to show that girls who don’t wear makeup are better and more righteous than those who wear makeup. Tara also tells that when she applied lip gloss, “Shawn said I was a whore” (p. 109). This statement implies that those who use makeup have low character. The use of the word “Whore” (p. 109) due to wearing makeup shows that in patriarchal society, women face abuse if they don’t follow any male influenced norm like wearing makeup. Tara goes on to tell that “he said it like a joke but I wiped the color from my lips anyway” (p. 109). This shows that she is so much influenced by males and is so much worried about her righteousness and purity that she even takes the joke seriously.

The removing of lip gloss shows the great extent of her brother’s influence on her. Tara’s brother’s use of the word “Whore” for her influenced her so much that Tara started to consider she is a whore. She says: “I had come to identify with it” (p. 186). This statement reveals that females can consider themselves as having low character under patriarchal influence. It means males can influence the women in defining their character. Tara also says, “I evolved a new understanding of the word “whore,” one that was less about actions and more about essence. It was not that I had done something wrong so much as that I existed in the wrong way. There was something impure in the fact of my being”. (p. 186) In this statement, the use of the phrase “Existing in the wrong way” shows Tara’s false conception that women are impure, and as she is a woman, she doesn’t need to do anything wrong to become impure. She is impure because she is a woman. The strategy of hyperbole has been used in this statement to enhance the point that in patriarchal society, women are influenced so much by men (through the use of words like ‘whore’) that they start considering themselves impure and also consider their gender as the cause of their impurity.

Tara considers herself an impure being and defines her character according to her dress or makeup. But this attitude only changes when she leaves the authority of her father and brother and goes out to gain education. Through her life experiences; she realizes her real value. Tara, describes her situation when after leaving her father and brother’s authority, she looks in the mirror of bathroom where her brother used to torture her. Tara, while describing her experience says “it wasn’t the clothes that made this face, this woman,

different. It was something behind her eyes, something in the set of her jaw—a hope or belief or conviction...” (p. 265). Through the strategy of situation description, a change in Tara’s attitude has been depicted in the above mentioned statement. The use of words “something behind her eyes” in the above mentioned statement shows that now, Tara gives value to herself. “Something behind her eyes” also depicts the presence of something worthy inside Tara. This implies that there is something of value inside her instead of the dress she is wearing. The use of the phrase: “set of her jaw” represents her intense feelings and strength. The criteria (in the form of patriarchal norms) is also challenged through this statement as Tara asserts that she is not defined by her clothes, it’s her, feelings, beliefs and determination that define her.

When Tara leaves patriarchal control and gets education, she comes to understand that “Scholar or whore, both couldn’t be true. One was a lie” (p. 224). Through this statement, a polarization is being created between her previous idea of herself as an impure being and the new idea of herself as a scholar. This statement also implies that as she has the capability of becoming a scholar, therefore, she is not a whore and her brother was telling a lie when he was referring to her as a whore. Through this statement, Tara challenges her previous conception of being an impure being.

Conclusion

Knowledge about the lived experience of the female requires thinking beyond Westren’s claim to have won the gender equality in the Western society. Patriarchy through the hegemonic constructions of femininity, domesticity and religiosity restricts the woman to fulfill her human potential. For improving her position and relations in the society, a female needs to dismantle the misconceptions about being a respectable woman in the society. The memoirist of *Educated* (2018) who challenged her status as ‘other’ had to cross all the familial, sexual, generational and cultural barriers in order to fulfill her personal goals. By recollecting personal experiences of her daily life the memoirist reveals that the Western society privileges men over women and reinforces the gendered power relations. Such thinking has repercussions and consequences upon women’s personal life, suppressing their identity and individuality.

The present paper shows that patriarchy influences the females so much that they consider themselves impure and as having low character. The discourse of the selected memoir reveals the issue that females, under the male influence, set clothes and makeup as a criteria to define their character’s purity. This dilemma of patriarchal society has been portrayed through the use of the techniques of actor description, situation description, victimization, hyperbole and distancing. A change in this attitude has been depicted by the strategies of polarization and situation description. These strategies reveal that after getting rid of patriarchy and experiencing the social world, the female subject resists her identity formation, on the basis of her sartorial choices and also through strong determination and conviction to get education, subvert the patriarchal influence by asserting herself as a valued member of the society.

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