

## **BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES IN KATE GRENVILLE'S *LILIAN'S STORY***

Shahaya Sheeba.B<sup>#1</sup>(18222214012011), S. Sudha Rani<sup>\*2</sup>,

<sup>#</sup>Research Scholar, Guide Assistant Professor of English,

St. Mary's College (Autonomous), *Manonmaniam Sundaranar University*.

<sup>1</sup>sheebaneorah@gmail.com , <sup>2</sup>sudhasmc@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

Literature is a distinct domain that mirrors the experience of human life. Australian literature is one among the genres that exposed the effects of colonial supremacy and cultural imbalances that prevailed among Indigenous Australians and European settlers. Certain feministic writings witness the trauma of the female characters who were subjected to both physical and psychological agitation in the name of cultural ethos. Kate Grenville, one of the renowned female Australian novelists made excellent contribution to the Literary world. Grenville's collection chiefly focused on the struggles of stereotype female characters. Grenville's works blended the historical facts with her speculations and brought out the invisible truths of Australia. Her *Lilian's Story* reflects the struggles of women who were forced to exist under patriarchal power and gender oppression. *Lilian's Story* is a novel that revolves around dominance, liberty and resistance. Lilian Singer as a daughter of a dominant father resisted against misogyny. Her father's physical and sexual violence made her to refuse the external world and create a world of her own which made others to discriminate her as an eccentric. This paper makes an attempt to do a detail analysis from the female perspective by referring the theories of feminist critics to rationalize that women should be brought out of the narrow boundaries of culture, tradition and social system to prove their equality and individuality.

**Key word:** patriarchy, autocracy, misogyny, retaliation, constriction.

Australian Literature basically developed with the historical representation that supported both the beauty and terror of the Australian Landscape. Australian writings generated from both Indigenous Australians and those descended from the European arrival. They tried to present the tangibility of this newly found land by delving in variety of themes such as aboriginality, migration, friendship, unanimity, sense of exile, and the harsh and fearful experience in the Australian wilderness.

Women writers in Australian Literature tried to prove their individuality through distinct works. Kate Grenville is one among the famous female Australian writers of European descendant. She has dedicated her literary career truthfully by contributing fifteen books which includes fiction, non-fiction, biography and books about the writing process. The awards like 'Commonwealth Writer's prize', 'Britain's Orange Prize' and 'Australian/Vogel Literary Award', which she received manifests her literary skill. Some of her novels have been translated into many different languages. Grenville's curiosity for creative writing helped her to yield Doctorate of Creative Arts from UTD, Sydney. She has also been awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of New South Wales, The University of Sydney and Macquarie University.

Grenville's *Lilian's Story* was published in 1984. It was considered as one of the most striking novels of the Twentieth Century Australian fiction. This is because of its rich language and the way it was fragmented into each section. The evoking lyrical writing style of each episode draws the attention of the readers. Patrick White, who has been hailed as the Nobel Laureate in Australian Literature has credited the novel by commenting in the front page of the original text as, "transformed an Australian myth into a dazzling fiction of universal appeal".

Grenville was inspired by an eccentric old lady Bea Miles, who used to wander along the streets of Sydney uttering Quotes from Shakespeare. Grenville often watched her when she was a University student. By collecting few more facts about Bea Miles, Grenville could manage to give life to the beautiful novel *Lilian's Story* which won 'The Australian Literary Award'. According to Grenville, the story is not all about Bea Miles but about the position of women who were forced to struggle within the limits of

patriarchy and undergo both physical and mental strain that leads to get connected with a new world, where they could exist without any social constrictions. It is also about how the society and relationships has to take the responsibility in double colonizing women in the name of patriarchy and imperialism.

*Lilian's Story* intentionally crosses the conventional law of patriarchal society that belongs to the Colonial Australia. Lilian Singer, the protagonist of the novel narrates her own story from her birth. She takes three different stages like "A girl," "A Young Lady," and "A Woman" where she becomes the central figure. Though the novel has been structured with a weird beginning, it is much captivating on the other way :

It was a wild night in the year of Federation that the birth took place. Horses kicked down the stables. Pigs flew, figs grew thorns. The infant mewled and started and the doctor assured the mother that a caul was a lucky sign. *A girl?* the father exclaimed, outside in the waiting room, tiled as if for horrible emergencies. This was a contingency he was not prepared for, but he rallied within a day and announced, *Lilian. She will be called Lilian Una.* (3)

The first two stages of Lilian were presented like a dream narration packed with old memories displayed with brilliance and confidence. Lilian presented herself as a fat girl. Though Lilian's obesity was the result of her initial strategy, later she made it as an intentional choice for recognition. "now I was fat. *I am a fat girl*, I whispered in bed ... "(17). One could easily observe the impact of colonial attitude in many occasions, like the way Lilian and her brother John were brought up by her parents, with societal orders and traits. Her mother Nora was the embodiment of a colonial wife. Though she was obedient and fulfilled all the duties of a wife, she has been subjected to inner torment which is very common in patriarchal society.

Albion as a dominant father clearly reflects a colonizer in his every action. Albion was fond of false intellectuality. His inclination is not totally based on intelligence was revealed through his brutal treatment to Lilian. When Lilian's curiosity encouraged her to trespass into her father's room against his

will and when she failed to follow his words in a social gathering, Albion immediately preferred the choice of whipping to show his dominance and make her stay within the patriarchal orders. Albion's routine beating towards his daughter clearly proves his madness of misogyny. Lilian established feministic resistance right from her childhood where she was supposed to be her father's victim. Lilian's inability to prove her skill without the support of her father obviously witness the male supremacy in the patriarchal social setup. Lilian was forced to choose solitude without any choice. From the very beginning the repression expressed by her father in the name of beatings did not affect her in any way; "He brought the belt down on my pinafore with a muffled sound. *No bloody good*, said crossly, and pushed the pinafore up, pulled my bloomers down. When the belt came forward, and a deep wrinkle appeared in the leather. It is *only skin*, I told myself and heard a yelping from somewhere that made me want to laugh" (20).

From the later part of the novel it is known that Lilian's childhood and adolescence were brutally spoiled by her father and therefore she segregates herself from the family and society. Though Lilian had a better education and pleasant outlook she opted for odd fortune. She created her own world where she could lead her life without any constraints. She was forced by her father to the imprisonment of asylum for ten years. Finally her father accused her as a whore for wandering in the streets and quoting Shakespeare. But even then she was ready to face the world without any hesitation and lived a sacred life in the street, with a company of an old drunken taxi driver till his death.

As initial records of history failed to display the role of women in its books, certain feminist critics and female writers like Grenville consciously took steps to fit women in history. Grenville also displayed the struggle of women against the male dominance in the patriarchal society which has been considered as an acceptable norm in Australian society. Measures and efforts taken in support of feminism and women upliftment created an awareness and made the people to understand as Hutcheon says, "...that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (15).

These evidences act as historical records which is included in the works of certain authors like Grenville as a collection of memories. According to Hutcheon, “women have helped develop the postmodern valuing of the margins and the ex-centric as a way out of the power problematics of centers and of male/female oppositions” (16). Though Lilian as a girl was used to the patriarchal social setup, after being raped brutally by her father, she could not blindly accept everything as it is. She wished to resist against all these orders and slavery. Women were forced to struggle against autocracy, male mastery and also for personal rights in order to withstand in the society and also to maintain their family bondage. This will definitely make them suffer internally.

As the male voices dominated the women and made them silent not only in their personal life but also in the society, their sufferings and struggles were hidden and ignored. Bell hooks in his work *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* explains that, “Power struggles, coercive authoritarian rule, and brutal assertion of domination shape family life so that it is often the setting of intense suffering and pain” (36). As Lilian was stuck within the limits of autocracy she prepared herself to withstand the suffering. Lilian’s intentional obesity through overeating proves her preparation to resist against her father’s brutal punishment, “...there was too much flesh now for Father” (19).

Albion as a colonizer used his superiority not only to subjugate his daughter under his control but also to use her as a sexual object. Albion’s predetermination to shatter Lilian’s rebellious notion and to bring her entirely under his control triggered him to rape her. Lilian could realize her physical inability to resist against her father’s control:

I could hear my voice, a thin reedy cry like something choking and not being rescued. Father said nothing at all, but the sound of his breathing was like a thudding machine in the silence. All around us the house stood shocked, repelling the sounds we made. My cries carried no further than the carpet of the stairway. The silent rooms would take no part in my struggle, but swallowed the sounds indifferently. No! I heard myself cry with a feeble

piping sound. No! No! The house gave back only silence and the panting of the desperate machine that was Father. (125)

Though this paternal violence was considered to be a great disaster in Lilian's life, it became a starting point for Lilian to move her out from the clutches of male supremacy. This gave her power to draw her independence and to succeed without dependency. Lilian could realise the power that was built within her to confront her father and his authority. She generated her courage to challenge her father who once again tried to punish her by whipping with her mother's belt. Lilian's verbal attack and physical response was the perfect retaliation that made him to react with the loss of words; "I did not move quickly, but was gathering myself to move when Father startled me by flinging the belt down between us. Intolerable, he shouted. Vile, vile! I was turning in my slow way to present my behind to Father at last, planting my fat legs apart to balance, when I saw that he had left the room. The belt lay on the floor in a great silence" (133).

As Lilian's inclination to quote Shakespeare was smashed by Albion in her early stage itself, she took it as a mimic symbol to show her defiance to her colonial master. Homi K Bhabha in his work *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* states that:

Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also thus, the sign of the inappropriates, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power. (126)

Though Lilian was much inclined to Shakespeare's quotes, her father's discouragement and authority made her to quote them not from the author's (Shakespeare's) perspective but from her own perspective, through which she could express the colonial atmosphere that prevailed around her.

Towards the end of the novel Lilian could realize that though she has been subjected to her father's authority even in her adulthood, he could not stop her from living her life on her own way with real

happiness, "...to become stone, or sky, or anything that could go on living its own silent life..." (154). When Lilian was accused as an eccentric and taken to the court, she was not bothered about losing her identity. She felt that if her madness is going to bring her fame she is ready to come out from the boundary of colonial identity and stay in the memories of her community as eccentric:

I was beginning to be a public figure and was enjoying it, the way people nudged each other and pointed. My story was beginning to have a small part in the story of others, and I was becoming a small part of history. I was at my best on a slow tram, or a bus lurching down George Street. Everyone greeted me, and I greeted them all as I hauled my weight on board. (248)

Writers like Grenville made an excellent contribution like *Lilians Story* to express Australia's colonial past. As a female writer she made attempts to express the struggles and sufferings of the female gender within the boundaries of cultural norms and social orders. Through *Lilian's Story* Grenville expresses the serenity of feminism and takes the responsibility to bring out the capability of a woman who could resist the male autocracy and break the colonial boundary to lead her life with all independence according to her own choice.

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