Tradition as an Orthodox Hurdle in Women's Identity in Ameen Merchant’s “The Silent Raga"

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Abstract: Ameen Merchant is an Indian born Canadian writer, who in his debut novel "The Silent Raga" explicates the oppressed identity of Indian Women in the patriarchal orthodox society. This novel has the touch of Feminism rooted to the soil of South Indian conservative traditions. The nature of Feminism cannot be universal; it differs with culture, region, economic and class levels as they relate to women in particular society. The female protagonist of this novel Janaki is forced into domestic chores after her mother's untimely demise. She is objectified by the orthodox tradition to pursue her dreams. Merchant optimistically shows Janaki, letting loose all the traditions imposed on her by the cultural conventions and finally achieving her best identity in musical career. All through the novel, there is variety of female roles undergoing sufferings in silence. Thus, Ameen Merchant in his "The Silent Raga" presents the tradition as a hurdle in women's self-identity. This paper focus on the points that assigning gender roles restrict women from being a full person, stop concerning women to see marriage as a prize or something to aspire and not to constrain women but leave her on being the best version of herself.

Ameen Merchant was born in Bombay in 1964 and raised in Madras. "The Silent Raga" is his debut novel. He is an eminent storyteller evident from his rich repertoire of emotions blended to a melodious tune. Ameen Merchant portrays the life of women constricted by the orthodox society with his musical metaphors and more to please almost all the senses through his picture of food, art and music. Merchant strikes a positive note in search of identity by the protagonist Janaki who steps out all the conventions of Brahmin society to nurture her musical career. This novel was shortlisted for 2008 'Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Canada and Caribbean). He now lives in Vancouver, Canada where he is working on his next novel.

"The Silent Raga", a tale of varied sort of Indian women who yearns to shine as star in the dark sky of conventions bound society. Merchant had exquisitely explored the Tamil women's life thrust by the hypocrites of Tamil Patriarchy. Women's plight, dilemma and obligations in a typical South Indian setting dresses the theme of the novel. It is enhanced by using Indian Carnatic musical notes and Ragas in the novel. Merchant has constructed the narration in non-linear form where the incidents of past and present are intertwined. The use of Tamil Brahmin accent brings the flavor of South Indian culture to the novel.

The journey of a Brahmin teenager to a lady of Mumbai actor is narrated and her initial compusre despite the unhealthy orthodox ambience is the pick of the story. Merchant craftily weaves the different threads of women in "The Silent Raga". Women who are perfect, imperfect, conservatives, rebel, ugly and beautiful. Ameen Merchant characterizes all women who fights, loses, or wins their dreams. He has quite intricately pictured the female characters, which is a great surprise from a Male debut writer.

True to its title,"The Silent Raga" suggests the unspoken, silent suffering of Indian women in common. Just like the Raga in music, the narration flows amble and leaves the mind peace-filled. This composure of silence remains even after the story is done-with. Merchant chose music as a framework because the Carnatic music of South India is very much a part of his heroines lives. The silent raga is like a prophecy that repeats itself at different junctures. It symbolizes the unsung story of protagonist that is her inner crave for music and self-identity.

The narration is flooded with women characters of varied sorts. The protagonist Janaki is boxed to take care of all household works from dawn to dusk after her mother's untimely demise. She was debarred from education but somehow allowed to learn music. Janaki is a prodigy in playing veena, a divine string instrument. Her father is least concerned about his daughters who remained silent most times. Though Janaki did all the works perfectly no sign of appreciation was heard from anyone. Mallika, Janaki's sister is lucky enough to attend school with Janaki as her second mother. Gayathi, Janaki's aunt brings out the rage in us with her head filled with lust. Zubeida (first wife of Asgar), a Muslim women, offers golden Philosophy to Janaki Asgar. Kamala one of Janaki's friends, kills herself when the bridegroom walks out of wedding hall for the short of five thousand rupees in dowry. Nalini, music teacher praying to her 'Saki' who also took her own head filled with lust.

"The Silent Raga" is an exquisite fusion of tradition and transition, exile and reconciliation, silence and eloquence, society and self, crisis and consciousness. Janaki who was all tied to tradition at first releases herself, forwards to accept the transition and marries a Muslim Actor Asgar as his second wife. Zubeida, Asgar's first wife, is more a confidante to Janaki and shares everything with her. It is Zubeida who encouraged Janaki to start a musical School that eventually turned a success. Thus, transition from tradition proves to win the hurdle of convention.

Janaki's mother often said to other mamis in agraharam,"we should give our daughters what nobody thought of giving us". Nevertheless, her sudden death dragged Janaki into ordinary, listless journey to nowhere. This shows how the women in Indian society are merely treated as replaceable for domestic chores.

Ameen Merchant had so elegantly brought the women's side, which is unexpected from a male writer. Janaki feels fulfilled when Asgar appreciates her labor. "Nothing hardens a person faster than the absence of appreciation”. This fragile longing for appreciation in domesticated women is still ignored. Don't they desire a better place than this?

Next in the list of gender concern issue is the Dowry system. Kamala, a violinist, who was to participate in all-India Classical Music Competition to be held in Bombay was betrothed to Rangan. On the day of wedding, Rangan’s father consumed poison to
stop the marriage for the short of five thousand rupees in dowry. Kamala hanged herself to death after this. She is one of the unsung Ragas pushed to death by the tradition of dowry.

It conveys the conservatism, the thrift, the social mores imposed on young girls of marriageable age as well as the paradoxes that are not spoken about. Fear, Ignorance, Shame and Modesty are the four prison walls that kept a woman confined to her place. A woman must have her own version of things. "Because you are a girl" is never a reason for anything.

"The Silent Raga" should be heard and its significance deserves a notice. Traditions should invite transitions to let the Indian women design their own identity. Dissolve the idea of gender roles because dreams are never gender specific. Through "The Silent Raga", Ameen Merchant has showed the above feminist themes in his novel where he empowered his female protagonist Janaki to chase her identity despite the tides of traditions.

Works Cited

The Silent Raga

Ameen Merchant was born in Bombay and raised in Madras. The Silent Raga is his first novel. He lives in Vancouver, Canada, where he is working on his next novel and programming a new Bollywood audio channel for the CBC. Merchant is a writer to watch out for — Anita Nair in DNA. Merchant's words verge on pure poetry as uniquely evocative of India as the sound of the santoor, the hammered dulcimer - Canadian Immigrant. ...a richly painted tale, revealing the caged heart of an artist who longs to soar on the power of her music. This is a gem of a novel, filled with brilliant imagery and an elegant style of writing. — Toronto Star.

...a moving tale of family, tradition, loss and reconciliation. Ameen Merchant's poignant and ambitious debut novel, at once intensely imagined and sensitively nuanced, shines an unsparing light on the complex subject of family obligations and sibling relationships. Ameen Merchant was born in Bombay and raised in Madras, India. The Silent Raga is his first novel. He lives in Vancouver where he program's music for the CBC's satellite Indian music channel. He is currently working on his second novel. More about Ameen Merchant. The Silent Raga. Full online text of A Resumed Identity by Ambrose Bierce. Other short stories by Ambrose Bierce also available along with many others by classic and contemporary authors. And still the interminable procession came out of the obscurity to south and passed into the obscurity to north, with never a sound of voice, nor hoof, nor wheel. The man could not rightly understand: he thought himself deaf; said so, and heard his own voice, although it had an unfamiliar quality that almost alarmed him; it disappointed his ear's expectancy in the matter of timbre and resonance. But he was not deaf, and that for the moment sufficed. < 2 >.