

SPACE, REPRESENTATION AND SUBVERSION: EXPLORING FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN FREDRICK BACKMAN'S NOVEL MY GRANDMOTHER SENDS HER REGARDS AND APOLOGIESE

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Abstract

This paper examines space, representation and subversion in Fredrick Backman's novel My Grandmother Sends her Regards and Apologizes in the context of. The story of the novel is narrated the from the perspective of a seven years old girl, which is an innocent and optimistic lens to see something with, but it is not just limited to a child story; rather it is embedded with vast range of various adult themes, such as acceptance, womanhood, female agency and gender equality etc. It makes it's one think of things that we often do not ponder over in our daily lives. This paper utilizes feminist theory and investigates the subversion of conventional motherhood and wifehood and the way characters break stereotypical norms and expectations of the society. The objective of this paper is to study how the female characters in the novel are different from conventional women, to understand how they try to discover their own selves and the way they find consolation in the company of each other. This study also uses Mitchel Foucault's notion of utopia and heterotopia, and explores how these spaced are created in the novel and what sort of changes occurs when a female character sees herself in this alternative space. This research study is using qualities research method as a tool to manifest its main contentions.

Introduction

My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologizes is the third novel written by the Swedish author, Fredrick Backman, published in 2013. This novel tells the story of an eight-year-old girl whose parents are divorced. She feels abandoned by her parents and is raised by her grandmother. This research article explores the construction of feminist spaces, female representation, and female friendships in the text. This research will also explore the subversion of conventional motherhood, and the

way in which female characters break stereotypical norms of society. This research paper uses feminist theoretical perspectives and analyzes the text through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of Heterotopia and Carol Pearson's work on women's Fantasies and feminist utopia. Michel Foucault's idea of Heterotopia theorizes a space where things are subverted and become "other". From a feminist perspective, it is a space where gender role gets subverted, where conventional gender does not matter, and it does not work the same way; where

society's every conventional norm and stereotype is broken; where a woman can use all her potentials to the fullest, potentials she cannot exercise in a conventional patriarchal society. Essentially, it constructs a space which is simply a feminist utopia. Carol Pearson in her essay says that "Authors of feminist utopian fiction usually begin by showing that how women are profoundly alienated and limited by a patriarchal society; they then go on to acquaint with an alternative society in which a woman could feel at home and manifest their potential" (Pearson, 50). Therefore, it will be the purpose of this paper to show the ways in which the selected text shows a vision of an alternative feminist utopian space that is built by women for healing and intimacy. Since, the novel on which the research paper is written is contemporary and no scholarly work is done on it, this research paper will be a great contribution to feminist scholarship and feminist literature.

Literature Review

My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologizes, is a very new publication and there is no scholarly research conducted on it. However, there are several reviews of this text by different critics. While giving her views about Backman's narrative style and the interaction between his characters Seemita Das in her review about his book *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologizes* on Time of India website says, "The strength of Backman's narrative rests on his seamless switching between hilarity and somberness, keeping the sensibilities of his characters away from dilution. So, when a child and a war soldier look at the same issue and engage in a long discussion, their respective identities and backgrounds stand beside them like faithful sentries. That both can still reach a common ground is the beauty of this book." She also comments that "This work is a magnificent ode to humanity and the many virtues that guard it from losing its sheen. It is a subtle but strong call to dream, to imagine, to protect, to preserve, to sing to dance, to fly to fall, yet to stand, to encourage, to fight for the right cause, to love to forgive; in other words, to live. Nothing is a

shame, even believing in superheroes, if it eventually adds up to the good in the world."

Julia Mastroianni, while showing her admiration for Backman's story telling writes about his novel *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologizes* and says, "What is beautiful and remarkable about this blurring of fantasy and truth is that through it, a child is given access to knowledge most children aren't. When most children in most stories are shut up from the whispers behind closed doors and the longing looks that mean something more, the *Land-of-Almost-Awake* gives Elsa the ability to understand all of it through fairytales."

Ani Johnson in review of this book comments that "Don't be misled into thinking that this is either a children's or something full of misty-eyed sentimentality. Yes, there are emotional moments as it deals death and its aftermath but it also deals with some gritty adult themes, moments of violence accompanied by adult-oriented language. It deals with life; the sort of life that shakes us up as well as delighting and worrying us."

Expressing his views, Pat Hodges in his review of *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologizes* says that, "Life and loss observed through the eyes of a clever child increases reader's awareness of the foible of other humans, and opens the mind to observation of their own idiosyncrasies and how humans can successfully communicate with each other for good outcomes. The book explores many relationships between adults, children, older adults, siblings, with much humorous description, and always leaves the reader with hope that even the most impossible feelings between people can be turned positive." Since, the above-mentioned critics have only focused on the main themes, characters and writing style, there is a research gap. As, there is no scholarly work conducted on this text through a feminist lens, exploring feminist utopia and heterotopia, which is a research gap, now this paper will address these topics. Also, there has been no scholarship work done on this text, this paper will be a great contribution to feminist literature and feminist scholarship.

Theoretical Framework

In order to explore the subject matter, of feminist space, representation and subversion in Fredrick Backam's *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologises*, this research paper has used Qualitative Research Method. Qualitative Research Method is a multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive and naturalistic approach towards its subject matter. Conveying his views about qualitative researchers Denzin says that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people brings to them. (2). The data for this research paper has been collected through primary sources, books and secondary sources; journals, articles and online reviews in newspapers and magazines or other online blogging websites. Various techniques are being used to make sense of the collected data, such as textual analysis, thematic analysis and grounded theory. To critically analyze the novel, textual analysis and discourse has been used in context of the setting, surrounding and particular themes to have a better understanding of the characters and their connection and interaction with each other.

As a literary framework, feminist criticism is concerned with how literature reflects and shapes the stereotypes and other cultural assumptions. Feminist criticism explores how literary works embody patriarchal attitudes or slash them into pieces, sometimes both happening within the same work. Feminism and literature are two inseparable things; both are glued to each other very tightly by an unbreakable bond. Patriarchy has been one of the main elements of society from time unknown. In the history of mankind, women have been kept oppressed, deprived of their rights, and treated not as human beings but rather mere objects, which could be claimed as property and could be used according to the will and wish of man. Women have served as painters' model and as muse for a poet in past but with the passage of time they have awoken slowly and gradually, to gain their voice and fight for their equal rights. Adrienne Rich, about this awakening of women says, "The sleepwalkers are

coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one's eyes" (Rich, 18).

In the past, women in literature are portrayed as wicked, treacherous and cunning beings. These are the attributes given to them by men. Their identities are carved by men, but with the passage of time, the role and portrayal of women has changed. They start discovering their own voice and have tried to washout their stereotypical image, which was projected by man. Tippabohotla Vyomakesisri concludes in her article *Presentation of Women in Literature from Past to Present* concludes that,

Literature has witnessed the role of women evolving through ages, most of the published writers were men until recent times, therefor, the portrayal of women was without doubt biased. Since the time of first explorers to present, women's roles and portrayal in literature reflect the changes occurring historically for women. The insignificance and oppression of women prior to the mid-19 century is related by the small roles of females in literature. As women gained equality, the heroine continues to change. By studying these changes, it is observed that not only the characters embody the female identity, but also the heroines transform into the new figures that women aspire to be. (Vyomakesisri, 19)

This paper has also used Michael Foucault's concept of utopia and heterotopia, and Carol Pearson's works on feminist utopia as a framework.

Analysis

A patriarchal society gives females certain attributes, which portray a stereotypical image of them. According to this stereotypical image, women are weak, cunning, shallow-brained, emotional, inconstant and something that can be possessed as property. They are expected to fulfill society's expectations. A patriarchal society expects women to obey their male counterparts, in every condition, whether they like or not. They are supposed to take care of children, and should not interfere in other worldly affairs. But, in this

novel, the females are not represented as they were represented in literature in the past. Their representation is completely different. These female characters are not like stereotypical women; they are brave, intelligent, loyal and very caring people. They are defying society's expectations and they try to discover their own selves.

Unlike his other novels, Backman has written *My Grandmother Sends Her Regard and Apologises* with the perspective of an almost eight years old girl, Elsa. She is a very smart girl. She is constantly bullied by her class mates for being different than the rest of her class fellows, because she is much more intelligent than others, whenever they mispronounce a word, she tell them the right pronunciation and for that matter they hate her. She looks up every difficult word on Wikipedia, to understand it. By giving this distinguished attribute to her character, Backman has broken the stereotype of female being intellectually inferior to male.

Beckman has subverted the concept of conventional motherhood in his fictional realm. Those female characters that are projected as mothers in the novel are not like conventional mothers. They defy society's expectations, and do not just stay at home all day, taking care of their house and children, but rather they go out for their work and adventures. Elsa's grandmother leaves her daughter, Elsa's mother, with Britt-Marie and goes to war as doctor and travel around the world, to help the wounded people. Whenever a natural disaster occurs, Elsa's grandmother would leave Elsa's mother at home and would go there, to help the suffering people. While explaining to Elsa that who took care of her mother when her grandfather died, Afl says, "Britt-Marrie took care of your mother when her father died. While your grandmother was still travelling a lot, you know." (Backman, 287). Her character is not like a female person who we encounter in our daily lives. A society would expect a mother to stay at home and take care to her child but in character of grandmother we see defiance of such expectation of society. She rebels against those norms which are being set by

society for her as a mother. She utterly changes the idea of conventional motherhood.

Another aspect of the novel which is very interesting and worthy to explore is that Backman has subverted the role of a conventional wifehood. He has manifested this concept through the character of Brit-Marry. She is a housewife who is repeatedly being cheated by her husband, Kent, and she knows about it because his coat always smells of a woman's perfume and he always make excuse for being late from work. But in the closing chapters when her husband gets a heart attack, she does not visit him in hospital but rather goes out of that building and never returns back. She makes herself free from that responsibility. She pack few of her belongings and leaves her husband in a miserable condition. Even in this modern times, in our society if a husband cheats on his wife, and the wife knows about it, still she tries to ignore it, and cannot make a decision like Britt-Mary. She empowers herself by ignoring her husband's illness, and leaves him and in this way she breaks the character of a conventional wifehood. About this empowerment Kim Hanley in his article about gender role subversion says that "Self-empowerment is the fundamental element to existentialism, existence precedes essence, thus self-empowerment is self-recognition and the realization that you exist outside the parameters set by others"(Hanley, 49).

Brit-Mary breaks out of those parameters which are set for her by a patriarchal society, where people expect a wife to be loyal and caring towards her husband, even if she is being cheated by him. But she does not restrain herself to those boundaries, which are set by a masculine society but rather she empowers herself and breaks out of them.

Michel Foucault's concept of utopia and heterotopia presents a space where things become the other. From a feminist perspective, it provides a space where gender role gets subverted or does not matter. Where societal stereotypical expectation gets rejected. Where a female individual can be whomever she wants. Michel Foucault describes this place in his essay *Other Spaces: Utopia and Heterotopia* as, "Utopias are

sites with no real place. They are sites that have a great relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces”(Foucault, 3). We see this sort of space in the novel in the form of Land-of-Almost-Awake. Land-of-Almost-Awake is a fantastical world, created for Elsa by her grandmother, where she can be her true self or can adopt any sort of identity she wants, which she cannot attain in the realm of real world. There, she is a Knight, and knight is a position only a male can achieve. As a knight she fights with shadow monsters in Land-of-Almost-Awake to protect Miamas, and if these shadow monsters bite you, “a far more serious and terrible fate lies in store: you lose your imagination” (Backman, 43).

This space which is created for her by her grandmother does not only help her in that fantastical world but also a very helpful entity for her in real life. We see that her character changes from a meek and scared girl to a brave and fearless one. This metamorphosis can be observed in a scene in which Elsa notices a man in dark while she is sitting outside hospital on a bench, of whom she gets afraid but then she starts looking for a knife. This courage of willing to confront the possible danger comes indirectly from the Land-of-Almost-Awake, where she is a brave knight. Beckman describes this scene as, And Elsa doesn't know why she gets so scared, but she finds herself fumbling around the bench for a weapon. It is very odd; she never does that in the real world. In the real world, her first instinct is always to run. Only in Miamas she would she would reach for her sword, like a knight does when sensing danger. But there are no swords here. (Backman, 47)

In the later chapters, we witness that the man in darkness is actually Sam, the husband of a woman living in her building and the father of that woman's, son who has a syndrome. Elsa sees him outside her building with a knife in his hand. She now knows that he is there to kill his wife and son. He stabs her dog, wurse, and she runs towards him to confront him but Alf grabs

her and stops her from running towards him. These acts of valor are the consequence of the power and authority she exercise in Land-of-Almost-Awake.

Carol Pearson talks about the idea of feminist utopia in her essay, Women Fantasies and Feminist Utopia, and she says that that an author who writes utopian fiction first begins with a space or atmosphere where women are kept alienated and limited by a patriarchal structure, but then he constructs an alternative space for them, where they can fully utilize their potentialities. In the novel, Backman has shown to the readers this limited space of patriarchy for Elsa in the form of her school, where she gets bullied by other male students daily and sometimes, they beat her. Sometimes when she engages in an argument about wearing Spiderman costume, they tell her you cannot be Spiderman because only a male can be a Spiderman. Backman writes this incident as, “And then the boy shouted at Elsa that couldn't be Spider-Man because ‘only boys can be Spider-Man’ And then Elsa told him he could be Spider-Man's girlfriend. And then he pushed Elsa into a radiator. And then Elsa hit him with a book.” (Backman, 60). Elsa fights for not being accepted as a little different from a stereotypical female but when she comes home she feels disappointed, and to counter those troubles she faces in the real world, she goes to Land-of-Almost-Awake and there she becomes a fearless knight, who fights with monsters and she forgets that she is just a little girl. In that alternative space she becomes a new being. In Land-of-Almost-Awake, she does not feel scared or alienated but rather she feels like an invincible knight who interacts with princes, princesses and queen living in that fantastical world.

The alternative feminist utopian space is constructed in the novel in the form of Land-of-Almost-Awake. This is a space where Elsa can do whatever she desires to do. This is a space where others do not judge her based on her gender. This is a space where being different from others is not a big deal. This is a space where Elsa exercises her potentialities to its fullest. With the help of this space, Elsa also copes with the harsh

and misogynistic treatment she gets in outer world, especially school. This is a space where Elsa is a knight and she tries to resolve conflicts and tries to make the atmosphere harmonious. Beatrice and Olpand in their article, *A Feminist Utopia* about the purpose of constructing such spaces say that “A feminist utopia should not, however, be based on harmony, but rather include structures that ease conflicts and increase our capacity for handling them peacefully.” (Beatrice, Olpand, 324).

The theme of female friendship and female companionship is also very deeply rooted in the novel. Giving her views on female friendship and companionship Kristen Fuller in her article, “The Importance of Female Friendship Among Women”, says, “Most of my emotional and mental strength come from deep bonds with strong females in my life. Over time, we become friends as we mirror their thoughts, beliefs and actions.” Later in her article, she further says that women are each other’s emotional support system. From giving advice, to being a shoulder to cry on, keeping a secret, lending a listening ear and boosting self-esteem, to developing strong and healthy female friendship is something every woman can benefit from. Female characters portrayed by Backman are very dependent on each other. They find solace in each other’s company. They live in the same building and they are all connected with each other and Elsa does not know about it until her grandmother gives her a task of delivering letters to different people in the building and while doing her task, she finds out that most of the people are the ones who were rescued by her grandmother, when she was on her journey to other countries, during war times. And some are those who were given shelter by her grandmother when they were in miserable situation in her own country. She was a savior for those women. The lady to whom Elsa calls “lady in black skirt” was rescued by her grandmother when she was abroad on duty. Her had lost her whole family in a disaster and she had no one left, so Elsa’s grandmother brought her to her own country and gave her an apartment in her own building. The mother of the boy with syndrome was also saved by her grandmother

from her cruel husband, Sam, and then she gave her an apartment in her building, where he could neither harm not ever reach her.

Looking at the character of Britt-Mary we see that how much is she also dependent on other female characters. When she got married, she had no one to pass time with when her husband was gone for work. For her, Elsa’s mother became a source of something meaningful in her life and more importantly, she felt needed, when Elsa’s grandfather died. Alf tells Elsa about Britt-Mary in thirtieth chapter as such, “Britt-Mary has given her whole life to being there for a man who is never home, and trying someone else’s children to love her, when you grandfather died and she (grandmother) couldn’t be there for your mother it was perhaps the first time she felt . . . Needed.” (Backman, 287). She found a bit of love and comfort in Elsa’s mother. When Elsa’s went to college and came back pregnant with a baby with her boyfriend, Britt-Mary lost her only source of solace and it made her a bitter person. When Elsa was born, Britt-Mary felt the same for her as she felt for her mother before, but by that time Elsa’s grandmother came back from her foreign visits and she took her away from Britt-Mary, and she lost her only hope of feeling needed.

The black is black skirt is portrayed as a drunk, who is always lamenting for her lost children and husband. She is a broken character in the novel, but when she starts interaction with other females in the building, she gets a little bit comfort and then she starts joining them in meetings and also in birthday parties. In the company of other women, she finds peace and consolation.

Conclusion

Thus, it has been demonstrated that Fredrick Backman has used characters ranging from a child to an old woman to show the importance of gender equality. He has shown that how much female friendship and companionship is important, and how it can help someone to get out of a miserable situation, and give her some solace and courage to deal with family loss and grief. He has completely rejected the idea of conventional wifehood and has told his reader

that it is not right to spend your life with someone who is not loyal to you and does not care about you. He has stressed on self-discovery. Backman has also conveyed to the readers that acceptance should be a fundamental element of our society. A girl should not be treated different from other only because she is different or because she is a girl.

The findings of this research also reveal that if the females are given the same opportunities as males and not subjugated on the bases of their gender, they have the potential no one can imagine, or at least same as males. A woman should not be just a housewife; to care of children and do the domestic work but rather she could be a mother as well as an employee at the same time, to be independent, to support her family financially and to contribute to the societ

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