

# The Predicaments of Pacific Women: A Review on Their Writings

<sup>1\*</sup>Kamala Naiker, <sup>2</sup>Rosalie Muertigue

<sup>1,2</sup>University of Fiji

EVERY single woman dreams of having a luxurious life. Women wish to acquire the best education for them, prominent jobs and live as they wish.

There are many women who are not destined to be a part of these dreams and desires. A very serious and sensitive issue often ignored by all. For many centuries people have been expressing their views and opinions on certain issues with the help of literature. Literature acted as a medium of expression of thoughts and ideas which writers wanted others to gain insight of. The literary world was there to stay but there were many stereotyped ideas which the males had about the females. Women writers had been excluded from the literary canon and have been misinterpreted in the works of male writers.

Countless women in Fiji villages and many other parts of Fiji are unfortunate. They receive a patriarchal teaching from early childhood; grow up with the instilled belief that a woman's nature is an inevitable consequence of her reproductive role. This kind of argument has been used throughout history and societies to validate women's submissiveness, subordination, and self-sacrificing nature.

European, American and Indian women in the nineteenth century lived in an era where gender inequality was at its highest peak. Women were deprived of many opportunities such as the right to vote, having control over personal property after marriage, having the rare chance to be granted legal custody of their children in case of divorce and not having the opportunity to be educated. Their uniqueness in writing, ballet dancing, theological preaching, was suppressed and they were also put into asylum declaring them as mad. The asylum physicians took advantage of these women's vulnerability and would sexually abuse them. They

were supposed to stay home, take care of the family, run the household, be smiling even in their suffering and please the Godhead husbands.

An ideal wife is projected to be devoted, passive, powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, pious and above all pure. These expectations of women eventually lead them to dependence, desperation and depression. The women in many Fiji villages and in many other parts of Fiji grow up accepting a patriarchal society's accepted norms as the gospel truth and they strictly abide to the laws set out for them by the men. A loss of their identity is inevitable. There were many females who inherited the talent or writing and were courageous enough to break free from the barriers that trapped them. They succeeded in establishing the stature which they truly deserved. Kate Chopin, an early 20th century writer, in her novel *The Awakening*, narrates a married woman's sexual rebellion against the restrictions of a conventional marriage. Acclaimed international writers: Anita Desai, Kate Chopin, Kamala Markandaya, Virginia Woolf, and also local writers: Vanessa Griffen, Jully Sipolo, Konai Helu Thaman, Arlene Griffen, Prem Banfal, Mildred Sope and many other South Pacific women writers have explored and expressed explicitly the suffering of females in a myriad of ways.

Several poems by South Pacific women poets highlight women sufferings which indicate that women need consideration and care. In the poem, *My Husband* by Momoe Von Reiche, a woman's hurting is voiced when her husband verbally abuses her with being "black and ugly" as the backside of a dog or as having hair "like the tail of Ami's old mare in the paddock". Charlotte Perkins Gilman, remembered for her short fiction "The Yellow Wallpaper", emphasizes on the terrible effects that enforced isolation can have on women when they are entrapped in a room without simulation of any

kind. The protagonist undergoes postpartum depression causing her to lose her mental stability. This masterpiece of Gilman's has awakened the patriarchal society's upheld ideologies with an intention to bring about a change in women. Though it is a fictional story, such treatments of women exist in reality in the world even today.

Men perpetrated an ideological prison that exposed and silenced women. This was called the "Cult of True Womanhood". This conventional thought was further aggravated into two categories namely, "Cult of Domesticity" and "Cult of Purity". Men had the freedom to fulfill their desires and interests whereas women were marginalized and expected to be submissive, subservient, self-sacrificing, ever smiling and pure in their marriage. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" created havoc in a patriarchal society and caused an alarm amongst the physicians who claimed that after reading this fiction, women will be driven to insanity. Gilman's obvious intention was to prevent insanity amongst women and to give birth to the "New Womanhood".

Arlene Griffen's essay "Women Speak Out in Poetry" details the treatment of women in a male dominated Pacific Society. Pacific women express their derogatory thoughts of their husbands about them, destroying their self-respect and identity. She writes that through poems, women communicate the relationships of men and women in and out of marriage. Most of these Pacific poems arouse sympathy for Pacific women because they are denigrated by the men of the society, especially their husbands. The purpose of these poets is to pose serious questions not only for women, but for all Pacific people. These poems are significant because they verbalize issues the Pacific people are challenged with in their lives without total comprehension of what is actually happening. Many men accept the traditional conventions and their upbringing as their right, oppressing the women who are silenced because culture dictates so. Women writers are involved in this process of themselves creating and recreating a history within their communities. They address specific issues pertaining to their own social situation, such as gender politics. In their writing, woman as subject is

a focal point, but it is dealt with in conjunction with other problems of national interest.

A woman is belittled by her husband who is attracted to white women and in the process a woman in such a situation loses her self-worth, dignity and develops an inferiority complex. The poem "My Guest" portrays the theme of sexual expectations of a husband of his wife and to which his wife does not live up to. The wife competes with other women to keep her man. Her life is reduced to her success as a sex object and a child-bearer. Another poem "Silly Woman", berates a woman for allowing her-self to be used as a sex object. The women, through these poems, express their calamitous situation but are helpless to bring about a change in their lives as they conform to what they were taught to believe in.

Such women are always in the background, with no say in family matters and becoming self-sacrificing and long-suffering in nature. Their predicament is unlocked to the world through women's writing as rightfully stated that literature is a window to the world and a mirror to life. Men expect their wives to be ideal. Pleasing their men, casting their best and too gentle even to force their penitence for their harshness and women blame themselves for a sin not committed and pleads for forgiveness.

Pam Morris, a feminist writer is concerned with the unique experience of being a woman. She strongly states that women have suffered from a long tradition of what is called 'Biological Essentialism' which defines a belief that a woman's 'nature' is an inevitable consequence of her reproductive role, rendering women to be submissive. This kind of essentialist argument has been used throughout history and in societies to justify women's subordination.

A Bulgarian-French philosopher and a feminist, Julia Kristeva, state, "Women are one half of the sky". Therefore, men are the other half of the sky but men are over-ruling women, setting certain limited boundaries for women. "The efforts of the contemporary feminist movement have put women on the path of self-liberation. However, it has also de-emphasized women's individuality," said Kristeva, "They treat women as one single

homogeneous entity” (2001). Women are quite sensitive to their individuality and specificity; Women's talents have to be exposed to emphasize their individuality.

Virginia Woolf's essay “Profession for Women” shares her experiences on writing reviews on books written by male writers. She hesitated in writing the ultimate truth about male writers. A phantom (an imaginary figure) reminded her that she must write the truth about the writings by men as male writers were always right. This is the belief of the society and women were expected to conform to that. The stereotype images of women created by men as being weak, economically dependent, and with no mind of their own were not questioned till writers like Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Gilman, Konai Thaman, Vanessa Griffen and many others wrote to show the misconceptions of a male-dominated society. They overcame their fear of the phantom to a very great extent. Instead of writing reviews on writings by men, they wrote to become economically independent and to keep their sanity. In 1938, just before the outbreak of Second World War, Virginia Woolf wrote “...for centuries men have been ‘childishly’ intent upon scoring the floor”, emphasizing that men dominate the women, making decisions and rules for women to follow blindly.

At any time, a woman still considers herself as a wife and is exceedingly devoted, loves with love that cannot tire but she loves alone. Women are intensively sympathetic, immensely charming, utterly unselfish, excels in the difficult art of family life. The women are so constituted that they never have a mind of their own or a wish of their own. Women are considered worthless and are supposed to do men's bidding. Women are puppets and the men are the puppeteers. The women swing and dangle in whichever direction men pull and maneuver their strings. The barbaric traditions which some adhere to make men enslave their women and force them into alien roles. Men forget their humanity and bargain with the lives of their loved ones. It has been drilled into women from infancy to respect and pay homage to male elders. To veto any of their decisions is seen as the height of insolence and a sign of moral and social disorder,

a form of rebellion which the elders deemed imperative to crush immediately. As a woman, she was of no consequence, her opinion counted for nothing.

A law unto themselves, men's words is commands, and women were born to obey. They decide upon and hold the girls' and women's fate in their powerful hands. Women and girls are not consulted on any subject because they are of no consequence; their thoughts and feelings are of no importance and readily receive chastisement for their actions. Women and girls are considered as dumb servants to grace their households -obedient vessels even when they are blessed with agile brains. Men assume they are the supreme beings and they expect their wives to be dutiful and entirely pure.

Many women in our country have a mind-set that they are meant to be ideal daughters-in-law, devoted wives and self-sacrificing mothers. They are expected to be patient, kind, and be the moral compass of the home, there to charm, chide (gently), give and forgive. The male-female relationship which exists in many Fiji societies is unsettling, at least from today's perspective. Many women are trapped in the clutches of the social norms which entrap them to servitude. Today, many women are still engaged in a deadly contest in their struggle for social and economic equality.

As modern day readers, this view of women in relation to men is unsettling because of the many ways in which the role of women in a society has changed over the years. In the Victorian era, a woman's individuality was smashed to smithereens. Women had no freedom of expression or movement but there was dependence and desperateness. The belief that “a woman's place is in the kitchen” is a cliché in this 21st century as men can also be in the kitchen cooking up a storm. Gender equality is the topic of the day and gone are the prejudicial ideologies dictating women to be within the four walls of the house. These dense and naïve thoughts that women are men's property and are to be subjugated and tamed by men have gone out of the window. If there still lurks these oppressive notions in men, then they definitely do not belong to this modern era. Writing by women, fiction and non-

fiction, deliberate on such issues to free the women from baseless man-made dogmas.

### References

1. Chopin, K. (1976). *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin*, USA, Penguin Book
2. Gilman, C. P. (1988). "The Yellow Wallpaper", USA, The New England Press
3. Griffen, A. (1997). 'Women Speak Out in Literature: Pacific and Caribbean Voices', Volume 12, Issue 25.
4. Kriteva, J. (2001). *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words: Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette: A Trilogy*. 3 vols. New York: Columbia University Press
5. Woolf, W. 'A Room of One's Own' from <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/Virginia/w9/chapter.html>/accessed 8/4/2010
6. Morris, P. (1993). *Literature and Feminism*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. Own' from <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/Virginia/w9/chapter.html>/accessed 8/4/2010
7. Woolf, W. (1974) *the Death of the Moth and Other Essays: Professions for Women*, Harcourt Brace, and Jovanovich.