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A BLACK FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND VICTIMISED WOMEN IN RUKHSANA AHMAD'S PLAY, *SONG FOR A SANCTUARY*

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Abstract

Written by Rukhsana Ahmad and produced as a play of Asian Women Writers' Workshop, *Song for a Sanctuary* (1993) is a theatre play displaying the state of women as victims of domestic violence in search of refuge to protect themselves from the wrath and abuse of their husbands, partners or fathers. Striving to raise consciousness among women for a common cause, Ahmad simultaneously reflects on the class-based and racial conflicts alongside struggles among women as they are fighting against the oppressive patriarchal system. It is quite significant that the play not only exhibits women-men struggle but also points out the problems women experience with other women. Hence, this paper aims to dissect Rukhsana Ahmad's play, *Song for a Sanctuary* by especially paying attention to the issue of domestic violence and the state of women refugees and other women characters in the play. Through the lens of the Black feminist theory, which represents the unrepresented women of colour, and its fresh perspective, this study will contribute to English literature and social sciences.

Key Words: *Rukhsana Ahmad, Domestic violence, Black feminism, Racism.*

RUKHSANA AHMAD'IN *SONG FOR A SANCTUARY* OYUNUNDA AİLE İÇİ ŞİDDET VE MAĞDUR KADINLAR KONUSUNUN SİYAH FEMİNİST BAKIŞ AÇISINDAN İNCELENMESİ

Öz

Rukhsana Ahmad tarafından yazılıp, Asian Women Writers' Workshop tarafından üretilen *Song for a Sanctuary* (Bir Sığınak için Ağıt) (1993), eşleri, partnerleri veya babalarının öfkesinden kendilerini korumak için sığınacak yer arayışında olan aile içi şiddet mağduru kadınların durumunu gözler önüne seren bir tiyatro oyunudur. Kadınları ortak bir amaç uğruna bilinçlendirme gayretinde olan Ahmad, aynı zamanda baskıcı erkek egemen sisteme karşı savaşıırken kendi aralarında da sosyal sınıf ve etniksel sebeplerle fikir ayrılığı yaşayan ve mücadeleye girişen kadınları yansıtmaktadır. Oyunun sadece kadın-erkek mücadelesini değil, ayrıca kadınların diğer kadınlarla deneyimlediği sorunları aktarması oldukça önemlidir. Böylelikle bu çalışma, Rukhsana Ahmad'ın *Song for a Sanctuary* oyununu, özellikle aile içi şiddet konusunu, kadın mültecilerin durumunu ve oyundaki diğer kadın karakterleri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, temsil edilmeyen siyahi kadınların sesini duyuran Siyah feminist teori objektifi ve yeni bakış açısıyla İngiliz Edebiyatı ve sosyal bilimlere katkı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Rukhsana Ahmad, Aile içi şiddet, Siyah feminizm, Irkçılık.*

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Famous Asian playwright, Rukhsana Ahmad was born in 1948, Karachi, a city in Pakistan. Apart from being a writer and playwright, she is an artistic director and translator. She has studied English Literature along with Linguistics, and she has four MA degrees in related fields. She is fascinated by the feminist movement, and she expresses her likewise opinions in her plays *River on Fire* (2000), *Letting Go* (2008) and *Homing Birds* (2019). She is the one who wrote the first play for the famous Kali Theatre, *Song for a Sanctuary*. The play was so successful after its appearance and radio performance that it was nominated for Susan Blackburn Smith Award, and its radio version was shortlisted for the Commission for Racial Equality, Race in the Media Award in 1993 (Donnell, 2002: 8). Hence, the play gained recognition in a rather short period.

Ahmad is a recognised playwright in Britain as she worked as a Reader of the Theatre Committee for the Arts Council of England and she was also an adviser for the Committee for Review of Literary Journals. Besides, she was “[...] a writer-in-residence in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and the London Borough of Harrow” and among the founders of the Asian Women Writers’ Collective (“Rukhsana Ahmad” 2014). Then again, due to her experience in the theatre and her outstanding works, Ahmad has contributed to the recognition of the Black and Asian minorities in Britain. In a similar fashion with other Black and Asian women playwrights, her plays are also issue-based, topical and naturalistic as she takes the tragic and the sad case of a woman in the play (Griffin, 2006: 10). Her plays tackle the problems of women refugees as mothers, daughters and sisters fighting against the strict patriarchal values of their culture of origin while facing the challenges of the new culture they are trying to adapt.

About the Kali Theatre, Ahmad was one of the pioneers of the company along with Rita Wolf. A short while after the actress, Rita Wolf heard about Ahmad’s play, she persuaded her to write the play for her theatre, following Ahmad’s success with the Arts Council grant. It is how the two playwrights set up Kali Theatre Company with *Song for a Sanctuary*. Ahmad worked as the Artistic Director of the Theatre for a long while. The company aims to bring forth extraordinary and challenging issues concerning the social, cultural, and political state of the Asian women to the stage. After the opening of the theatre, the recognition of the critical situation and the scarcity of the representation of South Asian women on theatre have brought about the need for special workshops and training courses at the theatre which included performances with the technical crew until Rita Wolf’s relocation to the US (“*Song*” 2014). With this, Kali Theatre Company voices the concerns of women of South Asia and the ills of their societies.

Song for a Sanctuary, as commissioned by the Monstrous Regiment, was a great success after the production stage. Following its popularity and appreciated by many women refugees for “exploring the lives of first-generation immigrant Black mothers” (Ranivoharisoa, 2005: 59), the play was also adapted for the radio broadcast for BBC Radio in 1993 (Ahmad, 1993: 159). The script of the play was based on the true story of Balwant Kaur, who was murdered by her husband in 1985. The play is set in a South London refuge and displays a sad life story revolving around the suffering of women refugees who run away from male violence. Ahmad’s introduction to the play proves that she has indeed talked to the women refugees before writing her play, which makes it issue-based (Griffin, 2003: 256). It explains how the play received such popularity after it was first staged.

To provide a brief synopsis of the play, Rajinder, the protagonist, flees from her husband, Pradeep, and takes shelter in a refuge run by Kamla and Eileen, two refuge workers. However, she does not get along with Kamla from the first instant they meet because Kamla is an Indian woman who has forgotten about her native culture unlike Rajinder, who does her best to preserve and transfer those values to her children. Her commitment to her culture, identity and faith cause serious conflicts among other residents in the refuge. Finally, as those women are trying to sort out their internal matters, Rajinder’s husband Pradeep discovers her place in the refuge, manages to breach the security of the house and murders her at night in front of Savita, their daughter.

In addition, the play’s elegiac title, *Song for a Sanctuary*, is quite significant as it foreshadows Rajinder’s death and pinpoints her desire to be free and safe with her three children. The play has three acts. However, in each act, the scenes get fewer and fewer intending to anticipate Rajinder’s running out of time to escape from her husband and her death. The first act displays seven scenes, whereas the second act contains five scenes as the last act has only three scenes. This effect accelerates the intensity of action and revelation of Rajinder’s death in the play (Griffin, 2003: 150). It conjures up the anticipation of the audience for the tragic ending.

Popularised especially with the works of Afro-American writers, bell hooks and Alice Walker (*Ain't I a Woman* and *The Colour Purple*), Black feminism is a feminist movement that emerged around the late 1960s as a reaction to the racist and supremacist propaganda of white feminism. As black women and their problems were excluded from the general discourse of the feminist and antiracist movements, the need for a new discourse to fight for gender and racial equality arose, which is how the Black feminist theory is constructed. In other words, Black feminism had its origins from the previous Women's Movement (white feminism) and the Black Liberation Movement. However, "in an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed" (Hull et al., 1995). Within this context, it is apt to analyse Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* through a black feminist perspective to dwell on the suffering of the South Asian, or in another expression, non-white and ignored women as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, and finally as refugees. Black feminism, or in Ahmad's words, "indigenous feminism" is another type of "feminism that mixes idealism with pragmatism and knows how to negotiate around religion and the patriarchal systems of her culture" and allows people to "take charge of their own affairs without the invading force (or 'white saviours')" ("*Homing Birds'- Exploring the Notion of Home*" 2019). Making the voice of those unheard and unrepresented before such as South Asian women refugees, Black feminism is indeed a more encompassing and progressive kind of feminism.

The play embodies various points begging for attention in terms of Black feminism. To begin with, *Song for a Sanctuary* is more women-focused as there are five women characters in the play: Rajinder, Kamla, Eileen, Sonia and Savita, whereas the only male character is Rajinder's husband, Pradeep, who stands for the violent and monstrous face of the patriarch and appears in various scenes throughout the play to emphasise the permanent threat of men in the women sphere. Thus, Ahmad's work, as other works studied in the scope of Black Feminism, tends to display various roles for Black and Asian women characters, at times "[...] all-female casts, which gives women from those communities- frequently socially and culturally marginalized, especially in theatre- significant cultural space, in terms of performance opportunities, in terms of stage presence, and in terms of cultural importance" (Griffin, 2006: 11). In other words, this kind of works produced by playwrights from marginalised backgrounds recount the unheard or ignored experiences of Black and Asian communities to initiate a process of recognition and redistribution in the society. As a result of this, a constant concern and protective policies can be initiated for these previously excluded groups in Britain (Griffin, 2006: 12). As Rukhsana Ahmad turns the real story of a woman into a drama production, the tragic state of Rajinder calls the attention of people towards the problems, and the domestic suffering of the Black and South Asian women. In this light, those who experience the same situation can finally make their voices heard through such works, as stated by Ahmad in her introduction to the play (159).

Domestic violence is a major problem in women's lives, as the play depicts. It is seen in every country regardless of culture, class, level of education, income, race, or age. Rajinder is an educated Indian woman, and yet, she suffers from domestic violence. Then again, Eileen and Sonia, neither black nor Indian, and who are from the different backgrounds of the British society, are also the victims of the male abuse. In this context, the societies "proscribe" violence towards women embedded within their cultural practices, traditions, and religion (Khan, 2000: 2). Likewise in the play, Sonia narrates her bitter experiences with her partner, Gary, to Rajinder and the two of them seem to unite in solidarity against patriarchal violence for a moment: "[f]irst it's a slap, and then maybe a fist or two, then a couple of kicks, until one day he has to let it all out on me. Last time he messed me up really bad... The worse it is the longer it takes me to get back to him, but I always do in the end" (I. i. 161). Likewise, Rajinder has had to endure the beating and abuse of her husband, Pradeep. It has not only destroyed Rajinder's life but also pushed her elder daughter, Savita, to confusion and psychological problems because of her father's cruel treatment to her mother. As the two of them speak in silence in the middle of the night, Savita confesses Rajinder about her fear of Pradeep, her father:

SAVITA: You know how he looked that day when he went mad 'cause you got back late... He just stood there, he was polishing his kirpaan... and his eyes looked strange... I really felt so terrified of him. [...] And you know, that time... when he flung his plate at you, for talking back at him?

RAJINDER: Savita, stop it. I won't be able to sleep, don't stir it all up in my time at this time. (I. ii. 164)

After the dialogue, Rajinder realises that Savita has wetted her bed again, although she is fourteen, which clearly exposes the teen's distorted psychology. Similarly, Rajinder is obsessed with hygiene, and she continually cleans or washes things, which again exhibits her emotional problems resulting from the multi-faceted violence she suffers.

In addition to the existence of domestic violence in the patriarchal societies, another trouble is that after the violation takes place at home, women are either oppressed to keep the matter a secret or they have to confront the passivity of the state and the police force even though they ask for official support (Khan, 2000: 2). In Eileen's case in *Song for a Sanctuary*, for instance, her husband tries to beat her with a hammer, and she runs away from the house in her slippers and asks for help from the police. However, they do not want to interfere with the incident because it is a "domestic" matter (I. v. 166). The oppression of the society and their own family on women to keep the family unit together leaves women in a difficult position. Although Rajinder has told her sister, Amrit, about the unutterable experiences she has had to endure for years, Amrit judges her from a patriarchal point of view and forces her to go back to her husband. She thinks Rajinder has brought disgrace to her family and people are gossiping about it (I. vi. 171). This shows how women can create obstacles for other women and judge them while their lives are already hard within the patriarchal culture.

Another issue related to domestic violence as problematised in the play is the objectification of the female body. South Asian women (Indian and Pakistani), are forced into submission due to their socio-religious status and gender-based life in the society (Salam, 2011: i). As Ahmad so painfully illustrates in *Song for a Sanctuary*, female bodies are subjected to male control, and women have no say even on their bodies, let alone their freedom. Rajinder's daughter, Savita uncovers the secrets of her mother's terrible experiences both to the refuge workers and the reader at the same time when she tells that Pradeep always forced Rajinder to watch porn movies and to imitate whatever those women did (II. ii. 177). Furthermore, Rajinder can neither protect herself nor her children, as she reflects in her conversation with Amrit, her sister, that Pradeep once wanted to push her over the window sill even though she was married for six months and pregnant (I. vi. 171). Even though she tries to escape from her husband's abusive and violent ways, he eventually stabs her to death. He viciously kills her simply because she left him disrespecting his claim on her body (Borch et al. 1994: 173). Thus, she becomes the victim of her husband's violence.

Child abuse is also a separate category of domestic violence which is pictured in the play. Unicef studies demonstrate that "[...] from 40 to 60 per cent of known sexual assaults within the family are committed against girls aged 15 years and younger, regardless of region or culture" which is also exemplified in Savita's situation as she is fourteen years old (Khan, 2000: 6). She is sexually harassed by her father and threatened by him not to talk about the matter. However, she eventually confides in Sonia as she feels too stressed, and Sonia is a more independent and understanding woman than her mother in terms of sexual relationships (I. vii. 173). Later, she also talks to Rajinder when they get back home. Nevertheless, Rajinder cannot believe that Pradeep is capable of such a thing, or she prefers to pretend that the horrible experience her daughter suffered never happened.

Femicide, or in other words, "murder of women by their batterers" is another phenomenon common to patriarchal societies, as also depicted in the play (Laurent et al. 2013: 6). After Pradeep finds Rajinder in the refuge, he begs her to come back and kills her upon her rejection: "Come back home, I want you back. I'll forgive you if you return to me. [...] You've no right to do this, to steal my children from me and run away like a thief in the night" (III. iii. 185). Realising he cannot get his wife back no matter what he does, Pradeep kills Rajinder in a most brutal way.

Through the lens of Black feminism, it is underlined that white feminism is lacking for its racist and white supremacist dimension and ignorance towards black women problems (Carby, 1997: 150). White feminism tends to fail representing women of colour, and focuses on white women issues, which explains why and how Black feminism emerged as another feminist movement. With this perspective, Black feminism also represents the differences and conflicts among women of colour while reflecting their lives (Mirza, 1997: 81). To illustrate, in the play, even though Kamla is from India, she has adopted the ways and culture of South London. For this reason, she criticises and looks down upon Rajinder because she is a smart and educated woman who raises her voice

against her, unlike other victimised women in the refuge. Thus, Kamla finds it hard to justify Rajinder's demand for refuge because she persists preserving her natural appearance and culture despite being in London (Aston and Harris, 2006: 42). She wants her to leave the shelter while her colleague, Eileen, reminds her that as women, they must stand one and protect all others who need help regardless of their conditions. On the other hand, Rajinder criticises Kamla for forgetting about her culture while she perpetuates her values, speaks her native language, prays at night and tries to raise her children properly. Especially for exposing Rajinder's dramatic story to the society and urging for consciousness, Rukhsana Ahmad's play becomes an example for the ones trying "to be heard, that is people of color, feminists, radical critics and creative writers" when analysed with a Black feminist point of view (Mazurek, 2009: 11). It can also be argued that the division of gender and race might be related because both are ideologically constructed regarding 'natural' and 'biological' distinctions. Therefore, it is similarly possible that these categories are social constructs and open to change (Carby, 1997: 45). In this concept, Kamla's attitude towards Rajinder is hostile, racist and classist and thus, in need of a change for creating a better world for the un(der)represented women such as herself.

The play similarly reflects socio-cultural clashes among women through two refuge workers, Eileen and Kamla, and two clients of the refuge, Rajinder and Sonia. Both groups "[...] mirror and present an opposite to one another through their intra-cultural differences" (Griffin, 2003: 150). Eileen is more experienced in the refuge house and shows sensitivity towards refugees as she was once one of them. However, Kamla is a single woman living in South London, not thinking about marriage and tries radical ways to cut off women from their husbands and houses as in the case, when she threatens Rajinder that she will inform the authorities of Savita's abuse by Pradeep if Rajinder returns home (II. iv. 180). Furthermore, she does not believe that Rajinder really needs their help as she is a very conscious and outspoken woman, whereas Eileen feels sympathy for Rajinder. Because the "feminist" perspective towards Asian women and girls presents them "[...] as requiring liberation, not in terms of writing herstory and making their voices heard, but into the "progressive" social mores and customs of the metropolitan West", Kamla cannot understand Rajinder's strong stance (Carby, 1997: 47). As with Rajinder and Sonia, the former is very keen on cleaning whereas the latter is slightly snug in such matters. Moreover, Rajinder has rigid rules about morality and sexuality, while Sonia has extramarital affairs, even in the refuge house, although it is forbidden. At this point, after Rajinder sees Sonia with a man in her room at night, she decides to leave the refuge as her two daughters, especially Savita, will eventually take Sonia as a model (II. iii. 178). On the other hand, Sonia criticises Rajinder for washing clothes at night, praying and being so strict. She also calls Rajinder "black" whenever she is angry with her although she comes from the same racial origin (I. iv. 168). Finally, it is also observed in the play that Eileen and Rajinder have more in common as they can understand one another. Then, Kamla supports Sonia over Rajinder, for instance, when Sonia complains about the noise Rajinder causes at night (I. iv. 169). Therefore, the conflict among women refugees makes their lives even more unbearable while all of them are indeed the victims of the same destructive patriarchal mindset.

From the black feminist perspective, the play exposes how divided the othered women are among themselves even in a dominantly Asian refuge, although they should constitute solidarity altogether against domestic violence and abuse in the patriarchal society. Towards the end of the play, as Rajinder and Kamla argue about Savita's case, they express their discontent about one another's culture and their way of living. Soon, Pradeep manages to enter the refuge house and murders Rajinder at night. Thus, Rukhsana Ahmad strives to reflect the shared suffering of women across nationalities and points out the conflicts as a destructive force towards the women's cause by dividing them (Iyer and Zare, 1999: 61). She depicts how patriarchal violence towards women remains the same all around the world.

In brief, Rukhsana Ahmad's play, *Song for a Sanctuary* narrates the struggle of an Indian woman against her husband and her family representing the mindset of the patriarchal society which discriminates her for her skin colour and race, even in the refuge house she has found as a sanctuary. She struggles to preserve her identity and her values despite other women's despise and tries to protect her children from their father's violence and abuse. However, she fails in the end due to her comparably less significant conflict with Kamla, a fellow woman, and becomes a tragic example illustrating the state of the victimised women in a patriarchal society. Displaying the helpless state of an ignored refugee woman and others like her, the Black feminist theory plays a highly significant part for drawing the attention of the general public to the ills of patriarchal black societies

such as racism, gender inequality, domestic violence, child abuse and femicide. Thus, studied from the Black feminist point of view, the play is full of potential to raise awareness because representation of the previously unrepresented women is the first step for the recognition of their problems, and taking action to find effective solutions.

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