

A Quest for New Woman Identity in the Post Independent Women Novelists

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Abstract - In the climate of new feministic thoughts, critics notice the narratives of identification of a woman character, in a patriarchal society, her struggle, then her becoming aware of the subaltern treatment, her resentment and revolt against such subordinating existence in the transgressional gender society. The ideal objective of this movement is that eternal principle of male and female cannot but exist together or both will be ruined. The new feministic image and quest for liberation from within and without, is/are emerging in Indian Fiction in English, after the independence. Today Indian Fiction in English reveals a transformation in the minds of women. Women's status has changed, which again is the force behind the changing Indian society, and this change is not less important than industrial and economical changes taking place. Women are definitely not doormats of men. In other words, post-independence India has experienced far-fetched changes in society, politics and culture. One of the common elements of that change concerns the constantly transformed image of the Indian woman.

Keywords - Divorce, Existential predicament, serenity, patriarchal, detachment, mundane.

I. INTRODUCTION

The silence of the Indian woman, which was taken to be virtue earlier, has been broken and the feminist discourse in India has continually been revisited and reevaluated, particularly in Indian fiction. The most important change happening is the weakening of the hold of the internalized oppression in women, a change that will have a far-reaching social, familial and cultural fallout, and the Indian fiction in English points in that direction. A big change is seen in the attitude and in the narrative techniques in the novels of 1980s and 1990s. A kind of new is seen in the matters of sexuality like-lesbianism,

adultery, apart from the heterosexual relationships, entering into women's creative outburst. The Indian women writers do not exactly follow the western women in the style of narrative, but certain aspects of the objective of revolt-writing come from their western counterparts. Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, among others, are the models for these Indian writers as far as the protest writing is concerned. The Indian feminists feel that when women finally achieve social and economic equality with men, there remains nothing to prevent them from freely developing their artistic talents. Women bondages are of different types, and women writers would like to liberate their gender/sex from all that binds them in the four walls. However, it is not only men who bind them in bondage, but the very social system/norms that make women subordinated to men.

II. WOMEN IN NAYANTARA SHAGAL'S FICTION

From the New Woman's emerging point of view, the novel *The Day in Shadow* (1971) by Nayantara Shagal is about Simrit's revolt and her quest for sexual freedom and self realization. The novelist concerns herself with the feminine autonomy. Simrit decides to dissolve a marriage seventeen years old. Her marriage to Som, an industrialist, turns out to be a bed of thorns. In spite of matrimonial comforts and couch of children, she is compelled by an inner urge to seek divorce. She confronts problems arising mainly from the marital crisis. A woman novelist, when she writes, she writes herself. In writing about the pains of divorce, the urge comes to her from her own experience of divorce. In Indian society, a

divorced woman is never well received. She is watched by others. The aching follows her like a shadow:

My skin is whole, not even a break or a split in it anywhere. It's the inside that has gone to pieces, and I'll just have to go long very carefully from now on The pain, a leper- like thing detached itself from her and walked beside her to the end of pavement, the end of the road and beyond [1].

In the novel, the novelist is concerned about saying how patriarchy perhaps 'entraps' women's simplicity in marriage. At the time of divorce, Simrit deserts all the wealth to Som but takes the children with her. But Som does not allow her go away so easily. He transfers a lion's share worth six lacks rupees to Simrit and these are to be inherited mainly by their son Brij when he will be of age. Till then Simrit has to pay the huge amount of tax on the corpus while she is not entitled to the income it may generate and feels she is an over-loaded donkey... with its back breaking and no one doing anything about it, not because they can't see it, but because it's a donkey and loads are for donkeys. These lines, very mocking in nature, are from the novelist with a tinge of irony. The audience supposed is the patriarchal structure. Simrit's request to relieve her of the tax is unheard not only by Som but also by the society at large. May be she had always been an animal only a nine obedient domestic one, sitting on a cushion, doing as she was told. And in turn she had been fed and sheltered [2]. "The distress and trauma that a woman feels after divorce in Indian society is directly linked with Sahgal's own view of divorce. So this novel is a writing of revolt. In the novel, the novelist purposely selects an intelligent woman protagonist who is aware of her target space in the society, but she is skillfully in a divorce just like Sahgal's real life: "In this book I tried to figure out something that has happened to me- the shattering experience of divorce"[3].

In her own terms, Simrit foresees her own bright future, that's why she wants to be a writer. But the

children, whom she thought to rely upon, desert her. Her eldest daughter desires for the attractive dress and luxury items appearing in the magazines. Her son, Brij betrays her and prefers his father's world. He knows that his future will be secured under his father's roof. It is of course materialistic views of her children that snatch them away from her motherly tenderness. Ramesh Kumar Gupta, in his article, "The Existential Predicament: A Linchpin in Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* States: "Existentialism orates that the glory of the free individual lies in rebelling against the tragic human predicament even though defeat is inevitable" [4].

We consider Simrit a New Woman since she rebels, though winning is uncertain. She has this potentiality for rebelling against patriarchal set up. She has the courage to break a long marital-tie between husband and wife. Her rebelling is remarkable, "She decided to divorce when another male partner is waiting for her outside marriage. She boldly leaves the sheltered world of Som not to live a life of her own, but to live a happy life under the shadow of another man" [5]. What Simrit says or does is inferior unimpressive and faulty. Her husband oppresses Simrit with his discerning language which is superior in nature, very symbolic of patriarchal domination.

The Day in Shadow is a narrative of woman's struggle against patriarchal domination and about identity crisis. The novel also is in support of the feminist movement, since it was published in 1971, when the feminist is aware of the injustice done by men. Women become willing prisoner in the boundary of exploitation. The seed of patriarchy is so deep rooted in Raj that he sees nothing inhuman in missing of this woman. Like any chauvinistic male, Raj takes Simrit for granted. Man, in the patriarchal set up, is not only the master of his own life but maker of the destiny of woman. Simrit tries to revolt against male oppression but her effort is submerged into social reality. Men compel her to assume the status of the other. In man-woman relationship by their inherent characteristic but by strong patriarchal forces space, not imposed by their inherent characteristic but by strong patriarchal forces and social tradition. This has resulted in

the failure of women to occupy a place of human dignity as free and independent beings. Feminists have raised their voices against this. Women have been reduced to mere objects of sex, “absolute sex, no less [6]”.

III. KAMALA MARKANDAYA’S WOMEN CONCEPT

The novel *Two Virgins* (1973) Kamala Markandaya concerns itself with the concept of tradition and modernity. Kamala Markandaya writes of women from her own experience of gender disparity. She values Indian traditions more than many others. A housewife herself in real life, Kamala Markandaya was conscious of the gender differences all through. She seems to write both about east and west, but it looks that she tries to interpret her eastern experience of the socio-economic conflicts to the west. She comes to the literary scene with a conviction to carry on her battle for the subordinated women in a male dominated society. She contains in her an innate capacity for understanding the agonies of women. Sudhir Kumar Arora says:

Being a woman, she inherits innate propensity to delve on to the lives of women. She perceives their wretchedness from a sociological and psychological perspective. She delineates their dilemma in the from the rootlessness and crisis of identity: a desire to be treated not only as someone’s mother but also as a liberated individual. Throughout her novels, her consciousness of what it is to be a woman, both as a member of society and as an individual, emerges as one instinctive and passionate concerns [7].

Two Virgins is a novel of realization, growth and freedom. The two main women characters Lalitha and Saroja have been portrayed to symbolize two divergent

views of life. Both are sisters, and are two different sides of the same coin, but signify two different attitudes of the novelist. Lalitha stands for physical beauty and modernity, and Saroja symbolizes inner beauty and traditional morality. Lalitha is beautiful that is why she exists. The novelist intends to project her for the modern young girls not to be misguided by the snares of flesh and glamour. She is virgin, and more beautiful than Saroja. She is promiscuous which entraps her to the world of glamour.

Kamala Markandaya might hint at the predicament of existence, supporting Lalitha’s lot since she was beautiful like Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary, she has expected too much from life, but got nothing at the end. Life seems to be a terrible waste of human potential. Saroja has learnt also to assess the situation. She could develop a sense of integrity for herself in spite of and sometimes with the aid of sexually deprived and barren environment.

IV. ANITA DESAI’S FEMINISTIC IMAGES

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), Anita Desai has compulsive urge to explore the myriad faces of experiences of her women protagonists. She often talks about the attachment-detachment concept, a very philosophic one, which has no finite or determinate meaning, but it gives some layers of meaning of existence as well as hidden power of personal revolt of her women characters. Her protagonists search for an ideal way of life that can accommodate their instinctual and emotional needs. Though her characters seek for their identity, they often lack intellectual power. Anita Desai, though her ironically-tinged narratives, hints that self-fulfillment requires an equal intellectual activity in the pursuit of the ideal goal in life. Detachment is used as a defense mechanism by Desai’s protagonists. Since defense strategy is a necessary part of revolt, it is good to see how they make use of it. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* And Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* have both this defensive strategies. Shantha Krishnaswamy opines, “... the desire for autonomy exists side by side with the felt needs of caring and nurturance. Conflict

arises only when exclusivity is sought”[8]. A female protagonist’s desire for autonomy is itself a characteristic feature of a New Woman.

The novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Presents the dilemma of Sita, a sensitive woman, who is seeking a momentous vision to clarify the disjointed Puzzle that life has always been to her. The eternal sea, an important symbol in the novel, stands for stability. Outwardly, an unimpressive figure, her character attracts our attention, she represents the natural human desire to see both stability and adventure.

Sita has been a victim of emotional deprivation in her childhood. Even in her adult life. She has been unable to overcome this lack of emotional bonding. She yearned for it but could not get it. This is in accordance with what Ursula Tidd speaks of the second Sex of Simone de Beauvoir, “Women were involved in domestic work and raising children. Men consequently had more and more freedom Women have been obliged to adapt to this patriarchal system, which maintains them in a subordinate position. Beauvoir argues that women have been assimilated to their body and sexed identity and traditionally confined to the roles of wife and mother”[9]. Sita is considered unstable by husband and eccentric by her children with whom she is unable to achieve intimacy due to her emotional inadequacy. The patriarchal society is responsible for this and now she is expected to do too much-satisfy her husband and her children. Her fifth pregnancy offers her no sense of fulfillment. This detachment is but a revolt. Like the act of Nanda Kaul, Sita too, retreats to the Island of Manori, which “assumes symbolic significance because it is one of few assertive steps she takes in giving meaning to her life in her own terms in accordance with her confused understanding of life.” She rejects her husband’s business associates for being “nothing– nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money. Animal”[10].

Sita has a vision for life. She is optimistic in her attitude. The retreat to Manori is also an attempt, though unconscious, to expose her children to a alternative life style. The novelist is aware that Sita does all these e.g. retreating to Manori and taking her children along with

her is in order to assert her individual identity. Neeru Chakravorty observes that this Sita is different from the mythical Sita. She says that Anita Desai exploits this mythic awareness to adjunct a new dimension to Sita’s character, who, “anti-normative, abandons her husband’s house like her namesake, but unlike her does so willingly and not to give birth, but to prevent it”[11]. The image of her father and that of Manori Island is inseparable in Sita’s mind. And when she goes to this Island for the second time, it is an act of challenge and adventure. Her rejection of ‘Manori’, mundane life in favour of a magical existence on the island is closely linked to her strong desire to infuse some meaning and control over her own life by imitating the actions of her father. Sita reorients her life for her own betterment, though her children has been painful for her. This reorienting makes Sita a New Woman of our list. On the other side Sita’s father, who stands for patriarchal tyranny, has never allowed Sita to grow as a mature person. He is responsible or this infant’ wife who never allowed the plant to grow when it had to. After coming to this island of Manori, Sita has become aware of her life. Her awareness and acceptance also is of the fact that father was a wizard who “had cast an illusion as a fisherman caste a net”[12] and trapped those all in an unnatural, dream- like existence, far from the responsibilities of real life is the result of the retreat. Sita emerges from an illusory existence to understand the real face of life. So we say that she is an emerging New Woman.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* has many protagonists, of whom Nanda Kaul emerges as a new Woman who prefers solitude and uses detachment as a weapon against injustice done to her by her husband’s infidelity. Nanda Kaul’s desire of withdrawal to recoup inner strength is subverted into an unnaturally fierce determination to guard her solitude against any violation. That is why she is a New Woman. Her ideal desire is to be remote and inaccessible, like the eagle soaring above the mountain. This is an action of retaliation and revolt. She wants to be totally alone, but of course not realizing that longiness is synonymous to death. She is very much like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* in her approach to keeping

silence. Neeru Chakravorty says: “For Nanda Kaul, self-fulfillment consciously lies in avoidance of all contact, cutting herself off from all stress-producing situations”[13]. Anita Desai’s archetypal Old Woman is sign and countersign— the repository of filled and unfilled needs and feeling with the reader discovers and slowly sorts out during the course of the narrative. At the outset Nanda Kaul gave the impression of enjoying harmony of being. Her prototypal Indian womanhood, which symbolizes our New Woman, has been both a wife and a mother. Her formerly active empirical existence justifies her present withdrawal on a mountain top in the Punjab province. She is a New Woman because she has deliberately chosen this topos, on a non-pace in serenity and repose. Here too will her initiation be complicated: and psychologically an ex-centering or de centering of her ego will take place. This is this ego that makes her a New Woman.

Once energized and brought to consciousness, her view of life broadens and a New Woman is born in her person. New orientations have expanded and enriched her vision allowing her to pass from one ego-centered limited domain to a supra individual cosmic sphere to become multiple and also one. Hence she is a replica of the New Woman.

In the Hindu religion, deity Kali is featured in sculptures and paintings as a black woman with two dead bodies for ear rings, a necklace made of skulls and a girdle dead men’s hands. A gruesome hag with bony fingers, producing teeth, red eyes, and breasts smeared with blood, who is always hungry and obsessively voracious. Kali worship for the western may seem surprising at first, particularly contrasting it to the Christian ideal of the immaculate Virgin Mary. Just as good is implicit in life and deity, so to, too is evil for the Hindu, and for mystic in general throughout the world. In India’s mother Kali, then is a caressing-murdering symbolization of the totality of the world creating-destroying, eating-eaten one. She is the all producing, all annihilating factor in the existing and non-existing process which is life. Kali means time; the time it takes to

grow and die, to give birth and to take back into the womb/tomb.

Fire the purifier and regenerator, the devourer and illuminator, terminates Nanda Kaul’s life thereby breaking down the barriers of flesh and illusion. No longer does obstruction lie in the way of enlightenment. Energized and liquidized, the different planes of her psyche and consciousness, allow an imminent of higher self to be born. She is born again as New Woman. Like the great God Shiva, who created the world as he danced the circular Nataraja— unifying space and time within evolution— and surrounding himself by flames incarnating eternal energy, so Nanda is divested of dross? Her adamant essence sparkles in all of its purity, beauty and eternity.

V. CONCLUSION

Almost all the women writers in this study are sincerely concerned about women’s liberation with their objective to take their women characters out of the ditch of traditional roles and the pains of taboos, unable to recognize their identity as human persons. The writers have a purpose, to avenge against the old age tradition and practice in which women have been so long suffering. In the process of delineating, writers almost create an ideal image that suits the modern age. The traditional concept of woman as ‘pativrata’ chaste, humble, obedient, as having secondary status; is being slowly deconstructed paving the way for an image that incorporates/includes concepts like frankness, boldness, assertiveness, financial independency and independent existence of one’s own. The social institution like marriage has been questioned thoroughly. The ideal objective of this movement is that eternal principle of male and female cannot but exist together or both will be ruined. The image of the new woman, her quest, her struggle for liberation from within and without, is/are emerging in Indian Fiction in English, specially after the independence. There have been male supports for this movement, but what is important is that women themselves have been coming forward and getting united in their war towards liberation and perfection irrespective of their caste, creed, religion and class.

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