



Volume: 2, Issue: 5, 108-110
May 2015
www.allsubjectjournal.com
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979
Impact Factor: 3.762

Sarika Goyal
Assistant Professor (English)
DAV College, Abohar
Panjab, India

Marriage and family – an Indian feministic critique

Sarika Goyal

Abstract

The feministic theory all over the world has been shaped by dominant European and American canons. Though there have been diversions from this stream yet the key line is to project the voices of the women writers of the world hitherto silenced by the metanarratives of the world or rejected as mere womanly chatter. The growth of feministic theory and further contributions by the third world writers have widened the scope of feministic analysis though limiting it to geographical, social and cultural arenas at the same time. Keeping these limitations in view the present paper argues that no doubt the feministic discourse across the globe addresses universal themes and issues; it still has a local idiom that caters to socio-cultural scenario of a particular region. On the same basis, any interpretation of Indian feministic theory cannot be a blind imitation of Western counterparts but it will have to take into account indigenous writers varied as they are in terms of scope and content.

Scanning Indian literature, chiefly the north Indian one, the present study critically analyses and evaluates some thematic concerns in the works of three Indian women writers. One is Mahadevi Varma, a Hindi writer and other two are Women writing in Panjabi. Based on reading of individual stories of these three, the paper will put forth some assumptions required for delineating an Indian feministic theory that can be extended and explored further.

Keywords: Marriage, Family, Gender, subjugation, subaltern, kitchen, widow, mythological women

‘A marriage is a second birth’. This is an old Indian saying that needs to be viewed and critiqued from feministic perspective. A marriage is a sacrosanct relation that brings forth two persons from different sexes, different families and varied ideologies together and aims to unite them within the diameter of seven circles though this union eventually takes many years. A woman’s stereotypical role is to marry, give birth, rear children and take care of family subduing her whole persona and inability on her part to perform any of the above roles invites scathing remarks for her and her family. This role that has been determined by patriarchy since ages is not granting her happiness but subjugates her and she in her new birth has to learn many things which her grown up mind and body doesn’t accept innocently like a child and is the cause of marital discord and violence as in the Indian context, the new teacher is not the biological mother but the socially and culturally constructed mother-in-law.

Feminists, especially from the third world, are unanimous on the point that hegemonised, Eurocentric or American theory can’t subsume similar conditions for the whole world as the gender roles have been socially and culturally constructed owing to variation in cultural, geographical, economical, religious and political conditions of women across the globe, mere biological similarity can’t address the issues of all. There have been political phases throughout the history of the world and violence meted out to women by kings, their loyalists, tradesmen, army, activists promoting civil wars, enemy soldiers, fascists, fellow brethren during internal strife like partition and people from their own neighbourhood demands close scrutiny of the theory and its assumptions, African and Asian postcolonial women therefore, have come up with numerous sideshoots of feminism. The present paper is a similar attempt to trace, analyse and critique the position of women after marriage in the social fabric in Indian and typically northern context and tries to highlight differences from the mainstream theory. I prefer to choose three stories for my purpose. The first one is *Bhabhi* (Brother’s wife) by Mahadevi Verma, second is *Asli Sach* by Jasmit Kaur and *Kusatt* (Ugly Truth) by Balbir Kaur Sanghera.

Bhabhi is the pen-sketch of a child widow who remains locked up within the four walls and is talked ill of for peeping out of a hole of smoky kitchen. She develops liking for a school girl as it gives vent to her pent up emotions as the girl is no less than a playmate and a daughter. Her colourless, friendless, charmless life is full of brutal injuries and burns as the girl records, ‘the

Correspondence:
Sarika Goyal
Assistant Professor (English)
DAV College, Abohar
Panjab, India

adolescent girl, like a pretty flower encircled by iron gauge in a house like a *samadhi* (tomb for Hindus), who had neither any companion nor any source of amusement, was absorbed in a penance to age continuously' (p 102). She suffered bruises and burns whenever her fortunate sister-in-law paid a visit to their house.

Mahadevi Varma questions the stakeholders of that society who are blind to the survival of widows after the demise of their husbands, parents. The woman finally leaves with her family unnoticed who find it shameful for a widow to interact with strangers or look out at the curious outside world from a hole. Mahadevi Varma finds such a woman 'a non-living monument erected for her dead husband before whom instead of bowing in veneration, they don't want to curb the desire to disfigure her' (*Shrinkhala ki kadiyan*, 30).

Mangamma in Gudipat Venkat Chalam's 'widow' voices her frustration. 'If because of their karma so many women, without children, are dying out of the sorrow, why don't men too suffer similar karma (p 109). 'Marriage and its rituals are often described as restrictive and oppressive and never just or fair towards women. Symbols of marital status become symbols of violence and oppression in many post colonial women writers' (Nayar, 132).

Jasmit kaur presents the pain and agony of a woman (Preet) who despite being 52 years old is neglected by her husband-- a renowned professor and a writer. She is not even taken to any function where the professor is to be honoured and is made to take care of the family. She bursts out saying, 'you didn't make home with me, you made home over me' (50). The dominating mother of the professor is exuberant over her son's achievements and ignores the sentiments of her daughter-in-law. The wife complains, 'you are sensitive towards your women characters, you don't let a thorn prick them. But have you imagined what has happened to my life' (51).

An Indian woman has been granted many rights by Vedic scriptures. She is invited to sit to her husband's left side after completion of four circles around sacred fire and is believed to be his other half. No religious ceremony is considered complete in her absence. She is taught to follow her husband and stand by him through thick and thin as she can receive power like a *pativrata*. Hindu girls bow before goddess Parvati so that they can choose the right husband or *vara* and their marital life turns out to be blissful because marriage is indissoluble. Even *Sita* (Lord Rama's wife) pays obeisance to *Gauri* (Lord Shiva's consort) before her *swayamvara*.

"Aehi bhanti Gauri asis suni Siye sahit hiye harshit alee
Tulsi Bhawani pujih puni puni mudit man mandir chalee" (*Ram Charit Manas*).

Preet is *Asli sach* raises a pertinent question as to why only a woman has to sacrifice to maintain that marital bliss. 'I twisted my umbilicus over & again, deliberately in order to get attached to you instead of my mother but your umbilicus remains the same, attached to many breathing beings' (51). It is noteworthy that Indian kitchen turns out to be the hub of family politics where mother and wife compete as chefs and present choicest delicacies to win the male. I could find no parallel to this in African, American or European context. Gender here doesn't turn up as a stratified construct but something that has inner tensions and thus extends the discourse of gender and patriarchy. Ambai's 'A Kitchen in

the corner of the house' excellently portrays this kitchen politics.

The third narrative is from a diasporic writer and deals with problematics of mutual clash and distance between culture and socio-economic system. Balbir Kaur presents this problematics in her stories and highlights the difference in ideologies of new immigrants and second or third generation migrants.

Kusatt is the story of a woman who leaves Canada to pay a last visit to an ailing mother, a cancer patient and stays in India for three weeks. Her husband and two children stay with her mother-in-law who poisons her husband's ears at her back. She is threatened on return. 'You deserted your children as per Canadian law and fled to India. You can't get anything here (109). This was so shocking that she realizes that 12 years of stability (in a married life) have suddenly turned to instability. She is forced to live at a distance of 500 yards as per law and move court for right to visit her children or obtain their custody. The mother-in-law makes arrangements for a new bride for her son and the poor agonized wife imagines 'soft delicate virgins, wearing red bangles with hanging *kaleeres* (an ornament for brides) hovering around her husband Dev' (122).

Sympathizing with 'respectless motherhood and zero-rights wifehood', Varma writes, 'if she's not a scholar as per desires of her scholarly husband her place is given to the second; if she is not an *apsara* (a heavenly beauty) as per the imagination of a husband who worships beauty, she's ordered to vacate her place; if she can't raise an army of children or sons; if she is feverish or though faultless, guilty of husband's unhappiness, she'll have to accept servitude in the family' (34).

The legal rights and respect that a separated woman gets are granted in European societies only as Indian society is more or less immune to the sensitivity of a woman.

Comparing modern women to mythic women, one wonders how the same society that worships women as virgins, the *panchkanya*, despite the fact of their being married, some who had known men other than their husbands namely *Ahalya*, *Kunti*, *Tara*, *Draupadi* and *Mandodari*, and considers them as chaste, benevolent and bestowers of benedictions, underestimates some other women who are equally chaste, moral and ritualistic and are to be considered as adornments for their family.

The same culture where sons are remembered by their mother's names like Anjaniputra, Kuntiputra, Devkiputra, Gangaputra, Sumitraputra, Yashodanandan, Kaikeyisuta and many others, suppresses some other women who fail to give birth to sons. Is it possible that these names were revered to insist upon women that they'll get a place only if they bear sons?

All the three narratives taken here put forth one point that a woman's life is determined more by her husband's family than the husband himself in the Indian context. Most of the Indian sops are centred on this theme. It doesn't mean that husband has no role to play in the married life. He is the main agent for domestic violence in many cases. Mannu Bhandari's stories for instance like '*Shamshaan*' and '*Keel*

or *kasak*' portray how men marry many times and are able to utter coaxing words for all wives and how at the same time some of them can be totally ignorant or insensitive to desires of their wives. In another story '*Deewar, Bachche our Barsaat*', she lays bare the pit holes of our society where women have been brainwashed to believe that their duty is solely to attend to a tired husband and provide him with every comfort and motherhood alone can bring them completeness. I, also assert it here that a married woman is always another's daughter (*Begani Dhee*) and can't find fair treatment at her in-laws.

K. Lalitha and Susie Tharoor's path-breaking work has brought into light many hidden voices from Indian literature. The work spanning many years, cuts across the barrier of language and puts many women writers together. This attempt needs to be extended further to other Indian writers and I believe that true Indian feministic theory must be an amalgam of all these neglected voices. Mridula Garg rightly points out that 'women have always had to wrest this space to work from the invisible margins within the margins' (Just between Us, 10).

The mythological references cited in this paper serve a special purpose. These aim to bring home the point that Indian feministic thought can't be separated from the mythological base. Though it is presumed that religious texts created by patriarchy brought about subordination of women, there is no denying that the same forces empower women to secure a respectable niche. The marriages, of Rama and Sita, Shiva and Parvati, Krishna and Rukmani, offer cumulative wisdom for the community. These marriages aim to delineate suitable behaviour for both the parties, hold marriage as asupreme and indissoluble relation, and validate masculine-feminine ideal and the completeness of the being in purush-prakriti duo. Agreeing with what Nayar says that 'this kind of feminism often emphasizes a retrieval of pre-colonial, local and native forms of the sacral' and acts as a counter to the hegemonizing discourse of western secular feminism' (152).

Coming to the issues of family, it is noticeable that elite, middle class and working class women serve families in different ways. Mahadevi Varma rightly points out that elite women are busy in keeping tradition; middle class kill desires and sacrifice for regular upkeep and working class work hardest to manage food and clothing. Rupa in Rohinton Mistry's 'A Fine Balance' steals milk and mangoes to satisfy her children's hunger and is molested by the watchman. The Indian subaltern women finds parallel with African Nnu Ego who realizes that the pride of motherhood is to be unable to afford an outfit with the hope that the boy will grow soon and clothe you' (Nayar 136).

There are many narratives from nooks and corners of every village whereby some maltreated woman has committed suicide after marriage. The women are severely wounded or beaten daily over trifles. Many are offered to lustful landowners to ameliorate the poverty of their parents. These purchased women naturally can't have any self-respect. The women who were taken away by kings during pre-colonial period must have suffered greatly. Who could describe the hurt pride and woeful tales of those families that were bestowed with vast acres of land if the king took fancy for any girl? 'For a woman to become a member of the 'master

class' depends on her taking a sexual master whereby her submission brings her access to the dominant culture' (171, Rice & Waugh. In a Victorian household, a woman had kinship structure and different ideology & her marriage was negotiated by a pater familias. In India, it is still done that way.

The modern Indian independent working woman fits into the description offered by Judy Brady in 'Why I want a wife?' and certainly finds herself exploited on various fronts. In conclusion I would say that an Indian feministic theory is not for 'rapid dismantling' of our age by 'murderous forces massed in social, national, religious and political groups' as Kristeva puts it, in fact it is to place Indian women as biologically distinct human beings and not merely as passive cattle. This aims to avoid the 'gendering of the genre' as a critic points out that we must be read by husbands, lovers, brothers and sons and only then they will give us space in a world full of 'anthropomorphic identities'.

References

1. Brady, Judy. Why I want a wife? In *Musings on Vital Issues*. Ed. P. J.George. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.
2. Varma, Mahadevi. Bhabhi in *Gadhya Phulwari*. Eds. Shahabbuddin Sheikh et al. Delhi: Rajpal & Sons, 2009. P 99-106
3. _ _ _, *Shrinkhala Ki Kadiyan*, Allahabad, Lokbharati, 2008.
4. Bhandari, Mannu. *Main Haar Gayee*. New Delhi: Radhakrishnan,2001
5. Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh. Eds. *Modern Literary Theory*. New York: Hodder Arnold, 2001
6. Kristeva, Julia. *Women's Time in Modern Literary Theory*. Eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. New York: Hodder Arnold, 2001.
7. Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature- -an introduction*. New Delhi: Pearson, 2008.
8. 'Asli Sach'. Jasmit Kaur. *Eek Chithi Apneyan De Naan*. Ludhiana: Chetna Parkashan, 2005.
9. 'Kusatt'. Balbir Kaur Sanghera. *Thandi Hawa*. Ludhiana: Chetna Parkashan, 2005.
10. 'Widow'. Gudipat Venkat Chalam. In *Musings on Vital Issues*. Ed. P. J.George. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.
11. Lalitha K. and Susie Tharu. *Women Writing in India*. Vol. I. Delhi: OUP, 2005.
12. Garg, Mridula. *Just Between Us—women speak about their writing*. Eds. Ammu Joseph et al. New Delhi: asmita, 2001.
13. Mistry, Rohinton, *A Fine Balance*. New York: Vintage, 1997.