



UMASHANKAR JOSHI'S HILLI: A TALE OF 'SEARCH FOR IDENTITY'

Bhagvanbhai H. Chaudhari, Ph. D.

Assoc. Professor, Dept. of English, the KNSBL Arts and Commerce College, Kheralu Gujarat (India)

Abstract

Umashankar Joshi was a remarkable poet and playwright of twentieth century Gujarati literature. He remained one of the chief contributors amongst Gujarati writers to lead the society as well as Gujarati literature towards new directions. He emphasized the Gandhian ideology and enriched the tradition of Gujarati Literature. Umashankar Joshi exposes the social and economic ills deeply entrenched in the society. The girl named Hilli in the story is devoid of motherly love since her childhood. She is shown motherless growing under the care of Bavaji, the Sadhu at the outskirts of a village. Joshi stresses on the wretched predicament of motherless girl deprived off her social identity and her ultimate comfort in the form of seeking the mother within herself. Hilli remains the victim of immoral societal structure. The writer seems to confirm the hopes and despairs of human mind in a striking manner. One of the fascinating features of this story is 'Hilli continues to exist herself within two personalities': mother and a daughter.

Keywords: *social evils, Gandhian ideology, exploited class, human nature, psychological attitude, social identity*



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Umashankar Joshi was a notable poet and playwright of twentieth century Gujarati literature. He actively took part in the nationalist movement during 1930s. In addition to this, he was also the well-known academician and skilled administrator. He was awarded the prestigious Indian award 'Jnanpith' in 1967 for his unique contribution to Gujarati literature. The eminent poets like Umashankar Joshi, Sundaram, Zhaverchand Meghani and the novelists like Pannalal Patel, R. V. Desai and Darshak remained the chief contributors who guided the society as well as Gujarati literature towards new directions. They emphasized the Gandhian ideology and enriched the tradition of Gujarati Literature. The literature of Gandhian period shaped a variety of new perspectives and offered a profound insight.

It has been observed that major sources of his creativity remained the pleasing backdrop, social life of villages and fairs and festival often held in the hilly region. His prime concern seems to introduce the social, political and economic issues of contemporary period.

In a response to 'how he would like to be remembered by the future generations?', Umashankar Joshi once said: "A poet who, in spite of, or because of, his involvement in public affairs wrote a few lyrics, and made significant contribution to poetry and drama; wrote some good prose and might perhaps be read for a sense of beauty and perspective" (Umashankar Joshi. in). The statement validates his life and literary career in an apt manner.

Vijay Shashtri observes that Guy De Maupassant and O. Henry offered the well-knitted, compact, close-structured literary works consisting unfailing statement of incident and striking ending-statement to the world of short story. The puzzle puts forward in the beginning of their works will certainly be solved at the end. The experiment of 'it does not click' is rarely found in their works... The accordance of every cord is attained at the end of the story (Shastri 195 Trans.). Umashankar too, has employed the similar writing style and enriched the tradition of Gujarati story-writing.

The influence of Freud is also apparent in some of the themes of short stories exercised by Umashankar. In a 'statement' to *Shravani Melo* the writer, under the penname 'Vasuki', notes that 'he started writing short story for the sake of experiment in various form of literature and continued it thereafter in his writings. He seems to confess that plot, of course is imaginative. The environment depicted in it is of urban and rural culture and is true to his sense. He further explains that it's possible that the stories seem to be manifested of self-experience directly at some places. To his views a short story cannot become artistic if it doesn't elevate the personal experience to universal. He clarifies further that in place of introducing study on art of story-writing, he will prefer to write down one more story (Joshi vi-vii).

Umashankar Joshi exposes the social and economic ills deeply entrenched in the society. The language of common man remains the medium of his expressions. The writers especially of Gandhian era endeavor to visualize the Utopian vision of a just and classless society through their writings. The influence of Marxism and Gandhian ideals seems evident in the Gujarati literature in the first half of the twentieth century. His unique work *Gangotri* (1934) shows the poet's Marxist leaning. The fundamental doctrines of Marxism also seem to attach with Gandhain philosophy.

Umashankar Joshi's creativity doesn't remain confined to only poetry-writing since he was fond of conducting experiments in various literary genres. He earned reputation through his collection of *Shravani Melo*, *Tran Ardhu Be*, *Antray and Visamo*. The collection *Shravani*

Melo and *Visamo* have retained thirty-seven short stories. He didn't write a story after 1960, though in an earlier phase, he used to write stories regularly. He wrote the stories during the first five years in the fourth decade of twentieth century. The wind of Marxism and advancement had its way during that period in Gujarat. Along with many writers, Umashankar too, had expressed his views in rather strict and an open class-conflict language (Dave 71). Joshi emphasized the true sense of caring social justice and the hopes and despairs of human mind. Hence, as a story writer, he depicts the pain of exploited class and peculiarities of human nature.

The story-collection entitled *Shravai Melo* seems an effort to search and establish the psychological truth of human nature. To Umashankar the testing and depicting the complexity of human mind, the complex approaches and the response of people towards practical world seem more interesting. The girl named Hilli in the story is devoid of motherly love since her childhood. She is shown motherless growing under the care of Bavaji, the Sadhu (the worshipper of temple) at the outskirts of a village. The bus-stop is located nearby that temple. The writer has shown Hilli awaiting there for her mother regularly with profound faith. To one sense, the psychological attitude of this girl to await the bus actually seems mysterious since the absence of her motherly love is fulfilled perhaps through this unusual technique. The writer has intentionally employed it to characterize her in a more intensive manner.

Though, she indirectly receives the advantage of due affection from the village's people and the Sadhu. The girl often asks "Where is my mother?" The sadhu replies her in a strange sort of reply: "Hilly, you have got no mother. Or, if you like, you are your own mother! Do you follow?" (73) The writer introduces such statement of Bavaji 'strange' enough, but it can also be interpreted 'meaningful' here, because such a philosophical and comprehensive statement shows its worth when uttered by saintly figure like Bavaji, the Sadhu. The writer seems conscious enough to define this relevance of particular character and its logical statement to offer narrative a realistic touch.

The writer in order to validate the dramatic irony of Bavaji, the Sadhu's statement: "You are my mother" shows how she becomes her own mother towards the end. The effort to achieve this truth is carried out by writer through such incident. On the other hand, his affection for Hilli is reasonable, which is understood through some of the incidents like 'the goat named Hilly', 'its death' and 'affection for the dead goat' finally searched in the girl. His

love for Hilli is shown as a part of filling the gap of that affection. The writer remembers it well in what circumstances the narrative develops under certain psychological facets.

Similarly, he portrays the rural nature along with psychological portrayal. For example, the issue of illegal-immoral relationship among the elite class of village people, is introduced from such point of view: A man named Badar wishes to know the secret of Hilli's parentage asks: "Bavaji, say what will. But in keeping Hilli with you like this, you have definitely saved the name of 'some high-caste'. Some widow must have left the child at the entrance of the temple. Or, you are not revealing even though you know it" Bavaji, after listening the query from Badar, narrows his eyes, arranges the wrinkles of smile at the corners of his eyes near the ears, strikes his beard and says: "Isn't it possible that some Patlani left the child before she went to another man?" (76) This dialogue gives the genuine portrayal of rural people's mentality and contributes to generate an appropriate environment. Besides this, it satisfies very cleverly the curiosity of reader over the issue "Whose progeny Hilly is?" The issue of '*Patlani*' and '*Natravali*' (widow-remarried) remain very suggestive here.

Hilli's contact with other village people and the arrival of her friend Chanchi's aunt from Bombay by bus serve as a supportive factor to twist the strands of her motherly desire. The bus arrives and Chanchi, goes away with her. This scene bites the state of mother's absence more intensively. Though, she never used to ask such question, but today she could not stop her from asking the said question to Sadhu for the first time: "Bavaji, where is my mother?" This question asked by Hilly makes her realize that bite. Hence, the incident of arrival of Chanchi's aunt carries the 'desire of mother' to its extreme stage. Along with this, it also remains more impressive over the issue of mental linking of Hilli with bus. The bus which was attached at unknown state of 'motherly feeling' in the beginning seems to attach with her acknowledged stage now. The writer himself could not stop from exposing the fact and says: "Whatever may happen she would never miss the bus, as if the bus itself was her mother" (78). Though, without employing such facilitation, it would have been understood properly. The writer intends to clarify the mental attitude of character and their secrets, perhaps it might be the result of his acceptance of contemporary story-traditions.

In order to make her desire for mother intensive in a gradual mode, the writer has woven together one more incidents of arrival of Monghi's mother from Bombay. Monghi is another friend to Hilli in the story. Monghi's mother has brought *odhni* (sari) and bangles

especially for Hilli from Mumbai. She wishes that everything her mother brought from Mumbai should be given to Hilli. To satisfy her demand, Monghi's mother says: "Hilli's mother has sent them for her from Bombay". The sudden statement of Monghi's mother remains an important link to develop the story because when Hilli listens to this, reacts in a joyous mood: "See, now. Did you hear that? See! Have you got a sari like that? And see the bangles my mother has sent!"(81) Now she seems fully convinced that everybody's mother comes from Bombay and her mother too, will come from there. She seems to assure herself that her mother knows it well that she has been waiting for her at the bus-stop. One more incident of her' desire for mother' linked with her friends, takes place in the story. The mothers of every girl console them and prevent them from weeping, but nobody is there to console Hilli. Such a pity remains unbearable even for Bavaji. The anger of Sadhu towards Hilli's constant utterance 'mother, mother' seems suggestive to Sadhu's confusion. The grown up Hilli's falling in love with Dhana, the gradual development of their natural love affair, and Hilli, desirous of motherly love and her changing mentality all seem important in context to its pragmatic function. Hilli gives a birth to baby-girl thereafter. The writer describes Hilli's identification with her daughter thus "she remembered the mother of her childhood days: when she was young, was she also like this little one? And did she also have a mother like herself?"(86) Thus, when Hilly finds linking the self within her daughter, showers plenty of love on her. The writer clarifies this in a vivid manner: "Like a mother, she went on showering affection on that little Hilli, she drenched that Hilli in gushing affection and she felt that she actually had a mother when she was young. In showering that motherly affection on the little girl, she felt she herself was overwhelmed with that affection (86). Hence, Hilly could find the 'motherly love' ultimately. The absence of her motherly love is fulfilled in her own daughter. She seems to imagine herself in the form of daughter. One of the fascinating features of this story is that Hilli continues to exist herself within two personalities: mother and a daughter. Thus, the psychological facets of Hilli's life are woven together in the narrative artistically.

Hence, Joshi stresses on the wretched plight of motherless girl deprived off her social identity and her ultimate comfort in the form of seeking the mother within herself. Hilli remains the victim of immoral societal structure. The writer seems to validate the hopes and despairs of human mind in a very fitting approach.

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