



PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN LITERATURE

J. K. Khuman , Ph.D.

Head, Deptt. of English, Shree Parekh College, Mahuva.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

A development & movement in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature which was well under way by the late 1960s and which has burgeoned steadily since. It is an attempt to describe, interpret and reinterpret women's experience as depicted in various kinds of literature¹.

There are two reasons for the crucial interest of Feminism in Post-colonial discourse :

- Both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subject, can be paralleled in a number of respects and both feminist and post-colonial politics oppose such dominance.
- There have been vigorous debates in a number of colonized societies over whether gender or colonial oppression is the more important political factor in women's lives. This has sometimes led to division between Western feminist and political activists impoverished and oppressed countries.

One of the most revolutionary changes of the twentieth century was the rapid increase of women in leadership roles throughout our society and nation. Throughout the world women's history has developed differently in different countries and among groups within these. Countries and can not be separated from the political context. In India too, the case is somewhat similar. Although 'feminism' because of its origins in the west and emphasis on individualism is a problematic concept in India as noted historian Geraldine Forbes rightfully argues, "The first women to enter political and social organization were deeply concerned with improving women's status"². She further tells how the parameters of women's entry into nationalist politics were set by male leaders and defined by women. The freedom struggle legitimized women's involvement in politics and preserved them outside the home but it didn't liberate them from deeply held notions of modesty and necessity of male protection. However, women rose to unprecedented

promise in every sphere including business, government, science, the arts, education, etc.

Adopted unanimously, in 1995, the United Nations Fourth world conference on women in Beijing produced a remarkable Declaration and Platform for Action. That linked women's rights to human rights for the first time in UN history and laid out detailed and ambitious plans for the advancement of girl, and women in health, political decision-making, education and economic opportunity. The Declaration and Platform were just pieces of paper -- there was no real enforcement mechanism but as such things go.

Statistical survey made each year to see how self-sufficient & self-reliant women are gradually turning and what dramatic progress they have been making in their own sphere of activities and also in those areas where they have to compete equally with men. They felt the need for changing marriage laws that mandate wifely obedience and divorce laws that permit men but not women to dissolve the union at will or whim, removing restrictions on basic freedoms, like the right to travel, study or work without permission of a male guardian. Nigeria permits husbands to "correct" their wives through physical punishment. More than five countries allow rapists to avoid prosecution if they marry the victim. In Saudi Arabia women still can't drive. In Kuwait they still can't vote. Then what is women's empowerment for them?

Feminism through the awareness of people in general towards the patriarchal treatment and some women's organization have insisted on reservation for women. Both reservationists and anti-reservationists for the cause want the right kind of woman in politics but neither group wanted women of all classes, castes and religions to answer the question "What do women want"? For fear the answers would not be the same as theirs. That is perhaps the reason for why the procrastination the proposal for the reservation of one third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislatures for women in the 81st Constitutional Amendment to the Indian Constitution. Similar problems to those concerned with class were faced in gender and race. Mohanty, for instance, criticizes.

"In the 1980s, many feminist (Carby 1982, Mohant 1984, Sulri 1992), began to argue that western feminism, which has assumed that gender overrode cultural difference to create a universal category of the womanly or the feminine was operating from hidden, universalist assumption with a middle-class, Euro-Centric bias. Feminism was therefore

charged with failing to account for or deal adequately with the experience of the third world women”³.

Thus, problems are created not only by male dominance, as in the case of Dalit literature as they blame upper class for all the problems. They themselves are responsible for the poor condition of the Dalit women even today.

Somdatta Mandal in her article questions the stereotyped notions of women’s empowerment in the Indian context Vis – a – Vis the illiterate rural figure that has been overly represented in celluloid representations as well as other media, versus her liberated and educated counterpart living in the city.⁴

To illustrate this point she takes recourse to three audio-visual representations, one a documentary made by a woman journalist, two, a feature film made by the same director, and the third, an award winning Bengali feature film made by a director of repute and shows how this common belief about the vulnerability of the illiterate village woman is a myth as is the belief about empowerment of her educated feminist, city-bred counterpart :

The first one, Ananya Chatterjee’s documentary ‘Daughters of the 73rd Amendment’ produced by the Institute of Social Sciences, Calcutta, shows the empowerment of three women panchayat leader from different parts of India. The amendment that made it mandatory for panchayats (village councils) has often been ridiculed, and elected women often regarded as wooden dolls controlled by existing male power. But the amendment has also thrown up many achievers (Ananya’s chronicle is of such women of grit who have been given the opportunity. The 50 minute long document focuses primarily upon three specific cases.⁵

1. Gunia Bai Ahirwar of Pipra village in the Bundelkhand district of Madhya Pradesh. married at the age of two and mother of several children, Gundi Bai holds up a success story in the manner in which she functions. Like all villagers her prime interest are micro-level roads, primary school, and drinking water. It is very ironic to hear (it is very ironic) that even as the village Sarpanch she has to wait in queue to draw water at the village well till all the higher cast women finish their jobs because she belongs to a lower caste. So much for ground realities in India. (Quite common in many other states.

2. Sudha Patel, from Anand District in Gujarat. Blind since birth, Sudha has a bachelor's degree and she reveals that she is alive today only because a good harvest the year she was born prevented her parents of infanticide as some villagers thought her to be lucky as "Lakshmi". Sudha's grit for working from a doubly marginalized position is also revealed in the way she sings and laughs her to office.
3. Fatima Bee, whose house shelf is full of so many achievement and award medals that one night mistake it to be a leading sportsman's or performer's house. She is also the recipient of an award from the president of India. Her case is perhaps the finest example of what women can achieve if given the necessary support from the family member and from society at large. It has to be mentioned that Ananya titles the documentary "Part -I" as she feels that the mission is still incomplete and many other Sudha Patel or Fatima Bees might be existing somewhere else in India, or are in the process of gaining empowerment.

The second illustration is of the film *Paromithar Ekdin'* (A day in paromita's life) by Aparna Sen, in which the heroine a middle-aged well-to-do woman of Bengali household commits the cardinal crime of falling in love with a young photographer. She had an ally in her mother-in-law. Her conviction on how economic independence has a vital role to play in this effort comes through. The third illustration is Rituparno Ghosh's award-winning film "Dahan" (1997), where the focal point is a well-reported rape attempt. A bunch of ruffians try to molest a newly wed woman Romita while many pass by, none offer to help, until a brave young teacher infuriated by what she sees, turns on the men and saves the girl. All this happens in the first 20 minutes of the film; the next two hours are about how various people react to the incident and the scandal it brings to the family reputations: Rohita her husband, her-in-laws, her parents the teacher, her grandmother with whom she shares a special bond her brother who idolized her all these add depth to the screenplay that is a brilliant insight into Indian middle class moralities and what is justice bravery right and wrong, morals, crime, punishment and so on. It portrays the plight of a woman assaulted by a group of men and who succumbs to the pressures of her husband and in laws by giving a false statement in court making her realize that her feminism ideals of being an equal partner in society is a sham and however much one might talk of gender empowerment, in real life that does not work. The writer mentions

refers to an interesting controversy raged in Kolkatta regarding Dahan and Annaya Chatterjee was directly involved in it. The film was screened on the third week of November in Kolkatta has part of the international fortnight of violence against women, organized by a XPGO, Sanlaap on 27th Nov, 2002 the audience at Nandan Theater got an insight into the situation of the couple harassed by four youths at the Tollygunj metro station in 1992 and the woman who fought for the couple seeking justice. The author Suchitra Bhattacharya and Ananya Chatterjee, the journalist who inspired the character in the film: By making think as the loser she wanted women to realize the pain and suffering, wanted readers to act. Ananya Chatterjee lambasted the film. In an act of unusual courage, she had come to the aid of a young couple when they were being roughed up. But when her story was adapted on celluloid, she found that it was flawed by male stereotyping. She felt that it had been majorly unfair to the male characters, especially the victim's husband she reported.⁶

Though the film says that it is based on a true life incident, I am surprised at the way the characters are portrayed. The woman's husband has been portrayed in a negative role whereas in a real life both the women and the man fought against social pressure and always appeared in court seeking justice. In real life the couple who were college students, had got married after the incident. The man stood firmly by his girlfriend, and had supported her against immense societal pressure. The couple married in UP and the case is still in court.

If this stereotype has to be broken it has to be attacked from both sides. For it is not some men who need to be broken, it is this east, short cut, method of stereotyping to justify one's actions and mind-set that needs to be addressed and broken down. When such stereotyping happens in a group or in a home it is dangerous enough. But when it happens in literature or in a film which leaves lasting impressions on people's minds it is likely to be catastrophic. We are not yet ready to accept real men and real women.

The purpose of this paper is to expose the wrong attitudes, aggression, decisions and representation. More aggression of the movement may render the man-woman relationship and moral values at stake harm the fundamental requirement of the hedonistic society.

As for representations of Indian woman is concerned either real, mythical, stereotypical or ideological-literary and cultural representations of race, class, and gender can be found seen everywhere in world literature in general and Indian literature in particular almost

from the very old age i.e. in the scriptures-religious and philosophical looks and oral traditions of different regions of our nation. There is a verse in the old and ideal Bhagvad Gita :

Man his Parth Vyasashritya ye api syubu papyona yah.

Striyo Vaishyas tallra shundraste api yanti param gatim ⁷

I veda vyasa veda, Bhagvad Gita, chapter 9, verset -32 [O Parth! even women vaishyas shudres and those with low birth (dog-eaters) taking my shelter, obtain the supreme destination]

In the above-cited verse, one may argue (orthod or feminist) that women are considered with the people of lower strata of society. But the aim of the Lord Krishna have no differences of classed, genders and categories in devotional service. The people of material involvement may have such wrong notions as high class and low class but for people in aborted in spiritual world every one man/women deserve supreme destination and transcendental bliss.

Toru Dutt has used the sources and created wonderful characters of Savitri & Sita :

The sweet simplicity and grace,

.....

Mirrored in dawning womanhood. ⁸

We may find some lofty and sublime examples of womanhood in Gujarati Poetry and Folklore, for example , Dula Kag's poem 'Rajputani' and Botadkar's famous poem "Janani ni Jod Sakhi nahi jade re lol....." ⁹

Dula Kag in one of his Dohas related to mother says –

Modhe bolu man tya n mane sache nanap sambhare

Pachhi motap ni maza mane kadvi lage Kagada.... ¹⁰

(When I utter "Mother" I recall my child hood after being elder I lost it – I feel bitter --
-----)

References

- Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Penguin Books, 1997. pp. 76,
Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in colonial India*, New Delhi : Chronicle Books, 2005 : 3.
Tiffin, *Post Colonial Studies Feminism & Post Colonialism*, 102-3.
Mandal Somdatta, *Empowerment of Women, Literary & Cultural Representations of Women*,
2004.
Chatterjee Ananya, *Daughters of the 73rd Amendment*, 2002.
Chatterjee Ananya, *The Times of India*, November 28, 2001.

Ved Vyas, Bhagvad Gita, Chepter -9, Verse 32.

Dutt Tory, Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, Prakash Book Depo, Bareli, 2002. Page. 121.

Botadkar, Joshi Umashankar, Mehulo Gajo Ne Madhav Nache, Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, Amadavad, 1987, 26-27.

Kag Dula, Kagvani, Gurjara Granth Ratn Karyalay, 1990, 72.