

Sunlight on a Broken Column and Inside the Haveli : A Discussion on the Feminine Sensibility in the Patriarchal Society

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Abstract. Women have been regarded as subservient to men since time immemorial. Even great thinkers and philosophers have regarded women as inferior to men. Aristotle, the great philosopher believed that femininity is an incomplete version of masculinity. He believed that a woman lacks qualities that are essential to men. He believed that women are defective by nature and incomplete in comparison to men. They are mentally and physically weaker than men and should passively allow men to dominate. Feminist perspectives have acquired a significant place across the country and world, beyond a number of established boundaries irrespective of caste, religion and creed. The study chiefly centres upon exploring female subjugation, psychological tumults, lack of freewill and identity crisis in the male dominated patriarchal society and devaluing traditional feministic virtues of service and submission. Women realized how male writers through the centuries had been stereotyped women. Gradually they began to see that male prejudices have denied woman her right and rightful position in life. As female empowerment alone can enable a woman to shed their dependent and inferiority complexes, so in the writings of many female writers we find a lot of writing which is quite self conscious about gender identity. Many women writers came in front and started retelling the past from their geocentric point of view and thus gave a new voice to patriarchal stereotype invention of telling their own tales. This paper focuses on the secluded life of women, their helpless condition and their transformation on the basis of feminist perspectives. In this research paper we will discuss about the works of mainly two femalenoelists - Attia Hosain and Rama Mehta.

Keywords : Feminism; masculinity; female suppression; agony; patriarchal society.

Many female authors have emerged to describe the pain endured by the women in our society. Women's subjugation is an old style of telling tales about them. Women have been considered as submissive to men since time immemorial. Feminism is rightly considered as the product of

Received : 7th June, 2024; Accepted : 28th June, 2024

post-modern sensibility. Post-modern sensibility is reflected in Indian writing in English which the result of new socio-cultural and political situations. The word 'feminism' has been derived from Latin word 'Femina' which stands for woman first of all. The term feminism exposes the predicament of contemporary women in traditional patriarchal society and raises the voice for women's liberation from prejudiced male-dominance. The contemporary woman does not want to conform to the traditional image anymore. Age long suppression and torture in every form has forced her to lift the cudgels and stand up to fight the patriarchal society. Previously, women were deprived of the privilege to education whereas men were given all the facilities and prerogatives in this field. The only role of women was to accompany men in their beds, provide them with emotional and egoistic satiation so that they were re-affirmed of their supremacy from time to time. Both men and women as writers have explored the role of gender through their writings. Their narrative is very diverse while narrating their male as well as female characters. A woman writer has moved very much far away from timidity and marginality to self-expression and redefinitions. Still the position of woman, whether as a writer or a human-being, is quite challenging even as the third world woman. Being completely emancipated and independent, she has been considered as 'the other'. It was exactly after the feminist's movements and in the later part of the 20th century that women writers like Rama Mehta and Attia Hossain have achieved recognition and they have shown their women protagonists protesting against patriarchy.

The primal and seminal concern of feminism is to declare that a woman is a living being. She is not a burden and not an attachment of man. These grasping terms certainly got our attention and also invoke humane feeling among women as an 'individual entity'. The paper is an attempt to ponder over the fact that Feminism has never been a movement, but a concept and moreover a belief which have been constantly intersected by many social, political and cultural histories. Like Dickens' novels, Rama Mehta's novel has the potential of bringing about social reformation and creating public opinion. The role of a woman is predefined by men or society. Her idealized role gives her duty and responsibility but no right, respect or freedom. The most striking fact is that women do not even notice the injustice done to them. They are conditioned to accept everything without any protest. They never think of the rights or freedom

they are actually entitled to as a human being. Rama Mehta tries to wake them up from their age-long sleep and have a progressive point of view in life. Attia Hosain's feminist concern also includes women of every stratum of society. Attia's writings emerged before the sign of second wave feminism in US and UK and feminism was also limited to certain segments of women. Attia's feminist approach is not restricted to some specific sections of women; rather it epitomizes the oppressed and marginalized women of every stratum of society. Attia condemns patriarchal education that makes women intellectually enslaved. She illustrates that in patriarchal structure, marriage is used as a domineering tool.

Main Thrust

Postcolonial literature has rejected the representation or stereotyping of the non-Western woman as being voiceless, having no agency of her own to voice her experiences, and incapable to portray a true picture of one's surroundings. Books by women writers talking about themselves and their experiences have slowly been claiming a space for themselves in an arena that has been predominantly considered a masculine activity. Feminist perspectives have stimulated across the country and world, beyond a number of established boundaries irrespective of caste, religion and other margins. Gender based struggles, in India as elsewhere, have had a long and eventful journey over the centuries, more so in a society fighting patriarchy and other societal odds since time immemorial. Moreover, the paper aims at the limitation and insufficiency of the society, people and norms and also the plan is to set equilibrium between the two sexes. Even in the 21st century we were unable to bring out an equal society and comfortable zone for women sex. It is indeed said that after seventy years of independence of the country women are still under bondage, unable to assert their rights, silently putting up the atrocities. Once Pandit Nehru said that we can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women. This argument is very strong and relevant as the women are also considered as nation builder. The growth of the nation and country depends on that how strong the women are. The feminist's thinkers have been in the continuous reworking of the female liberation, empowerment and emancipation. Moreover, their main aim is to bring an equitable society in terms of gender. Their focal point is the struggle against the odds of the society but to prove the fact, that woman is an independent

human being. From independence to modern day literature the stories represented the imbalance between male and female. The differences are socially constructed. The existential crisis of females in a male dominated society makes them subjugated creatures. Attia Hosain was born in 1913 in Lucknow in undivided India into the liberal kulwaī clan of Oudh. She graduated from Lucknow University after having attended low Matinee School for Girls and Isabella Thoburn College. She got her first collection of short stories, *Phoenix Fled*, published in 1953. Her novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, was published in 1961. Her writings were disdainful of hypocrisy and extremism. Her battle led to harmonies between the languages and different belief systems that surrounded her and got fortified by humanism and socialism. It showed no acceptance of any philosophy without intense analysis. The novel, which has been analysed in this paper, is Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, which was published in 1961. The novel, mainly set in Lucknow, is an autobiographical version of a fictional character called Laila, who is a fifteen-year-old orphaned daughter of a rich Muslim family of Taluqdars. Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* converses about a Muslim girl Laila, the main protagonist and also the alter-ego of Attia Hosain, who headed for all the restrictions and exploitation. She sets an example for the women, who belong to the Muslim conservative family. She sharply protests against dishonour of human dignity, prejudices and exploitation. She obeys all the code of conduct meant for girls but at the same time, she was affected by the new wave of the college.

Laila, the protagonist in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is an orphan girl brought up in her grandfather's household by orthodox aunts who keep purdah. They remind her of her feminine duties and code of conduct from time to time. She escapes reality through her books. In this novel, we see Laila's growth from girlhood to womanhood and her experience moving from her grandfather's more traditional orthodox household to her uncle's more modern reform household. The novelist presents the growth of the protagonist in two different worlds, one is the world of the Purdah culture of the house which represents conservatism, repression of sexuality and complete patriarchy and other is the world of new, practical, social and economic ideas which encourages an individual to assert and grow. Laila was given English education owing to her father's wish to see her educated. Though Laila is educated to fit in to the new world, she is expected to uphold old traditions and culture in her mind. Laila considered British rule as repressive, but she obtained certain

modern values from her western education which exposed her to a world of new social, economic and political ideas. She read too many books and unlike her cousin Zahra, had her own thoughts and beliefs. Education makes Laila able to see the disparities in male and female voices. But she was not allowed to express her feelings. Laila's cousin Zahra is also a victim of this change. She was a dutiful Purdah girl brought up fittingly and properly according to her mother Majida. Before marriage she said her prayers five times a day, read the Quran an hour every morning, sewed and knitted and wrote the accounts. Her marriage with Naseer, an officer in the Indian civil service transformed her into a modern wife with overly individualized, private resolutions for maintaining her patriarchal and class privilege. Marriage for her was an escape from rigid patriarchal restrictions and purdah culture which gave her freedom to socialize. She attended social functions morning, afternoon and evening. She even takes differently rebellious Laila under her wing, bringing her out of purdah and dressing her up, dragging her to public events in defiance of their Aunt Saira's reservations. But Zahra's change is only an outward change. Laila is torn between concepts of arranged marriage and love marriage. She considers arranged marriage as an uncivilized belief because of which she asserts "I won't be paired off like an animal" (*Sunlight on a Broken Column*, 29) during family discussion of Zahra's marriage. Love marriage was not acceptable in orthodox as well as in reformed Muslim communities. Marriages had to be arranged, because individual choice was recognized as love which was considered as a sin committed by one to his family "love between man and woman was associated with sex, and sex was sin" (312). Yet another female character is Sita. Sita's education did not give her enough courage like Laila. Sita is like every other girl who yields to parent's decisions in every matter regarding their life. Sita loves Kemal, Laila's cousin. But for her, marrying him was unthinkable and she decides to marry following her parent's wish. According to Jasbir Jain,

Ashiana in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* serves as a microcosm of the world at large with not only its womenfolk in purdah but its retinue of servants who represent the community at large. It has a living relationship with the past not merely through the culture it cultivates but also through the house at Hasanpur

at the outskirts of the city, which
symbolizes continuity and permanence.

(Jain, 143)

Attia lived at a time when the feminine ideal was at a diminish as it was the partition time in India. No doubt, a number of writers and public figures were actively engaged in campaigning for women's rights with, of course, some positive results, yet the condition of women had remained as deplorable as it was in the beginning of the 20th century. Her novels show women struggling with the real and not with the ideal condition of life. Rama Mehta is one of the most considerable feminine writers who raised the voice of women as much as she can do and it can be exemplified well with her Sahitya Academy Award winning novel, *Inside the Haveli*, a wonderful literary presentation for the feminist thinkers as well as literal readers. In the title of *Inside the Haveli*, this 'Inside' is assigned well for only women, as women have no space in 'Outside' society of joy and pleasure while the men can move anywhere for not only joy and pleasure but also to establish their own identity into the various fields of traditions and professions. The characterization of the novel is concentrated on feminine sensibility of marginalization which can be seen well in the portrayal of the protagonist, Geeta who was born and brought up in Mumbai, the economic and filmy city of India. She was married in an extremely traditional and conservative Rana's family of Udaipur in the conceptual and contextual background of old Indian culture. After her marriage, it was seen that she was put in the Haveli which has confined all her joys into the four walls of the building and it has also taken away all her freedom and fascination of a freely marital life as it has been described "the separation of self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept purdah" (*Inside the Haveli*, 6) Consequently, the protagonist is seen struggling against the traditional and conservative rules and regulations of the Rana's family for her willingness, freedom, fairness and frankness towards her fulfilling desires. She is also seen hither and thither for establishing her own identity through her bearing capacities of sufferings and suppressions.

Child marriage, treatment of female child as a burden, purdah system, ill-treatment of widow— almost all of the patriarchal notions and restrictions are projected very explicitly in the novel. In the form of the birth of Sita from Lakshmi and Gangaram and the first sign of the feminine

exploitation can be seen when Khyali, admitted “Girls are burden... but what can one do once they are born?” (8). Though the novel appears to be all women novel and centred on them, yet, in fact they are being marginalized by the man of the house. Woman’s place in man’s life-cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. Women in *Inside the Haveli* are seemed to play the same roles. The women surrender their selves to the social structures that demand their wilful submission and obedience. The story of the novel unfolds the classical clash between traditional role of orthodoxy and modern thinking of improving conditions and situations of the women ‘self’ in the two cities of Udaipur and Bombay respectively, “In Bombay, Geeta enjoys full freedom but in Udaipur she has to abide by the form and the etiquette of the haveli” (29). In this way, one can say that women, in India, have been as the silent sufferer and upholder of the traditional values of family as well as society. Rama Mehta, presents an intimate picture of a patriarchal system which existed since feudal times and was not over it even in the modern consideration. It is also exemplified with a revelation of attitudes towards women and their status in upper section of Indian society where the life behind purdah is considered well educated and cultured.

Conclusion

In the patriarchal and postcolonial spaces, the construction of the image of a woman in the colonialist and nationalist texts fortified the power relationships. Women who fought along with men for independence were now fighting a new fight – against those very men they had fought along with. As Elleke Boehmer (1995), in her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, observes that women felt the need to rewrite their and to do so they had to resist, recreate, and empower themselves. Women in the contemporary era came across multiple problems and hardships in society. On the one hand, they keep striving for their rights and a letter of survival, while as on the other, it looks quite a fierce challenge to carry out their duties in a male-dominated society. While describing the patriarchal system, Ania Loomba observes, “While women and gender are seen emblematic of culture and nation... a woman who broke the code of silence and subservience became the object of extreme hostility, which in some cases, succeeded in silencing the outspoken women.” (Loomba, 186) Women, especially from conservative areas and orthodox families, are being encompassed by bundles of bold-like troubles and problems

every single hour as they massively struggle to fulfil even their most fundamental hankerings. At every step-in life, they are rendered to perceive disdain and contempt in their own communities. The primal and seminal concern of feminism is to declare that a woman is a living being. She is not a burden and not an attachment of man. These grasping terms certainly got our attention and also invoke humane feeling among women as an individual entity. The paper is an attempt to ponder over the fact that Feminism has never been a movement, but a concept and moreover a belief which have been constantly intersected by many social, political and cultural histories.

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