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## ‘Subject’ the ‘absolute’: Treatment of Male Characters in the Novels of Kavita Singha

Dr. Priyalekha N S

Assistant Professor (on Contract)

Centre for Comparative Literature

Institution: Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kerala

### Abstract

The last decades of the twentieth century, women’s writing appeared as a major area in the main-stream of literature and thereby tries to questioning the patriarchal characteristics of main-stream literary tradition. Kavita Singha (Sinha) is the one name among the women writers of Indian literature who can be identified with this tradition. Kavita Singha’s presentation of female characters often poses a challenge to the patriarchal notions of familyhood and moral bondages of Indian society. Comparing to her contemporary woman writers, Kavita Singha has not portrayed any significant male characters in their novels. . Protest against patriarchal oppression and the politics of patriarchy, are the most politically significant feature of her work. She is not ready to accept man as ‘subject’, the ‘absolute’ and woman as the ‘object’, the ‘other’. She rejects the traditional feminine role and also defies the overwhelming male-ego. Elaine Showalter describes the aim of gynocritics is to seek out a feminine aesthetics, or ‘essence’, which differentiates women’s writing from men’s.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the paper addresses an important question that is how Kavita Singha has created her male characters in her novels.

**Keywords:** Society, Patriarchy, Power Politics

The protagonists in the novels of Kavita Singha are mostly females. Hence, comparing to her contemporary woman writers, Kavita Singha has not portrayed any significant male characters in their novels. If at all, there are some male characters she created in her writings just to give completeness to the course of the story. But these characters are largely remained as marginalized. She always opposed the male dominance in our society. Since childhood, she experienced the dominance of male in her life. First experience male dominance she experienced was from her father, who with his hypocrite nature, dictated her and spoiled the small happiness of her childhood. He has always disliked her interests in various arts, and he used to destroy her paintings and writings. Later, it was her father who felt proud when Kavita Singha became recognized in the society and in the literary circle of Bengal. But he never acknowledged or lamented for the prohibiting role he had played in her life. All these reasons, Kavita Singha’s description of her father in her memoir *Bilu and Six Rusted Pins* belies a deep antagonism towards him.

<sup>1</sup> Sara Mill, Lynne Pearce, Sue Spaul and Elaine Millard, *Feminist Reading/Feminists Reading* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1989), p. 84.

Kavita Singha had thought that her marriage would liberate her from the dominance of male in this patriarchal society but it really did not happen. Like her father, her husband Bimal Roy Chaudhury also played a dominant role in her life. In one of her novels *Pap punya periye*, the author has narrated her experience of being dominated by her father and husband through the incidents which happen in the life of the protagonist Basana. Kavita Singha was not ready to accept the exploitation of women in the hands of men. Her first published work, *Art and Women* was about the use of female body in advertisement. In this article, she has strongly criticized the use and exploitation of women by the male businessmen for their profit.

Kavita Singha believes that Bengali mainstream literary culture has its own way of dealing with women writers. They are not ready to accept the treatment of bold themes by women writers because it is deep-rooted in their conscious or subconscious that the way women could be sharp and fearless in their poems, such freedom has not yet been granted in their prose writings. Kavita Singha also faced this discrimination of male dominance in her writing career. Through her writings, Kavita Singha expressed her rebellious attitude towards the male's power politics which is exercised through all the different agencies of patriarchy. It is very evident in her poem *Ishwerke Eve* (Eve Speaks to God), she asserts:

I was first  
to break  
the golden shackles  
of luxurious  
pleasure.  
I was never  
a puppet  
to dance  
to your tune  
like  
meek Adam.<sup>2</sup>

She has questioned all kind of patriarchal agencies and to some extents, it reflected in her portrayal of male characters in the novels.

The narrative of the novel *Pourush* (Manliness) starts with the stream of consciousness of the protagonist, Sibnath Mitra who is a middle aged bachelor, working as a middle-class clerk. The story reveals the journey of Sibnath from a timid, mousy, self-centric, spineless, morose, morally shaky, escapist and almost non-existent personality to self-confident, helpful, honest macho figure. It is a saga of how he achieves his manly qualities, how from antihero, he turns out to be a real hero at the end of the novel. This is a very unconventional plot in the sense that the concept of anti-hero was not very popular in the Bengali literature. But in the end when Kavita Singha delineates Sibnath Mitra emerging as a bold courageous person with full of manly qualities, the novelist, therefore, conforms to the patriarchal construct of masculine qualities.

Himadri, Sibnath's young colleague cum friend acts as a counter-foil to Sibnath. A jovial, social at the same time very upright person, Himadri raises his voice against the corruption rampant in the office and becomes determined to expose the people behind it. Sibnath though enjoys the fruits of his company but leaves him more than once when Himadri is in dire need of him. But Himadri does not leave him and even he takes the initiative to meet Sarala and beg sorry for Sibnath who embraces Sarala and makes sexual advances, left her alone and escaped when police caught them in the park at dark. It is because of Himadri's endeavour Sarala forgives Shibnath and returns to his life. Himadri's constant support helps Sibnath to come out of his cocoon: "Shibnath discovers himself with Himadri.....he has never thought of himself before in this way. Himadri is a nice guy. Sometimes Shibnath feels the urge to do something for him. If Himadri has not come, Shibnath would not be able to go to the office picnic this year."<sup>3</sup> Finally it is Sakhisona, the eunuch, who chides Shibnath for not rescuing Himadri from the hooligans sent by the corrupted colleagues; Shibnath feels the call of his soul and jumps over the attackers to save Himadri.

<sup>2</sup> Kavita Sinha, "Ishwarke Eve" (Eve Speaks to God), in *Women Writing in India 600 B. C. to the Present Volume II: The Twentieth Century*, (eds.) Suise Tharu, K. Lalita (Oxford University Press, New delhi, 1993), p. 331.

<sup>3</sup> Kavita Sinha, *Pourush* (Dey's, Kolkata, 1984), p. 93.

Next important character in the novel *Pourush* is Sarala's boss Mr Chowdhury. When he increases the salary of Sarala, it makes talk between the colleagues of the office that Sarala is taking the advantage of her sex. His employees' this kind of talks creates a negative image of Mr. Chowdhury. But in real, he is a broken heart father because of his daughter who eloped with someone. In one occasion, when Mr. Chowdhury, seeks Sarala's company, Sarala mistakes the fatherly affection for sexual drive and in a fit to take revenge on Shibnath, makes her mind to offer her body to Mr. Chowdhury though there is no love interest. By then discloses that he makes a fail attempt to place Sarala in the position of his eloped daughter, Rinku. The true face of Mr. Chowdhury reveals there in front of Sarala, a face she has never seen in her life: "Then it seems that today, after such a long time, or might be first time in her life, she has seen such a face of a man, a face, old, ugly but genuine. That is a face of manliness. This man is not afraid of anything. This man does not escape. He knows how to face. If he loses, he can admit that, says forgive me or punish me."<sup>4</sup> Through the characterization of Mr. Chowdhury, Kavita Sinha portrays a very genuine man.

Rabi, Makhan, Kashi and Lakshman are other male characters in the novel. Though they play a minor role in the course of the story, through their behavior towards the inferior sex Kavita Sinha depicts the attitude of the power politics of the patriarchal society. Rabi, Kashi and Makhan are the colleagues of Sarala but they are not treating her as equal to them. Moreover, they make disgusting stories of Sarala and her boss Mr. Chowdhury because of her salary hike. They consider Sarala's salary hike to be an undue advantage of her sex. Therefore, when Sarala came from the boss's chamber, they looked at her in a sarcastic way: "When she is walking across the hall, it seems, everyone is looking fixedly at her shoulder as if the senior boss has put the impression of his dyed hand on her shoulders. When she enters the room, it seems to her, Makhan, Rabi are not hiding their *bidis* that way they used to do. While putting gum in the envelopes, she stealthily notices, Rabi and other are gossiping loudly. There is no longer that low voice of respect. Kashi is scratching pulling his *dhoti* up to his knee."<sup>5</sup> From their erotic concentration on specific part of Sarala's body, it is evident here that these colleagues harbour of the sexist attitude of her. The power of patriarchy makes them to think like that Sarala should suffer this disgrace, and this is the also the irony of patriarchy.

Sakhisona, a trans-woman struggles for a new life after coming out from the clutches of the *hijra* community. Here Lakshman supports Sakhisona's attempt to come to the mainstream life. As her partner, he helps to buy a sugarcane-juice preparing machine. His support and consideration make Sakhisona dreaming of a home and family with Lakshman. But for Lakshman, she is just 'other', a *hijra*. This mentality of Lakshman towards her revealed out when there is an argument between them, he shouts at Sakhisona and says that she cannot be called even a *Magi* in heat of anger. Later Lakshman starts a secret relationship with Sumati, a betel leaf seller, who is pregnant for the second time; however not by Lakshman. After knowing his relationship with Sumati, Sakhisona hands over her sugarcane juice extracting machine to them and returns back to the *hijra* community. Through the character of Lakshman, Kavita Sinha throws light on the emotional and physical exploitation of transgender in the male dominated Indian society.

Surya is the main male character in the novel *Ekti kharap meyer galpo* (The Story of a Notorious Girl) by Kavita Sinha. Surya is a 19 year old boy from a middle class family who fell in love with Ruma. Though he was sincere in his love affair with Ruma but she ditched him and suddenly left Kolkata and moved to Delhi with her father. The very day, he meets Alaka when he visits a high-rise flat in Kolkata with his friend Salil Nandi. While party going on, Alaka asked him to visit her flat that day, but Surya denied. According to him, Alaka was not at all a 'good girl' in the traditional sense. He was feeling envious of Alaka, her ultra-modern dress, ability to sing, good English, and imported car. Surya meets Alaka for the second time when he was preparing for his master's examination. After watching Surya performing dialogues of various filmy heroes during Durga Puja festival, Alaka and her boss Sudhin Chaudhury offer Surya to give voice at Radio Jungle. But Surya could not keep the appointment as Ruma's mother committed suicide on the same day.

In between Ruma had come to Kolkata for a few days and Surya had met her. Surya had learnt that her father Nitish and his friend Mili Datta would marry once Ruma's mother Kalyani gives divorce. On the day of the divorce, Surya had met Kalyani and had requested Surya not to forsake Ruma. After another three years, when Surya was on the verge of completing his research Ruma returns to Kolkata. By then, Ruma had a scooter accident with Kamal her engineer boyfriend, which has left a deep scar on her face and has crippled one of her legs. Kamal had ditched Ruma after that and had left for Haryana. Surya remembered Kalyani's last request to him; so he could not turn away from

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> Kavita Sinha, *Pourush* (Dey's, Kolkata, 1984), p. 82.

Ruma. He took a teaching job in a college. Though apparently they were happy love-birds, both of them knew that there was just adjustment and calculation in their relationship.

For the third time, Surya meets Alaka in Konarak and both of them fell in love. This time Surya asks Alaka to marry him, but she denies saying that she had already lost her virginity. Surya told her that body never gets violated. They get married. But the marriage breaks due to Surya's lack of trust on her. After that, Surya returns to Kolkata and marries Ruma. He names their son as Alak. For the last time, he meets Alaka at Ajanta Caves. Still both love each other and the novel ends with Surya's narration: "That was the last time that I saw Alaka in front of that cave on that cloudy noon. She was smiling and waving her hands. She was getting smaller and smaller there and was again becoming more and more prominent in my heart."<sup>6</sup> Through the characterization of Suray, Kavita Sinha tries to depict the inner conflicts dilemma of the young middle-class men of the time.

Nitish, Ruma's father is another male character in the novel. For a while, he takes his daughter Ruma to Delhi where he stays. He has an extra-marital relationship with his friend Mili Dutta and he wishes to marry her. Therefore, he is waiting to get a divorce from his wife Kalyani. Once he gets divorce from Kalyani, he marries Mili Dutta. But things have not worked well between Nitish and Mili Dutta. After two years, he started meeting another woman and it disturbs completely in his married life with Mili Dutta. Later, he started living with that woman and with whom he was planning to move to Australia. While he is planning to Australia, he is not at all thinking about his daughter Ruma who came back to Calcutta and lives with her uncle. Running behind lust and new opportunities, here, Nitish emerges as the worst example of a husband and father.

Kavita Singha has not given much importance to the male characters in the novel *Charjan raji jubati* (Four Angry Young Women). Though, through the male characters in the novel, the author shows the different forms of patriarchy's power politics. There are two types of male characters in this novel. The first one is the fathers of the main female characters of the novel. One cannot consider or present them as responsible fathers. Bulan's father is one among them, who is portrayed as cruel and selfish. He didn't take any responsibility of his family, left his wife to suffer alone; therefore, his wife and children had to fight hard for their everyday livelihood. Like Bulan's father, Chuni's father is also not taking any responsibility of his family or daughter. He is living a life in his own terms. Suman's father leaves his wife when he attracted to another woman. The three father figures in the novel have adapted themselves to the non-ethical ways of the world.

The second type of male character is Biru and Nilu who lived for creating an equal world. Biru, Bulan's brother lived a life of a struggler. Portraying Biru, Kavita Singha shows the interest and enthusiasm of young generation towards the Naxal Movement of the time and at the same time the agony of the family who lost their sons or husbands in the course of their fight. Biru followed and believed in Naxal ideology. He was Suman's friend. He used to talk to her a lot about his dreams and conviction. But he died in the course of his fight. Nilu was Chuni's friend. She was fully herself only while with Nilu. Suman's friend Subir is another male character who is not come under those two types. Subir tried to rape Chuni. Suman had tried twice to punish Subir for this. However, eventually Suman asked Subir to marry Chuni. Being aware of his crime, in a guilt consciousness Subir accepted that proposal. If we closely examine the male characters in the novels of Kavita Singha, it is evident that she picked each of them from her surrounding and her personal experience as well. Without giving any special fabrics to them, she depicted the basic traits of men.

Many form of literature has always been a reproduction of its socio-cultural background. Therefore, the mainstream literature has reflected the patriarchal social structure of contemporary society especially in the nature of portraying male characters underline this feature of our society. In order to shake the foundations of this male biased society requires a radical reconstruction of the depiction of dominating male characters as superman. This is precisely, by depicting male characters; Kavita Singha tries to do in her literature. She has not given a hero status to her male characters; her men are weak but the power politics of the various sources of patriarchy make them strong, oppressors, and deceivers. Through these characters, she depicted the various agencies of patriarchy that disadvantage others because she could not accept the male tyranny in our society. She believed that patriarchal oppression and the politics of patriarchy, directly or indirectly, go deeper than economic oppression in the personal, domestic and social life of women. A close reading of these male characters can say that they are the by-product of the author's personal experiences. By depicting them, Kavita Singha throws light on the deep rooted nature of patriarchy in our society.

<sup>6</sup> Kavita Sinha, *Ekti kharap meyer galpo* (Bishwabani, Kolkata, 1976), p. 76.

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