

ASSORTED LIVES: A POSTFEMINIST READING OF *SHE WRITES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES*

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Abstract: Change is one thing constant and leaves nothing in its constant state of existence. Evolution is the natural law which makes irrevocable imprints on the historical scale. Society which is in its constant state of flux makes it difficult for its subjects to fathom its depths. The metamorphosed societal structure propels the cultural tendencies of people towards refinement. The impinging effect of these mutated cultural structures on the individuals and in turn its effect on the society at large becomes a necessary topic of discourse. The dichotomic disputes between male and female human species, has turned interminable by various feminist doctrines. It becomes a need of the hour to consider the change in the attitude of modern day women to study the health of the society. Women have made a progressive shift from feminism to post feminism; providing opportunities for every individual to voice. *She Writes*: a collection of short stories. The twelve short stories are bound to the limits of three specific themes. This paper intends to give a post feminist reading of the stories that are set against different cultural contexts with in India reasserting the space provided by post feminism for individuals to voice and choose. Women's cultural production is seen as central to consciousness raising and hence leading to social change.

Index Terms: *Feminism, Postfeminism, Equalism, Empowerment, Rework, Unique and Popular culture.*

The world with its constant change makes it indispensable for human species to escape its clutches, leaving the society in a constant state of flux. The transitions made in the traditional societal structures may not be perceived from discernible levels by its individuals. But the impinging effects of these transitions on the modern world are drastic. Women who have a conspicuous role to play are left adrift during cultural change. Literature strives to help those adrift in the change. The process of transition leading to change becomes a hellacious task for individuals to withstand. At times the magnitude of the flux may be high that it may transmute the societal superstructures. Any change even in terms of individuals will affect the society at large based on the intensity and impact factor of the change. Polarising changes in terms of gender will lead to a devastating stature of the society. Traditional feminism focuses on issues like equality of pay, right to vote, independence with pills etc. Modern times do not throw redundant issues against women to be addressed. Changing times have mutated the needs to be addressed. It makes feminism an obsolete phenomenon transmuting the previous waves of feminism into modern age feminism or fifth wave feminism or Postfeminist era. Such changing trends in the Indian cultural contexts are registered in the writings of young women writes in *She Writes: A Collection of Short Stories*.

As documented by *She Writes* the causative force behind change is 'Post feminism'. The transition from feminism to post feminism makes it complicated for people to decipher. Feminism which shook the world in three waves fighting for the cause of women on a collective scale has had a backlash in the contemporary context. But as Ann Brooks states in her work *Post feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*, post feminism is not against feminism, it's about feminism today (03). Feminism is a movement which is

constantly evolutionary in nature. As Ann Brooks points out in her work, feminism was, “Once seen, somewhat crudely, as an anti-feminist the term is now understood as a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism (01).

The prefix post in the word post feminism opens the possibility of change: implying a process of ongoing transformation and evolution. In the fast changing world the attitude of people towards changes keeps shifting whereby leading to the shift in the positions of the movements. The movements are updated with necessary additions and deletions or sometimes revamped from scratch to fit the need of the hour. Post feminism has led to another movement called Equalism. The equalists perceive feminism to be polarising people focussing much on the differences defining the world in terms of gender binary. People fail to focus on the similarities which are necessary if the world is in pursuit of equality. Feminism has succeeded in giving collective rights, highlighting the need for individual empowerment. As Angela McRobbie states: “By tropes of freedom and choice feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant” (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 11). Moreover feminist ideologies are contradictory when bound to certain limits. The core of feminist movement in the 1800s was to gain quality in terms of political, intellectual and economic spheres. But the contradiction arises when feminists want priority and privilege for being women along with equality.

Unlike feminism, post feminism concentrates on those issues which feminism failed to address like providing space for women to voice from marginalised, diasporic and colonised groups referring to it as women of colour feminism. Post feminism is very closely related to neo-liberal ideologies providing space for all those on the margins. As rightly pointed out in the article Post feminism in popular culture: A potential for critical resistance? “Post feminism is a new form of empowerment and independence, individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumer culture, fashion hybridism, humour, and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered fundamental for this contemporary feminism” (Adriaens Web). Human beings are to be identified as individuals in a cultured and educated society rather than being identified as a gendered species.

As documented by Angela McRobbie, “Popular culture appears to be engaging in a well-informed and even well intended response to feminism while perniciously undoing feminism” (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 11). Popular culture becomes an indispensable topic when post feminism is dealt with. Globally considering post feminism is being taught to kids. Disney Pictures has been instrumental in reflecting the trends of the society through its princesses in the movies. Disney princesses have made a giant leap from 1937 to modern times. The Disney princesses have crossed horizons during their travel from domestic sphere to liberated sphere. *Frozen* was screened in the year 2015 reaping an unimaginable turn over for Disney Pictures. Most of Disney’s princesses of recent times are free thinking, independent, taking destiny into their own hands, transforming society’s expectations. They do not succumb to circumstances and endure situations into which they are being thrown into. Post feminist ideology strongly asserts that a woman’s success or failure was not dependent on equal opportunities but on individual choice.

In Indian context these movements have varied spectrum of experiences because of the cultural differences. Unlike other European countries the inception of feminism as a movement holds flags for men and not women. Women were confined to domestic spheres that waited long for eminent leaders and writers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi and so on to fight for their emancipation. Hence feminism in India cannot be restrictively tagged as women’s issue. Moreover Indian laws those were framed to save women from being abused by the traditional patriarchal societies have started wrongly victimising men. Genuine complaints registered against the misuse of power and authority of patriarchal society is meagre. Laws and privileges which were enforced to save women from the clutches of the patriarchal society are being misused by women. The society has already shifted its position to a post feminist platform while confuting the obsolete feminist ideologies.

This paper titled “Assorted Lives: A Post feminist Reading of *She Writes: A Collection of short stories*”, depicts the status of women in the present day society. *She Writes* like an assorted box of chocolates fascinates the readers with varied registers and experiences of women. The book offers a break from the monotonous

range of stories of women by women. The stories, taken for study portrays the kaleidoscopic expressions of untold battles that women brave against in their day to day life. Though not addressed by people in forums, *She Writes* has addressed such untold, untouched grey shades of lives.

Of the twelve stories in this collection few stories paint monochromic canvas of lives. A monochromic canvas has single colour with different shades of the same colour making it challenging to decipher. The post feminist works are sensitizing the society at large to read such monochromic experiences of women. It snapshots the superimposed images of women in a new spectrum of light illuminating the different shades of same issues that are considered as clichéd expressions of women.

In May 2012, random house India, in association with MSN, had conducted a short story contest to hunt for twelve of India's finest women writers. The participants could choose from one of the following themes: Women in the city- 'Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn' - *Gone with the wind*, Growing up in India- *Experience is the name Every one gives to their mistakes*'- Oscar Wilde and The man in my life- Being with him made her feel as though her soul had escaped from the narrow confines of her island country into the vast, extravagant spaces of his the *God of small things*. The condition laid down was that the quotes given with each topic had to be incorporated somewhere into the story. Hundreds of entries poured in the judges had a difficult time picking the final ones that appear in this book.

The untold battles raged by protagonists in the short stories forms a collage of women's experiences and expressions. The female species with varied Indian cultural backgrounds are broken into tiny bits of glasses as in a kaleidoscope. Nevertheless they try to emanate the colours irrespective of the size into which they are shattered. Women have the capacity to restructure broken chords of life; but on one condition that an individual needs little hope to sustain and reflect the myriads of colours and expression. Few cultural agents who believe that cultural policing to be a duty assigned to them by divine entities and block the tiny streaks of sunshine from illuminating people's lives. It becomes unfair to expect people to grow and radiate in such environment.

Women underwent numerous struggles in every walk of their lives. Those which cannot be changed were endured by women. In the present scenario women are thrown open with umpteen opportunities. The present feminist phase promotes differences and encourages individuals to concentrate on their uniqueness. Predominant issues those which are ignored and swept under the carpet are brought to the limelight for discussion. Such grey areas that need attention are dealt in few stories.

Post feminism promotes an ideology that men and women are biologically, psychologically and emotionally different. Pushing this ideology further it culminates in individual difference with the same species. Women cannot be generalized and pinned down to a single focal point. There is a common ground that brings women together but there are unique features that differentiate one from another just like fingerprints. Their expressions may coincide at times but that cannot be used as a criterion to judge and generalize women.

The early part of the 1980s was when media began labelling teenage women and women in their twenties the 'Post feminist generation'. After twenty years, the term Post Feminism is still used to refer to young women, "Who are thought to benefit from the women's movement through expanded access to employment and education and new family arrangements but at the same time do not push for further political change", says Pamela Aronson. Post feminism is a highly debated topic since it implies that feminism is dead and because the equality it assumes is largely a myth in the Indian cultural context.

The protagonist Konika from "Other People's Lives" is a self made woman though she is perceived as a simple house wife by her husband. Men take the privilege of assuming themselves to be Mr. know all. Konika and Amit are newly wed Bengali couple who have come to Darjeeling for honeymoon. In the hotel room konika is exposed to hair dryer for the first time so she inquired husband about it's working for which he replied,

'What's the point anyway, Koni? You are not going to use one back home. Dry your hair as you do everyday,' he had suggested. Catching their images on the nearly wall-sized mirror on the other end of the bathroom- Amit with a towel draped around his slightly distended waist and herself unsure in her nightie- Monica had felt that stirring of guilt again. (*She Writes* 3)

The honeymoon Package is a gift from Amir's elder sister living in U.S. The writer had delved into the psychological self of a newly married woman. Sex as a topic is neglected by most in a country like India with so much cultural heritage: "Only guilt, no pleasure. The guilt of people who were out of place but suffered the discomfort anyway, because doing otherwise would irreversibly tag them as 'outsiders' (*She Writes* 3). An individual realizing and coming to terms with one's own sexuality is an important trait of post feminist thinking.

Konika and her husband stayed in the hotel for three days and two nights where she got acquainted with Rohini. When invited for dinner by Rohini, at one instance Konika loved the way she was did not feel bad about--- chillies. This act of hers triggered the bottled up feelings in praying, husband of Rohini whom Konika met at the hotel in Darjeeling:

This is what I miss most in England. When I emigrated first, and before Rohini joined me, I would be reduced to tears longing for green chillies during meals. I would satisfy myself with cell phone-wrapped frozen Mexican chillies bought from the supermarket and carry them around in my pockets. Though I have my own patch now in Scan thorpe, the habit had stayed on,' Pratik confessed in Bangla with tears streaming down a face that was glittering like the gem-like pods. (*She Writes* 13)

An external intrusion may influence other people's lives to a great extent. In this story it is a mutual influence. The evocate action of Pratik has encouraged Konika to assert her nature. "She never knew that absolute pity could be so refreshingly bland" (*She Writes* 13). Another trait of post feminist literature is that it provides space for marginalized section of the society. This story gives space for Indian diasporic community to express.

In the story "The Tourist" the protagonist Michele, an Anglo-Indian breed had come to pay a visit to India to fulfill to her old mother's wish. Her mother is busy meeting her old friends brushing their memories of old moments and reliving them psychologically. But for Michele her visit was monotonous till she met Saurav, at an ice-cream parlour near R.Hoogly the ungainly mass of yellow slowly navigated through the narrow Amherst street of worth Calcutta. As her yellow taxi approached the familiar looking bend on the road, Michale felt an unexpected peace enveloping her instead of her emotions spiraling into an uncontrollable rush like she had expected them to do. Michele was slowly falling in love with Saurav, who introduces himself as a medical student. Personal exchanges were turning intense with a visit by Michele to Saurav's home to meet his parents.

He is my second lover, she thought. Back in London for her friends felt she was almost a virgin, compared to their standards. An understanding descended upon her, 'I guess a part of me has always been Indian, unable to segregate the emotional from the physical. (*She Writes* 28)

She wished to stay back in India but her mother was busy packing things to have Indian for London.

She was suddenly hit by the realization of how much she wanted to become a part of Saurav's world, but his miserable city with its dirty roads and monstrous weather. She wanted to embrace what she had always turned away from, to discover a part of her she had strived to bury in every action of her life (*She Writes* 31)

Michele was forced to make a decision that would change the entire course of her life before she could leave for London. She decided to meet her Saurav at his house and waited long till a traditional Bengali woman of her age carrying a wailing baby in her arms as said by Saurav. Michele thought this woman to be his sister. She reports to Michele that; Saurav is a practicing doctor since the last three years, ever since he finished his MD. He also teaches at the NIIMS hospital. These revelations shocked her and she inquired if she was Saurav's sister and her reply shook her to death:

She was looking very carefully at Michele's face. She gave a nervous laugh before starting again, so Saurav has been talking to you about his family. Actually he did mention you once while talking to me on the phone. You see, I was with my parents for three months for the birth of my baby. You had a skin problem of some kind, he was saying. But you look fine now. (*She Writes* 35)

Michele victim of Saurav's lust is determined to find her way back to normalcy. She can rework her life and move forward but the most pitiable character is Saurav's wife. She takes pride in Saurav's role as a husband and as a doctor, without being aware of the fact that she is betrayed by him. Saurav's wife is a representative of most women in India who are unaware that they are being betrayed by their dedicated husbands. Sex is a biological thing for men but a psychological expression for women. Women should develop the conviction to start anew like Michele.

"Revelation" is a short story that portrays using magical realist elements the obsession caused by work pressure for women in the present times. The protagonist Gaia is deeply obsessed with dead winter tree in the subconscious self. Her boyfriend struck the chord on by gifting her a keychain with a picture of dead winter tree. He narrates an incident, earlier in their life to prove her obsession:

I remembered the winter trip we went on and how you followed every tree with your pesky camera and how morbidly you captured mainly the dead once. I couldn't understand why they fascinated you so. They didn't look that pretty either. Dead, Rotting, Lifeless. And yet, you had to be dragged away because you were off on your own for too long. (*She Writes* 43)

Women are looked down with contempt especially in matters concerned with business and politics. Men are ready to risk their reputations and money believing another man but not a woman as in the case of the story "Yokemates". Sudha the protagonist puts her foot sternly and makes a decision for her husband Vijay. Unlike Vijay she does not adhere to values but she is bent making the decision. Her act of decision making cannot be judged based on the consequences. Women are clear of making choices for themselves even if the decision leads to misfortune.

"Mantras of Love" is a deeply moving poignant love story that has crossed various barriers like religion, nationality and culture. Reality is just the opposite of what human fantasize. Deep philosophies of life are dealt in by the writer. During the unexpected times people may leave but individuals have to endure everything that comes their way. The protagonist chooses to live alone even after her husband's death. The choice of living in a family, wanting to have a family of one's own or living alone is appreciated. The traditional feminine way of life is also appreciated by post feminist ideologies. Whereas feminist ideologies forces a woman to go against her heart's desire. Physicality of human relationships travels into the horizon of spirituality.

In "A Tale of Destiny" Noyona did not care about Alok's first marriage and affair because she too had an first affair with Bijoy that she never bothered to think about it. But once Alok's relation with Anjali was revealed to Noyona she could not accept sharing her husband's love with another woman though she does not exist. The pathetic life of Anjali was destined to be taken by Alok's suspecting nature. Alok deserved most beautiful woman as his wife but Anjali deserved death in return for her extreme love. Since she loved him to a great extent she could not move away from him and decided to bid goodbye. Alok has never played his role as a husband. He failed to understand the love Anjali had for him and he also failed to realize the fact that Noyona was his responsibility. Being a man he had complicated the lives of two women. This story juxtaposes the decisions of two women of which one chooses death and other chooses life. The story does not travel between life and death but betwixt the choices two different women make who are destined to live the same life.

The remaining selection of stories in the book *She Writes* intends to sensitize the reader's response towards cliché ridden issues faced by the female species that are often neglected and ignored. At times women who voice for such causes are humiliated and men who support the cause of women are considered effeminate. Few hypocritically constructed prevalent ideologies prevent individuals from voicing for women. A monochromic painting will be painted using different shades of same colour. It needs great effort to differentiate colours to completely experience the art. Issues that have become clichéd and those which the society has taken it for granted because these issues have increased in a drastic manner. Issue may be common but the repercussion and intensity of the issues are dealt in few stories and this chapter will explicate these stories.

"Winds of Indifference" captures the lives of those who are in a transition phase. Urbanisation is at its peak and people are still moving towards cities from these villages. The story juxtaposes village and city environment, and the attitude of people living in village and city. Education and the exposure influence human decisions. The protagonist of this story Ketki wishes to become a doctor and moves to the city to pursue her career. Slowly her

decisions influenced her sister and brother. But she paid a huge price during the process of achieving her dreams. The price was their family reputation especially her father Sarasvati Prasad's reputation since he was the only school headmaster in the village. Her father was considered effeminate by his peer group in the village has somehow managed and risen to the status of a school headmaster. Ketki achieves her ambition but failed in her pursuit of search for a companion of her choice. Ketki consider those villagers who gossip to be well frogs. The eaves dropping winds carried her tale to every village. When her sister gets married to a groom of her choice Ketki and her father were ostracized by the villagers. Ketki convinced her father to move to the city. He was not satisfied with his life in the city:

Doesn't the smog stifle you? He inquired one day.

But papa, the smog is thick with possibilities and the winds whisper of opportunities.' Doesn't the noise deafen you?

For Ketki, the noise drowned out persistent rumours. The honking makes it impossible for pesky neighbours, if any, to eavesdrop. Rootless in the city Ketki felt liberated from the prejudice while Sarasvati felt uprooted from tradition .he was so rooted in tradition, he felt he could not run. (*She Writes* 95)

Meanwhile the village wanted its headmaster and they were ready to accept him if he disowned his daughters. In spite of Ketki trying to convince her dad he left even without ever a word:

His empty bed at once shattered her heart and saved her soul. Did the neatly-made bed represent a clean severing of blood ties? Was it a bloodless end to the tussle for Ketki's soul? (*She Writes* 96)

The story that juxtaposes lives of two women with traditional and modern upbringing is "Spaces". Space is an important concept in the modern globalized world. The more, technology tries to bridge the space between people, the more it builds walls becoming a barrier for even mundane conversations. Kausalya is a woman with traditional and Trishna is a girl with modern upbringing. Kausalya is not exposed much to the world and its reality whereas Trishna is forced by her parents to purse her MBA from London. Kausalya's marital life gave her all worldly comforts but failed to give her a companion for life who would respect her sentimental attachments to her parents, home and garden. She dreamt of getting married, about the person to whom she would be married to. She was inter pelleted into a mere object which naturally got her attached to a broker Natarajan. This decision of her's cannot be taken as a demoralising one because the circumstances into which she was thrown should also be considered before judging her. She had decided to elope with him because he appealed to the emotional self of Kausalya. Fortunately she was saved during the last minute and this experience of Kausalya helped Trishana in gaining clarity regarding the decision she has to make that would change the rest of her life. It is good to be uprooted, to gain experience through mistakes rather than to be rooted safe without any development:

Mistake? Perhaps not. Experience, yes. Life, definitely. She of all people knew how difficult it was to uproot a plant. But she knew that it could be replanted, rejuvenated and rebirthed_ giving of itself to a newer world, budding with a beauty that it had never know it had. (*She Writes* 130)

Deshmuk Aji, the protagonist of the short story "White Chilly". The story is entitled after this nickname of the protagonist. She stands as a representative of all old age parents. She has braved all storms that life threw her into old age without her companion and no soul to take care of her. The greatest philosophy of life becomes clear for people when they become old. All things will pass away and the race that people indulge in for the worldly life will mean nothing at some point. As a working woman she had tried her best to balance her role as a mother and a light too. Since she understood that education has the power to change life insisted on giving good education for all her children. She was forced to earn extra for her children education but during her old age she regrets of all that she had done and those that did not do:

I have made many, she said bitterly. ; I Should Have Been More Selfish and not allowed all my children to settled abroad. I should have taken better care of my husband so that he would have still been here with me today. If my children were not prepared to comeback, I should have

insisted on them doing so or us going and living with one of them... oh so many mistakes that I regret and somehow they seem to dwarf all my achievements. (*She Writes* 143)

Deshmuk Aji says that even if her children were informed about their mother's condition they would bicker amongst themselves as to who should take up the responsibility. She had great relief after confessing it all to the narrator this relief had removed all the entanglements the white chilly had and made her reliable that there was nothing any reason for her to continue her existence on his earth. The narrator juxtaposes and justifies both the generation. But practical, logic ruled decisions will never become an answer to emotional entanglements. The story ends with an open note portraying the pain and end of a mother who had swirled all through her life. The younger generations have to make decisions well concern for their parents and it also cautions all parents who are hearing this phase of life. The protagonist could have stayed with her children but she chose to live an independent life and to live under the mercy of her children.

"Mirage" is a story that juxtaposes discrepancies in city life and also portrays stories of two couple in parallel manner. Karobi's obsession for Rabindra slowly turned towards the nation and society. Her portrait changed making his change in her evident. The selfish move made by Rabindra has victimized an innocent as the murdered happy, peaceful, normal life, has become a mirage for everyone in this story. Innocent women whose lives are dependant of their near are the real victims of their grave mistakes.

"A Boston Brahmin" deals with an issue that is very pertinent for the younger brides of twenty first century. Rina was living in a make believe world that was completely ruled by her husband Karan. This story reminds the readers of *Doll's House* by Ibsen where women are treated with much contempt and humiliated. Women are forced to act innocent for their men to feel superior and intelligent. Once Rina's found her saris were sticking from the box which she stored them irritated her to a great extent. Initially Karan was annoyed by looking at the sari mess but later he pleaded Rina not to take this serious. Rina was too ignorant and innocent that she is not smell anything strange. That night when she received a call from her husband who was under police custody, she learnt certain things about her that changed her attitude towards him. She found her husband dressed like a girl at the police station. Instead of becoming furious she laughed out loud which annoyed Karan. But Karan has put himself into a situation that Rina reigned dominance over him. After they reached home for the first time ever Karan prepared tea. After learning Karan's problem Rina responded in an unimaginable manner.

Frankly my dear, she said,

I don't give a damn. I would have helped you pick out a sari, if you'd asked. Let me know when you want to do it again. At least one of us should be using them (*She Writes* 193)

The younger generation has learnt to accept each other's misgiving and flaws. By giving funny remarks she is trying to revert and subvert Karan's dominance but she does not demean him for his flaw. But if Karan had been in her position definitely he would have bloated the issue. The story points out the fact in an open manner that men are yet to change this attitude toward women.

"Conundrum" as the word suggests it is a problem that is difficult to deal with and could be arrived at a solution by guess work. It is an inference formed without proof or sufficient evidence. The story is between two women Shanta and Pramila who had been friends for years. The conflict arises between because of few reasons. Of which the foremost reason is poverty if Pramila had been economically self-sufficient things would have quite a different turn. The next reason is expectation. Women should learn to build a relationship with put any expectation. Both women expect each other to gratify their personal needs and desires. At times when in need they started using the others service. This eventually brought ominous environment into their relationship. Next reason was, they took each other for granted. This would naturally bring a breach into any relationship. Friendship has to cross certain silly ideas like economy, status and power. Pramila's relationship with the professor was quite different because she accepted the professor to be superior. She never expected things from her rather she worked for everything that she deserved. The professor being an educated woman treated Pramila as an individual with due respect irrespective of her poverty and her status as a maid.

Shanta should have had much understanding about her friend's family and situation. Instead she took advantages of her poverty and took her for granted. Even a morsel of food given for free of cost would bring a loss for Pramila but Shanta expected her to serve the entire family for free. Pramila decided not to do it because

she could not afford for it and this enraged Shanta. Eventually she ended up humiliating Pramila to a great extent. She did not stop with insults but falsely accused Pramila of stealing Shanta's gold chain.

Pramila though not economically sound could not bear such false accusations which would spoil her honour. Latter things are left for the readers to guess through a movie that Pramila is watching at professor's house which is added to an announcement made by Shanta's daughter in law Madhuri that Shanta was dead. Hearing this Pramila was indifferent giving clues for readers of the happenings.

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