



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Rise of New Women: A Critical Study of The Plays “The Swing of Desire” And “Listen Shefali”

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Abstract

Gender representation in Indian Literature in Translation holds perennial place as it outrageously delineates rich, complex and contentious arguments that exist among men and women in terms of political, social, ideological, or cultural implications. Down the ages, the place of women in any given society is highly disputable and questionable. The male dominated social discourse of 'Gender' has made the life and conduct of women miserable, pathetic and condemnable. Particularly the tradition-bound, rigid and orthodox Indian society which treat women as its commodity, imposing its self-fabricated codes and conduct on her. After the layers of generations, the gender exploitation and discrimination though has been diminished to certain extent, the ill-treatment of women still persists. The concept 'New Woman' which emerged in the West in the early 20th century witnessed the kindle of undauntedness in women. She courageously unveils and challenges the treacherous web of patriarchy where all women are trapped and suffocated. The current paper deals with this dimension of New Woman in the selected Indian Plays in English translation; Mamata Sagar's "The Swing of Desire" and Kusum Kumar's "Listen Shefali". The protagonists Manasa and Shefali represent the fierce, feminine individuals who dauntlessly question the disdainful patriarchy and fought for their self-esteem and self-identity.

Key Words: *Patriarchy, Gender Inequality, New Woman, Resistance, Assertive Feminism*

Introduction

The establishment of Indian women writing in India have paved the way for formation and accumulation of Writers which solely dealt with the teams regarding gender inequality, haghuty patriarchy, heinous discrimination women face in social cultural the domain, the observation and resistance of new gen woman. Indian women writers begin to explore various literary forms to unveil the hidden faces of patriarchy and multi-facets of gender exploitation. In order to enter into the mainstream writing, these women writers begin to write either in English

or their works got translated from regional writing into English language with view of reaching the larger quantity of audience. The current plays "The Swing of Desire" is written by regional Kannada language writer Mamata Sagar and "Listen Shefali" is written by Kusum Kumar, Hindi language writer. Both these plays were translated into English language and published in "Staging Resistance", plays by Women in Translation which is edited by Tutun Mukherjee. Mamata Sagar and Kusum Kumar created the protagonists Manasa and Shefali who effortlessly align with the emergence of New Women in Indian context.

These protagonists seem to be the very epitome of New Women, a Western breed that has made its first appearance in Indian Literature during the second half of twentieth century. This New Woman is self-assured and ambitious. She was also invariably, unashamedly, fearlessly, uncompromisingly conscious about her individuality, dignity and her independent identity that will not rely on any man whether he was connected to by birth, by marital ties or by virtue of emotional ties. At the very outset, the protagonists and their creators appear to be the New Women to the very core and hence are credited with the pioneer of the tradition of New Women writing in the English language in India.

The protagonist Manasa in the play "The Swing of Desire" symbolizes the emergence of New Women in Indian context. She is the skillful aspiring dancer who wishes to flourish her career in dancing and carve her own identity. As Susan Rosowski hits the nail on the head when she says, "...for a woman, (acquiring and deciding) an art of living is difficult or impossible. It is an awakening to the limitations" (Rosowski-150). Pratap -Manasa's husband- turns out to be the biggest obstacle for Manasa who attempts to cease her from making her own decisions against his supreme masculine wish. Pratap- shielding under the institution of marriage- wishes to dominate her career, exploits her physically and emotionally. He viewed her body as mere means of fulfilling his manly desire and lust. Manasa outbursts saying, "My body has become rotten this six years as an object of your lust. You condemned me to be merely child bearing machine for you. You stifled my art. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" (The Swing of Desire- 234). In order to cease her career, Pratap even used foul play-card of 'motherhood' to emotionally blackmail her.

Manasa grieves bitterly and even doubts her decision of marrying Pratap. She says, "Was it a mistake to have married Pratap? Was I the only one to quench his lust? Right from the beginning he loved me like a madman. Not my talent, not my success, only my body" (Ibid., 232). It is astonishing to see how many expect women to leave according to the rules of 'man-made manual' and violation of any these rules would question the whole existence of women. When Manasa resist to terminate her dream career for the sake of her family, Pratap rebukes and condemns her for choosing her career over the responsibility of family. He says, "What is your identity? Your self-respect? Is that what makes you forget the love strived children of yours? Tell me what kind of woman are you? What kind of mother?" (Ibid., 233). It is Ironic to see how the patriarchy questioned the very motherhood of Manasa just because she chosen her career. However, exhibiting the qualities of new women, Manasa retaliates saying, "Society, people, family.... You will make me sacrifice my creativity for your false Pride... You can't be

here people pleasing me, can you? That is why, however much you try to stop me, no matter what you do, I am ready to face anything for my art". (Ibid., 234).

Further Manasa take the fiercest turn. Out of three children bears, she divulges to Pratap that he was not a biological father to one of these three children. This one psychological blow from Pratap was more than enough to break Pratap into pieces. Manasa says, "Just one blow from me and he is now shattered... And to such an extent he hasn't recovered to this day". Manasa liberate herself from the treacherous trap of patriarchy by denouncing the emotional play-card of 'motherhood' and 'perfect wife'. Manasa waged emotional war on Pratap in order to seek revenge on him. She turned out to be triumphant choosing the path of career over family and Society. In the conclusive part of the play, Sister of Manasa speaks adeptly about the new-found image of Manasa. Sister says, "Manasa, you have won. You overcame all the obstacles that blocked your success. You have proved your worth as a woman, as an individual.I lost myself somewhere in the futile attempt to hold onto my husband and my family. I have left with nothing." (Ibid., 248)

Another play "Listen Shefali" by Kusum Kumar revolves around the central character Shefali who is the embedment of new woman. She is well educated, sensible, assertive and self-esteemed woman. She has been born into untouchable family and experienced all sort of a heinous treatment meted out on her by caste-ridden society. However, through education she has made her own refined identity. Over the course of time, Shefali fell in love with upper- caste man Bakul. There is a blooming love and respect between each of them. Apparently Satyamev Dikshit who is in politics wish to get his son married to Shefali which would otherwise be the happy news for the couple. But the fate turns out to be bitter for Shefali. Self-dignified and self-assured as she was, she sniffed the foul political purpose hid behind his approval for this marriage; She says, "His father must be saying that he is doing me a big favor. Out of sheer pity, he has accepted this marriage.....Both father and son wants to announce to the world that they have contributed towards the upliftment of Harijan girl. They want recognition on this basis. I will merely be a means for their self-advertisement" ("Listen Shefali"- 209). She was well aware with this foul game and even confronted her mother who kept persuading her for accepting the marriage proposal initiated by Bakul's father.

Shefali's mother was agitated over the cold response given by Shefali. She was happy with the fact that upper-caste, socially and economically well-settled Bakul and his father came to the pavement of their lower caste home and put the proposal of marriage. But, there is the stark distinction between the perspectives of this mother-daughter duo; perception crisis of two generations. While mother succumbed to the patriarchy and confined herself to the man-made boundary, the daughter of this very mother stood binary opposite in terms of denouncing and questioning this masculine supremacy. Shefali was rather content in rejecting the love of her life than projecting herself as the pitiable creature in the eyes of society. Apparently her mother couldn't figure out Shefali's 'feminist logic' and grieves at her "Shefali, you are not destined to be happy. You are victim of your pride. You will take your pride to your grave.....Why you detest the idea of marrying and settling down to a happy life, I can never understand."(Ibid.,210)

Shefali reminds us of Mary Anne Ferguson's views about the stereotypes regarding the image of women in society, she says, "A person who deliberately departs from a socially approved stereotype by playing a new role, developing a new style, usually must pay heavy cost". (Ferguson,4). The cost that Shefali has to pay is bi-fold here. She has to reject her four-year long love, swirl into the life of grief and sadness. The another most heart-piercing cost she has to pay is being the scapegoat of Satyamev's another venomous plot that he has hatched against Shefali. Bakul's father convinced Shefali's mother to get her another daughter Kiran married to Bakul. Satyamev wants to cater votes for his election victory through highlighting himself by getting his son married to lower caste woman, thus bringing light in the life of downtrodden woman. Shefali's mother wants any one of her daughter to get settled into this prestigious family. These two sides are benefitted in on or other way, the only loss will be to Shefali for choosing her own path. Shefali-at the end- has to witness the marriage between her comrade Bakul and her daughter Kiran. Though she was heart-broken, she justified her stance for preserving her self-esteem and self-identity. Shefali emerges to be the true symbol of New Woman who broke the age-old shell of 'passive femininity' and instigated the 'assertive femininity'.

Mamata Sagar's Manasa and Kusum Kumar's Shefali are the truest embodiment of New Women in Indian context. Both were swirling around the tornado of patriarchy, being churned under the code and conduct of male-dominated society. What made them distinguished is their sheer protest against callous patriarchal set-up and the web they hatched to trap women and make them victims. These two protagonists proved to be fierce and valour warriors who fearlessly fought against the evils that were demeaning their very existence. They both don't want to fit into the mirage of men-made portrait of 'Perfect woman' or 'Perfect wife' by compromising with their self-esteem and identity. They created their own world where they themselves are the dictators of their own life, not giving an inch of space for the intervention of men.

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