

Jai Nimbkar's Feminist Approach with Reference to Her Select Short Stories

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Abstract: Jai Nimbkar is a modern Indian woman writer who shows an incipient or pronounced feministic streak in portraying women characters which reflects her individual stance on man-woman relationship. She vociferously presents her argument that woman has been given a demeaning position in this patriarchal society. Her protagonists are vibrant and sometimes radical. These features are clearly evident in the protagonists of her short stories "The Childless One", "Turning Points", "The Huntress", and "Distorted Heaven" from her collection of short stories *The Phantom Bird*. While it is permissible for men to ignore social decorum and prudish notions of morality, then, why is a woman always expected to restrict herself only to certain areas of life? The writer explores the themes that depict the modern woman's right to reject the life prescribed by a male-dominated, anti-individual society.

Key words: dehumanize, victimize, career, opportunity, tradition, aggressive

Introduction

Jai Nimbkar is a creative short story writer with her own definite views on the art. She uses the trivia of daily occasions to bring realism in her short stories. She has been writing without ceremony, about the human predicament, playing out the lives of ordinary people – from lower middle class and labour class – who we might encounter on the streets, bringing into sharp focus the meaning of life itself. Her easy and sharp observations of life in middle – class Indian family, her ability to capture the subtle nuances of interpersonal relationships and to breathe life into her characters so that they remain rooted in the social reality around them are her assets.

Indian feminism focusses more on defending equal social rights to women. Their representation is for gender equality. Jai Nimbkar sets her protagonists into a journey in search of their autonomous selves, for self-exploration in order to arrive at a definition of the 'self' and self-recognition. According to G.S.Balarama Gupta, the chief thematic concerns in her stories are:

Woman's sense of anguish and alienation that results from her acute consciousness of man's perfidy and her struggle to achieve emancipation from traditional constraints and orthodox morality and achieve a conscious identity for herself. (Gupta 1993, 41)

The patriarchal system has established certain norms or practices for women over centuries through the ideological, biological, sociological, anthropological as well as other justifications to control women and to make them stay subordinate. Only a submissive woman is regarded as rational and whole. The moral remains that docility in a woman leads to happiness for all and that upsetting the domestic order may lead to disrupting social and cosmic order. Woman in her place is a cornerstone of society. Her role is to save humanity through submission. "Indian society continues to threaten women whose supposed "failure" makes them punishable. The punishment they suffer may take the form of isolation, frustration, self-questioning and resignation". (Riemenschneider 1985, 315)

Radha in “The Childless One” raises her voice against the system. Her mother-in-law represents the domineering patriarchal authority that has virtually succeeded in dehumanizing women in various ways right from the beginning. In spite of her repeated protests, Radha is left under the care of her wily mother-in-law, by her husband, Sripati, during her supposed pregnancy. As her marriage to Sripati had taken place against the wishes of his mother, Radha knows very well that her heartless mother-in-law would not receive her properly. But Radha has no other way but to go to the mother-in-law.

As Radha’s delivery gets delayed, her swollen abdomen becomes a “focus of pain and fear and shame” (Nimbkar 1993, 184) and she manages to avoid everyone but not her mother-in-law who remarks insinuatingly: “God knows what monster child is growing inside her” (Nimbkar 1993, 183). Finally the doctor diagnoses her swollen abdomen to be a tumour and Radha undergoes the surgery for its removal. The mother-in-law plans to get her son remarried as she feels Radha is of no more use to her son. When Sripati also is quite willing to remarry, Radha realizes: “I’ve got nobody now. I’ve only got myself” (Nimbkar 1993, 188). Worried about her life, she leaves her mother-in-law’s house and finds work as a farm labourer. For others she becomes something of a joke, they call her ‘vedi’, a mad woman and bait her to fill an empty hour. Very soon Radha grows tired of being used for a few laughs. “She learned to keep herself to herself. Life assumed a fairly placid routine and she began to live without hatred and bitterness as her constant companions” (Nimbkar 1993, 189).

Radha’s suffering is akin to the suffering of Guleri in Amrita Pritam’s Punjabi story translated into English by Khushwanth Singh, “The Stench of Kerosene”. Guleri after learning about the second marriage of her husband, unable to face the system of patriarchal authority, commits suicide, whereas Radha combats and questions the institution. She revolts against male dominance and demands for a more rational viewing of things by questioning her husband: “How many times will you marry before you know that you will never have any children . . . All you were ever fit to father was a lump of flesh . . . A child with neither head nor limbs” (Nimbkar 1993, 191). She shows him a small dirty child with rickety legs and calls him her son and again questions: “What can a woman do when her husband isn’t man enough to protect her from wolves?” Thus Radha questions the very male hood, which treats woman as an item of lust. Through her, Jai Nimbkar makes it clear that women also have an equal right to be as ruthless as they want.

The new female model in Radha crystalizes itself as she seems to be a synthesis of female values although it is still in its underdeveloped stage. But the race of the power woman is already born: the women who have watched most carefully and deserved and won the opportunity to effect this change. (Murali Ganam 1985, 84)

Woman is easily caught in the meshes of intrigue, and social constraints of all kinds and her subservience to man gives her no freedom of action on her own. Yet she endures everything by the sheer power of her womanliness – her gifts of beauty, love, patience, compassion, and goodness.

The protagonist of “Turning Points” gets an opportunity to present her paper in New York and also to work there for six months as a guest lecturer. But she rejects the offer for the sake of her 23 year-old son, a medico. After the death of her husband she was completely devoted to her precious son, Bichu, who was then a small child. Her senior colleague, Jagdeesh proposed to marry her years ago, but she had to make a choice and the choice clearly was in Bichu’s favour, fearing Jagdeesh may not be the sort of father Bichu needed. He still cares for her so deeply that he takes as much of the burden of administrative work off her shoulders as he could. She too loves him in “a muted non-urgent way” (Nimbkar 1993, 124).

However, Jagdeesh advises her not to lose the opportunity, but take time and decide over her leaving. The same day, during dinner, Bichu says that he and his girlfriend, Sarita want to get married as soon as possible. His mother’s advice to postpone the marriage till the completion of his education is kept aside: “What’s the point in waiting once we have decided to marry?” (Nimbkar 1993, 129) She had never expected her son so

irresponsible and expecting his mother to support both of them, perhaps for many more years to come. She wishes to convince him but realizes that it is not going to fit in with the strategy she must follow if she wants to save herself a small space in his life:

“This devious sparring had never been part of our relationship, and I hated Sarita for making it necessary. I recoiled at the prospect of working for them and keeping house for them and hating every minute of it and not able to show it” (Nimbkar 1993, 129-130).

She simply could not let herself face the worst in herself. So the only way to prevent it was by running away. So she immediately takes the decision and tells Bichu that she would not be present at the time of their wedding only to realize that her absence would not really matter to him. The next day she confirms to Jagdeesh that she is very much prepared to go abroad. But unexpectedly she learns that Jagdeesh also is leaving for the same place. Jagdeesh worries if she would change her decision after learning this. But now there is no reason for her to stop: “For the time being I had no right to hope, or let him hope, since my choice had not been governed by his needs”. Though it is primarily to run away from her selfish son, her acceptance to go along with Jagdeesh brings a hope to lead a new life with him. Once she had rejected Jagdeesh for the sake of her son. But now because of her son she gets closer to Jagdeesh paving the way to live the life for herself with the support of a person who cares for her. She takes a deliberate step to liberate herself from the shackles of traditional roles – the decision to turn a new leaf is the essential point.

The story, “The Huntress” is intensely fraught with feminist thought. The protagonist, Malavika or Vicky metaphorically yearns for communion with the other sex. As Vicky’s parents died when she was quite young, she has always lived with her sister, Arati and her husband, who are the only parents she has known. After having been a student of politics and psychology, she grows up into an individualistic person and wishes to be alone and hates when “treated like a little girl whose feelings are make - believe” (Nimbkar 1993, 94).

During a party, Vicky is introduced to Mr. Saha, a Member of Parliament, critic, novelist and journalist. At the very first instance, she takes him for a crummy type and feels his face out of a ghost story. But slowly she gets attracted towards his big and sort of sleepy looking strange eyes and his low, soft and very attractive voice. She finds him watching her and she begins to enjoy that. When she receives from him a compliment on her smile, she wishes she would have “spent a bit more time in front of the mirror” (Nimbkar 1993, 91). He even probes into her personal matters regarding her boy friend and reasons that her disappointment in love has brought her sadness. During dinner, his simple assertion – after entering into politics he is beginning to realize that a lot of criticism against politicians comes from personal dissatisfaction and not from any interest in public good – impresses Vicky a lot. Before leaving, Saha requests her to do the honour of dining with him the next day and she feels very delighted to do so.

Slowly Vicky starts taking pity on the man who was twice her age and enjoys herself more than she had expected. She realizes that she had not thought of her boyfriend, Vinod, during the next evening, in the company of Saha. Saha leaves her at home after shaking hands with her and she finds herself thinking that “the handshake probably meant more to him than a kiss to Vinod” (Nimbkar 1993, 95). When her sister comments that he might have fallen for her, Vicky simply rejects calling it “nonsense”.

Next day Vicky again gives him “the gift of another evening” (Nimbkar 1993, 96). She receives a fresh shock when she finds his skin with large white patches in the remorseless light of day. The concern in his voice wraps her in “a warm and secure cocoon.” She considers “what it would be like to be married to him” (Nimbkar 1993, 97), but immediately thinks: “It would be nice being worshipped by him. But it would become tiresome after a while. I’d never be able to be myself . . .”

Finally, the moment of proposal arrives and Saha proposes marriage with all hope: “In the few short hours I have spent with you, I have found reason for hope. You are a genuine and compassionate person and I have a great deal of regard for you.” He also asserts that he cannot offer her a lot of money but would make her happy. She feels pity for him and also anger for invoking that pity. To escape from the situation, she simply says that she has received the long awaited letter from Vinod that day.

That night, sleep eludes Vicky. Like mosquitoes, the extraordinarily quaint things Saha had said to her do not let her sleep. She feels disturbed: “Reason for hope. What a joke! Some men are really the limit. A girl is just friendly and they propose marriage. Twice my age, my god. And imagine living with that face for a lifetime.” (Nimbkar 1993, 98) She thinks of his strange soft eyes and suddenly feels angry for he has “no right to go and spoil everything”. Immediately, at midnight, she rings up to Saha and apologizes for her lying about the letter from Vinod. She begins to feel more and more gauche and says: “I – feel flattered that you want to marry me. But I am not your sort, you know. It would never work.” Saha consoles her: “There is nothing to forgive . . . A Lady has every right to say ‘no’ without offering excuses.” While saying so he sounds as though he was “explaining a basic fact to a child”. Vicky tiptoes back to bed and tries to sleep. Again she is not allowed to do so both by the mosquitoes and the thoughts about Saha. This time she decides to change her tactics. No doubt when Saha proposes for her hand, she withdraws.

It is like ignoring or keeping her away from the mosquitoes that perch on her body. But later she inwardly wants to have pleasure with Saha. It is exactly similar to her waiting for a mosquito to perch on her body. When a mosquito lands on her forearm she lets it sit there and grow fat. When it is “immobile in its satiety” (Nimbkar 1993, 99), she crushes it ‘gently’ until the blood spills out “in a bright red stain on her arm”. She looks at the stain with satisfaction and derives pleasure. This is akin to the trapping of Saha, who is ready to make amorous advances towards her. But suddenly she realizes that she has trapped the mosquito at the cost of her own blood and enters the world of vacuum, which is akin to her expression of sorrow. She may trap Saha but at the cost of her own self.

“Distorted Heaven” presents the beautiful, exquisitely slender, tall and graceful Sumitra who barter her marital life to get a name for her illegal, unborn child. Having been made pregnant by a man who worked for her father and unable to marry him as he is already married, Sumitra drags Manohar and herself into an agreement in the name of marriage. She makes use of his love with Aruna, the “daughter of a rehabilitated Devadasi” (Nimbkar 1993, 79) and entices him with the condition: “I’m not asking you to give up Aruna. If you marry me and give my child a name, I’ll leave you absolutely free to go on seeing her.” (Nimbkar 1993, 81) This clearly sounds “a preposterous bargain with a man she didn’t even know.” (Nimbkar 1993, 83)

Sumitra also understands that Manohar is ambitious, otherwise, he would have defied his family and married Aruna long ago:

“I can’t see you giving up your whole life for her. You are not the type and you were realistic enough to realize that. Fact that you haven’t married her all these days is proof enough of what I am saying. . . I would be much more of an asset to you as a wife than she can be” (Nimbkar 1993, 82).

She also takes the advantage of Aruna’s family background: “If you agree, she has no choice. Being what she is, such an arrangement shouldn’t seem strange to her.” Being left with no other option, Manohar finally accepts and lays the condition: “The child must be brought up without the knowledge that I am not its real father.” (Nimbkar 1993, 83)

After marriage Sumitra is at first afraid that Manohar may hate “the child that had forced him to marry the mother” (Nimbkar 1993, 84), but later feels glad to find that he is very fond of her daughter, Neelam. After living for twenty years as his wife, “only in name” (Nimbkar 1993, 85), she realizes what she has lost in her life

for which she cannot blame anyone but herself. She alone is the root cause of the consequences, so she has to bear the brunt of it. And Manohar never lets her forget it. She decides to give a meaning to her married life and asks Manohar to give up Aruna: “Don’t you think twenty years is long enough for us to have kept this ridiculous bargain?” Manohar replies that their bargain never had a time limit and moreover she does not have any right to ask him anything. Sumitra asks him to consider a time limit at least now:

“I thought you are kind. I came to you because I was afraid of the society’s condemnation. But you have condemned me to a fate worse than any I could have imagined. Don’t you think two decades of punishment is enough for any crime?”

But Manohar does not accept that he has punished her: “I have given your child a name. I have given you security, a home, status – everything you could ask for.” Certainly she is not satisfied with what he has given, for she has received everything “except the essentials”. She recalls how helpless she was before the marriage:

“I was not in a position to ask for more. I was young, inexperienced, and desperate. I had no bargaining power. I had to accept the minimum. I never thought that you would hold me rigidly to my promise for so long”.

However, she had thought that time would change everything and would bring happiness to her: “I thought we could be happy together in spite of having started out wrong. We could have been, if you had given us a chance. But you refused to. You have been cruel and selfish”. Manohar feels “an impersonal kind of pity for her”, nothing more, and reminds her not to forget about Aruna: “You are forgetting that there is a third person involved in this . . . She could have had a life of her own. She gave up everything for my sake.”

Sumitra tries to convince him that Aruna has had a good life for twenty years: “Isn’t that a sufficient reward for her great and noble sacrifice?” She requests him to end his relation with Aruna by asking her to go away from him for she wanted a few years of his life. He is shocked at her ingratitude and denies doing so.

Finally, Sumitra uses her only weapon: “. . . here’s only one thing left for me to do. I am going to tell Neelam about her real father. You hold all the cards. I’ve nothing to punish you with except Neelam”. Well manipulated, Manohar feels himself helpless, breaks out in a sweat and requests for time to think about it. She has already given him twenty years and now she can give not more than one week. He is horrified at this “blackmail” and is mystified at her sudden decision that she could no longer “put up with something she had accepted with equanimity and . . . grace. . .” (Nimbkar 1993, 86)

Manohar, left with no option, goes to Aruna that evening to make the final decision. He feels that history was repeating itself. But he is not sure any longer about who was at “the receiving end of life”. When he discloses the matter, Aruna is not surprised and receives it stoically as though she knew that it would be “the inevitable end.” (Nimbkar 1993, 87) Time had not been as kind to her as it had been to Sumitra. In contrast to Sumitra who still looks virginal, Aruna looks matronly, heavy, and her dark complexion devoid of its youthful freshness. Her once delicate face has become fleshy and a veil of sadness has already settled on it. She understands that Manohar has already decided and so “there is no point in dragging on an empty relationship” (Nimbkar 1993, 88) between them unless it is “based on love and trust”.

After this when Manohar tries to cross the road to reach his car he meets with an accident and dies thus destroying all the hopes of Sumitra. Unfortunately, time has been cruel towards her and ‘that happiness’ she has been waiting for remains a mirage in her life.

Aggressive women who succeed in male spheres are considered unfeminine and unnatural. When women are considered intelligent, their kind of intelligence, their mysterious intuition, is equated with flightiness and fuzzy thinking . . . Possessiveness in men is associated with protectiveness and

responsibility, in women with narrowness and selfishness; self sacrifice in men is marveled at, taken for granted in women. (Ferguson 1977, 7)

Women are expected to be highly materialistic and pious. Either frigidity or lust in a woman is a negative characteristic because the male appetite is the norm. Such conflicts among the different images of women have made them confused about their own identity.

Conclusion

Jai Nimbkar's vision is fundamentally affirmative. The world of suffering and struggling householders is overarched by a transcendent joyousness, available to whoever is willing to experience it. In fact, the process of disillusionment never ends; there is always further to go. The world of senses is far too dull to give up. The shedding of illusions may be a painful process, but it is a good thing as it discloses the truth. Emotional options for Nimbkar's women are hedged with severe limitations, yet they persist in the quest for feeling, searching to know and be known. As J.M. Waghmare in his Foreword writes:

Jai Nimbkar's fiction is characterized by feminism no doubt. But the world of her female characters ultimately ends not with a bang, but a whimper. The cultural condition of Indian women is, by and large, responsible for this pathetic situation. (Ratnam 1999, 13)

In fact, Jai Nimbkar's vision of woman's predicament is sharper and deeper than that of other women writers. Instead of invariably believing in compromise and relapsing into tame domesticity for the sake of security and comfort, Jai Nimbkar's protagonists register their protest in varying degrees of intensity. They want to exercise their freedom, make a choice and refuse to conform or compromise.

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