



Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LILJ)

Vol.4 / NO.1 /Spring 2014

Feminism: Frailty Thy Name is Not Woman

Rita Garg

Abstract:

Woman since ages is marginalized and taken as a weak dependent being while the energies are there to fight irreversible situations. The paper throws a glance on various critics opinions on feminism and then applies those to An Abbreviated Child, written by self. Here the protagonist, Radha is sold thrice and rehabilitated five times but she reinstates self and also the other misery-stricken labourer and orphans. Chandrima, an orphan proves a better educated fighter for the cause of all. To the extent that like, Radha she gives up all the comforts in life.

In the novel, a term 'genderex' is coined to express that woman is made to not only biologically but also socially ad this is so close that it becomes difficult to demarcate in any manner.

To get over unconfined, woman moves out of the attic. To seek status, with the help of others is not the motive here. This is also a reading to show that woman wants a compatibility of man woman relationship. As the Indian tradition goes, here woman as a crusader but along the lines of Indian beliefs.

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LILJ) ISSN 2249-4529, Vol.4/ NO.1/Spring 2014

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-4no-1spring-2014/>

© www.pintersociety.com

This gives a full picture of social reconstruction where the possibility of bringing civilization to employment on an island is also presumed.

KEY WORDS- *Feminism Woman Incurrigible 'Genderex' Defeated*

An Abbreviated Child by Rita Garg raises many questions related to feminism. According to Michael Ryan, “Feminism asks why women have played a subordinate role to men in human societies. It is concerned with how women's lives have changed throughout history, and it asks what about women's experience is different from men's, either as a result of an essential ontological or psychological difference or as a result of historical imprinting or social construction” (101). These problems are answered also in the mentioned novel. Besides, the charge 'Frailty thy name is woman' is also discussed at length. Soshana Felman raises an age old charge against woman: “Is it by chance that hysteria (significantly derived, as is well-known, from the Greek word for 'uterus') was originally conceived as an exclusively female complaint” (840). It implies that mental health is associated with man but the contradiction of this is vehement in the novel, *An Abbreviated Child*. Here, woman is mother of her children, nurse of others progeny, well-wisher of society, saviour of values and has a future vision also.

Simone de Beauvoir's point of view that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ is well delineated in this novel, but by way of putting up a courageous face, woman characters are utilizing utmost energy to improve upon the conditions laid for them, as well as of society.

The aspects of feminism are taken up at large and in many hues. Even the down-trodden can prove efficient torch bearers, is the projection of this novel. Here are two categories of the down-trodden women—those who have the motive of self-development and of those who self-willingly carry the burden of others as well. A typical feature of the novel is that there is no dearth of struggle. To be brought in extremely adverse circumstances and then work on the lines of helping others is a rare gem to decorate one's virtues. As per a very appropriate demand of feminists, the right to education has much dominating role to play in the novel. In the novel, repeatedly it is ascertained that there remains every possibility of woman empowerment in

Feminism: Frailty Thy Name is Not Woman

education. Besides, it is also expressed that not only woman but also the people around shall be benefitted out of it. Rather, the suffering of woman shown in the novel has the fundamental reason in poverty. An answer to this comes in the suffering woman's mental development. This is one factor that can play wonders.

The reason of woman's being a dependent diminishes with education. This is set well in the novel. This is not one novel where education has been given an upper hand but the vehemence and elaboration in this novel hammer the mind of the reader. The presentation is realistic and in a natural manner.

The central character of the novel, Radha, sold thrice and rehabilitated five times, ultimately reaches the orphanage of Mrs. Preet Rani. There she completes education up to M.A. level. Then she receives a proposal to marry a Minister Ji, a regular visitor to the orphanage. Radha has no reason to refuse. The purpose of this marriage on the part of Minister Ji is to disguise much undesirable in his life, particularly, those activities which are anti-nation. Sufficient to prove that after eight in the night, there are certain nooks and corners in the house where Radha cannot move. The whole day, she is a meaningful part of the day but once it is late then her movement has to be restricted. With the passage of time, she realizes much. During the day time, she helps her husband in many ways but the spouse lacks faith in her. All the reservations, in addition to a lack of understanding, provoke Radha to leave the establishment. No doubt, facing a hell of crudities, Radha reaches that juncture in life which would have given a torpedo like success or satisfaction. The submersion in the house of Minister Ji is not her frame of mind and she rejects verbose hammerings and comments on that: "I am, what I am. You are a history-maker, I am a history-sufferer. My ultimate object is devotion to work without your type of calculations, diplomacies, controversies, double talks, pretentious faces, schizophrenic mind, making faces of good and evil type in accordance with the picture of self to be shown to every new being. You devilish monster..." (9).

After one such tiff, she demands to be left alone with her struggle as she wishes to be a 'real good living human being struggling alone' (10). Here she develops a feeling of sincerity to Chhotu, a boy servant in the house. While she annihilates any repulsive doing and prefers to

leave the house of her husband like a 'pixie', she goes much frightened and hidden although that was not necessary because no one is bothered about the departure of the destitute along with this idealistic woman. No doubt, the world is not deprived of such misery - stricken overflowing crowd making ones. As an educated but deprived person, she knows what it is to work hard.

Later on, she fights for one and all and such inmates of the orphanage as Chandrima, Chhotu or Roderigo who inscribe the saga of Radha's ideals. In the orphanage, every inmate has a heart rendering tale to tell. The undiminished courage of hers leaves the reader wonder-struck as the selling scenes of hers really tell upon the reader. Particularly, the second selling when she was drugged, fully made up, dressed up, legs tied to two bamboos hinged between two trees in the scorching heat of June.

As is generally found, poverty-stricken women would not be able to grow out of unfulfilled basic needs. This sect would not know where to spread the area. The calamities remain as wide as the darkness. Nonetheless, it is surprising to see Radha who is first sold along with mother and that too by father. They suffer under the person who is bound to drinks and other ills. Radha and her mother were the bread earners but they were the suffocated ones, and the marginalized ones. Humiliation, psychological disturbances, sufficing to deaden for ever and hunger giving a particular sensation are the single root originated multiple bearings in life.

Another inmate of the orphanage, Chandrima, also proves much helpful there. She is moon like in appearance and also intelligent. Her devotion to education is endless. With the object to earn more for the cause of others, she declares: "The purpose of joining Alph University in the US is to complete PhD in Economics and return with competence to earn better" (48). As per desire, within six months, she is able to send money to the orphanage: "...the best day of life to fulfil utmost desire" (54). With education, she does not plan to be of use at the orphanage only. Her future vision explained to Roderigo, a fellow inmate to marry her, is: "Roderigo, suppose we increase the resources of our NGO and take up places like an island where lack of civilization cannot accommodate people other than labour. We teach there; establish institutions to learn harder and better. This also creates better employment for our higher stratum." (102)

Feminism: Frailty Thy Name is Not Woman

Chandrima is much avowed like Bhishma Pitamah to take care of one and all. For this, she gives up her growing friendship with Bon, a Canadian research scholar under the same research supervisor as she herself. One day, Bon expresses anxiety about the renal problem of his father nearing the point of kidney transplant.

As an aware being, the facts of medical tourism are not new to her. The condition of Bon's father who is used to drinks, makes Chandrima react: "While a rich drunkard buys a kidney, a poor drunkard sells his own or that of his child—an abbreviated child—as if the child is sure to face the surgery and do well with one kidney only—that too all through his life." (87)

Her struggle is much associated with the experiences of others. Keeping in view the lapses on the part of human beings, Chandrima apprehends that the cultural gaps between the rich and poor are only superficial in the sense that the poor have constraints and develop no culture and their second suffering is if an organ is required they have to sell; if entertainment is required, girls suffer their selling even. The rich have all the freedom to misuse. The dilemma of Bon's father reminds Chandrima of a chance meeting with a poor boy, occupied in an animal market, and his understanding of life: "Why do you talk of morals? Yes, I raped the girl at the age of thirteen. Your atmosphere is different. My ethics is strange. The whole day I stand in animal market. The ram is set right by me. I also fix ewe at the right place... .. There is nothing; the small tail is controlled by me sometimes. That's all." (100)

The boy tells further: "When the action takes place between ram and ewe so many people around would form a circle... .. you might perspire then... .. Our *haat* is a real world. When a girl is brought for sale see the eyes of buyers." (100)

Chandrima is more matured now and she understands better how an HIV patient, mental case, drunkard or leprosy patient is free to be a parent. With this mental struggle, she wants to be back in India. She also knows that reason and *deewangi'* (99) have to be differentiated. She wishes to be on the track of ideals but with a logical stand. Chandrima comments: "Sita was a *deewani* at the highest level to forgo palatial attraction twice and see what she achieved in life." (99)

Chandrima aspires to be a procurer of senses: *Deewangi* is a pinnacle, madness is a void; *deewangi* is surrender, madness is downfall; *deewangi* is creation, madness is destruction; *deewangi* is the last rite of funeral leading to God, but that act which does not reach even one's own self" (99). Chandrima is a woman performing many tasks and willing to work like a courageous helping woman and leading a family life as well. This is how Fiona Tolan opines with reference to essentialism debate: "... woman should be proud to be woman." (323)

Chandrima's struggle, without signs of sadness or fatigue, puts her in the order of a true fighter and the novelist wishes the same as is mentioned in the preface to the novel: "Wandering in the wilderness of woeful woods in life is to abbreviate self."

Here, Terry Eagleton's statement on mankind and culture is relevant: "Man and woman do not live by culture alone, the vast majority of them throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by it at all, and those few who are fortunate enough to live by it now are able to do so because of the labour of those who do not" (187). The theorist says further: "There is no document of culture which is not also a record of barbarism." (187)

Another significant woman character is Sonam, the daughter of a labour in Shivalik Hills. She studies up to B.A. level from a government college where education is free and the reading material is also made available. Thus enabled to fight miseries, she also gets satisfaction in life: "Then one day a princely boy came in the life of Sonam" (72). Another feather in her cap is to settle in life without the stigma of dowry as is a common practice, 'to sell or take dowry from the boy's side'". (66-67)

Sonam's aunt, Gauri, returns to her parents. On her arrival home, from the house of deceased husband, she expresses her agonies over there. Her mother comments: "Gauri, I wish you are 'The Last Sufferer'" (63). The implication being that education empowers in many ways and gives shelter to many like Sonam. Besides the government policy to spread education, individual's efforts are equally responsible. The growth of women also depends on the growth of nation—either letting women suffer or flourish. Among others, the poverty-stricken women from one family are Gauri, her mother and brother Kalia's wife. They work as labour. Gauri's mother was not able to take proper care of her son, Kalia. Rather when she used to labour at quarry, landslide hit area or a place like that; she would make Kaila lick opium to quieten him. Her

Feminism: Frailty Thy Name is Not Woman

constraints in life infuse negative virtues which destroy him. Kalia gets incapacitated and used to liquor. This concludes in his selling of Gauri for income tax free Rs. 20,000/-. The plight of Kalia is untimely death and Gauri is married to a man who has lost his wife as well as an ox. He spends on Gauri with the idea that she would serve both the purposes: “She was so young. Always busy with physical work, this duty, then that work, then this again as strong as an ox—as soft as a girl, as patient as a woman—the submersion of the genderex’. (45)

The term 'genderex' is coined in the novel to suggest how much she suffers at both the ends and faces excess of torture in life. It would be in the fitness of things to consider as to what Roger Webster says: “As with the class system, gender differences are socially constructed though usually presented as natural or normal. There is an important distinction to be made between sex and gender” (74).

No doubt, a general observation is there in society but the role of feminine nature diminishes when man is not able to work outside as well. Gauri has to play the role of an ox, labourer, domestic engineer and a companion of not much value to husband. Hence forth, the coining of the above expression has its need. She is not a lone case of her type. The term applies to many such women.

As a woman, she suffers endlessly and poverty too has no constraints in uncoiling itself to her. Much pressurized, she tells of self to Kalia's widow:

'I know the taste of hunger.'

'I know the labour of an ox.'

'I know the anger of a husband.'

'I know the lack of companionship.'

'Without the loss of virginity, I know the loss of womanhood.'

'I know the stranger's status in own house'. (70)

Thus, it is apt to have the coining of the term 'genderex' because woman suffers for biological reasons as well as social. Gauri explains consequences of suffering and also the pain: "When pain converts into agony and suffering follows, I become one with myself--only with myself." (71) Gauri finds solace back in the family but conditions bring another calamity in the accidental demise of her sister-in-law at the work place.

Similarly, woman's sufferance is excessive as a mother too. One instance is of Chhhotu who recollects and tells Radha how once he overheard his Taiji lodging a complaint against husband to mother-in-law that she was not medically fit for child delivery: "How my life was jeopardized when my sixth son was born... . Amma, he becomes a brute" (75). She was also expressive of gratitude to mother-in-law: "During the days of my extreme trouble all the succour comes from you. You are my real mother. Why do people say that a woman inflicts misery upon another woman? In my case, a man lies at the root of all the troubles" (75). In this reference lies an extra dimension to the cause of woman. Another picture of motherhood is drawn is the kidnapping of a babe. Out of pain, the mother finds no sense in life but she cannot die either: "My Lal, My boy, My Munna. Oh God, where are you. Why I was born. My survival is rather impossible. Oh! Better that death follows. But suppose the baby is recovered. Who shall receive him, feed him, clean him." (34)

Panna Dhaya, a heroic mother, for the sacrifice of her son, adds a new concept to motherhood: "A bit of meat—may be live meat—that's how a child of some one else serves for... . She offered the life of her son to save the Prince of the State. To bear with the toughest move on the part of mother—momentarily an outsider or alien—be able to decide against the blood of self—running and pulsating the throbbing heart of the baby—and let the fatal blow be inserted into the baby often loved upon while sucking the juices of life as a divine part of mother's body... ." (34)

This divinity of a mother comes in sharp contrast with a Test Tube baby's surrogate mother. The latter is needed till birth but Panna Dhaya—a wet nurse—becomes relevant after birth. With reference to this, a medical danger and a danger to the intelligence of the unborn baby, is rightly put forth: "How much, besides the minimum, shall be given by her to the growing foetus. Is not the man to suffer and woman to carry diseases. Would the Test Tube baby not be fed on surrogate mother's diseases... ." (74)

Feminism: Frailty Thy Name is Not Woman

The implication is that the baby carries “a triangular load of problems” (8). Under this scenario, another problematic aspect of motherhood also reveals itself and that is the mythological reference of Abhimanyu getting enlightened in mother's womb while a Test Tube baby surrogate mother cannot play the role of a real mother and her womb remains the “never-never-nest of a baby” (8). The womb renting mother, selling motherhood for money shall do whatever is possible to extract—to fulfill the desires. Eating part shall be fit for her, for her family but not for the foetus. Entertainment shall be fit for the family but not for the foetus. The unwanted complexes, clashes and the basest line of thinking would flow in the woman and the umbilical cord would nourish on the uncalled for tendencies. The misuse of womanhood cannot bring good even to the womanhood renting woman. To associate and disassociate only for the cause of money would hamper the emotional aspect of the woman.

The feeling of security is desired by all. The poor and weak women consider it essential to be under man's shelter: “A shelterless woman can never be better...how the leaves suffer in the heat but not the small plants growing under the pleasant shadows.” (72)

The novel also exhibits praise for a hard working self-sufficient woman: “An island does become a world in itself...” (72)

The words of Paul Reuter have relevance: “Much working-class art is created and experienced in group-situations—not in the privacy of a study, but in the church, the hall, the work site, the meeting hall, the quilting bee or the picket line.” (840)

Working women literature means of the working women and by the working women. Here is an orphanage and a group activity is appropriate. No doubt, only the like minded indulge. In the novel, one character—a minor one—objects to the course of action taken by Chandrima.

With regard to the pitiable agonized conditions as delineated in the novel, Meenakshi Agarwal comments: “The miseries and sufferings of the down-trodden existed in the past, exist in the present and, who knows, may exist in future. Nothing will change till the moments of selflessness overpower humans.” (148) Thus the struggling women prove that education is a step ahead to increase the strength of self and of those women who can suffer but not come forward.

In the novel, feminism has a strongly worded dimension of woman's being a benefactor. Broadly speaking, all the deprived ones try to prove their worth and help the deprived and destitute. Instead of being under the burden of foreign, alien or imaginary conditions of women, this novel clearly focuses on a local problem with a solution fit for that region.

Secondly, this novel falls within the periphery of the Female Phase, as classified by Elaine Showalter. In the novel, the women are in quest of raising their own voice and identity. They resist that place as is given to them by patriarchy. A critic, Manjusha Kaushik comments on the aspect of resistance by woman characters in the novel: "In the beginning, the woman was at the periphery and thereafter she was brought to the centre but with no solution. This matrix of patriarchal society seems to be useless for women. The contemporary writers being sensitive to this position of woman and have shown an attitudinal shift in her character. Now in contemporary fiction, the women characters take a flight--ambitious, revolting--with an intention not to let the man exploit them. They give a clarion call for a change. The present novel, *An Abbreviated Child* belongs to this category which sketches a graph of attitudinal shift in a woman through the character of Radha." (70)

Unconfined women move out of the attic. To seek status with the help of others is not the motive here. Here is also a reading of the society and women bringing compatibility in man and woman's relations. This hits at the epistemology of the feminism under the given circumstances. As the tradition goes with Indian women, she goes to find freedom but along the lines of truthful realization. Her maintenance of social values is remarkable. This gives a full picture of social reconstruction where the possibility of bringing civilization to employment on an island is also presumed.

Works Cited

Agarwal, Meenakshi. "A Raga of Pathos—*An Abbreviated Child*." *Ruminations*, Vol. 3 No. 2 June 2013. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition. New Delhi: Doaba Publication, 1983 rpt. 2000. Print.

Feminism: Frailty Thy Name is Not Woman

Felman, Soshana. "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991 rpt. 1996. Print.

Garg, Rita. *An Abbreviated Child*. New Delhi: Vishwabharati Pulications, 2011. Print.

Kaushik, Manjusha. "Attitudinal Shift in Woman: A Study of Rita Garg's *An Abbreviated Child*." *The Vedic Path*, Vol. LXXXVI (No. 1 & 2) Jul. Sep/Oct. Dec., 2012. Print.

Lauter, Paul. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brumswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991 rpt. 1996. Print. Print.

Ryan, Michael. *Literary Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999, rpt. 2004. Print.

Tolan, Fiona. *Feminisms: Literary Theory and Criticism*, Ed. Patricia Waugh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Webster, Roger. "Society and the Individual." *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition. London: Arnold, 1990 rpt. 2001. Print.

About the Author:

Dr. Rita Garg is Reader & Head, Dept. of English, INPG College, Meerut, India.