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Understanding the Patterns of Growth of Indian New Woman: Comparative Analysis of Select Fiction by Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapur, Rupa Bajwa and Shobha De

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Feminist historiography, feminist writers and critics from the West as well as East have already done a commendable job by revealing the historical process of women's subjugation, their rising out of various suppressive power structures and occurrence of the phenomenon called 'new woman' in society as well as literature. A systematic exploration of western feminism & feministic theories underlines seven types of feminist thought that had also some impact on the women of emerging countries like India. These are: Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, Radical, Psychoanalytical, Existential and Post-modern feminism. It also brings out various socio-political, historical and economic factors that led to the emergence of new woman in 19th century. But this image of new woman never remained static rather it kept on assuming various forms and shades over the time. Since 1980s, the standpoint feminists of the West have emphasized that feminist movement must address those concerns that are rampant at the global level such as sexual assaults, unlawful carnal knowledge or adultery etc. They have taken feministic trends beyond the trivial politics of equal rights and opportunities thereby giving birth to a new wave of feminism i.e. the New Feminism. The New Feminism is a kind of post-feminism that became famous in the 1990s and focuses on a younger generation of women who express their desire to fashion new styles of feminism. New feminism provides an optimistic and celebratory picture of a confident, assertive group of young women who are reporting high levels of achievement and success across private and public sectors. But it also stresses on the relevance of feminism in the modern day female existence. As Natasha Walter (1998) states thus:

Feminism is still here, right at the centre of these new lives' where it is needed to address a central paradox of this 'brave new world'. In effect, the New Feminism presents a contradictory picture of unprecedented female freedom and independence coupled with continuing blatant inequalities...The average woman, 'with all her new dreams and beliefs', still faces a number of concrete, economic and social injustices,... and an increased chance of living in poverty. (Walter 67).

New feminism claims itself as more recognized, more comprehensive, more enthusiastic to hold power, more liberal in crossing political restrictions, a feminism that belongs to men as well as women, conformists as well as socialists. In the West, where the new woman of the 19th century was audacious, stylish, educated, and fervent to revolutionize everything and even took sexual liberties too, the new woman of the twentieth century came out as a rational, contradictory character, introvert and caught in the web of conflicts and tensions. The thoughts and movements of Western new feminists and their representations of their female subjects have some impact on the women of emerging countries like India where a number of post colonial female writers have tried to visualize their dream of women empowerment through their fictional new women. With the rise of new feminism across the world, a new group of Indian feminists has come forward to struggle for the individual sovereignty, freedom, rights, open-mindedness, education, support, sexuality, bias, patriarchy, chauvinism, abortion, birth control, divorce, equal pay, maternity leave, and prostitution.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the patterns of growth of new woman in Indian society and fiction in its pre and post independence era through a comparative analysis of selected fiction of the Mahasweta Devi, Shobha De, Manju Kapur and Rupa Bajwa. It also highlights how the concept of 'new woman' in India has emerged as a by-product of feminism. In India, since ages, women have been leading their lives as per the dictates given by their society. The allegory of the "angel in the household" held a woman and her virtuousness high on a pedestal and eventually her role was declared to be confined to the domestic household only where she as a meek creature, was expected to abide by the decisions of patriarchy. Defining patriarchy, Catherine Thankamma in her work entitled "The Women Patriarchy Created" (2000) opines thus: "Patriarchy is the system that traces family descent and economic inheritance down the male line. in a joint family the senior most male is the head, the patriarchy, while in the nuclear families of today, it is the father" (Thankamma 42). Consequently, females in a house begin to develop disbelief in their self-esteem and deem their lowliness as pre-ordained.

The paper investigates various social, political, economical and cultural reasons which brought about the emergence of a new woman in the fiction of select Indian authors and their selected fiction which includes Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* (1979), Shobha De's *Starry Nights* (1991), Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop* (2004). Selected authors belong to the different time periods, social backgrounds and cultural milieus thereby projecting different facades of Indian new woman. Fictional lives of the female characters in selected novels have been used to trace the chronological journey of development of Indian new woman. It starts with Mahasweta Devi's sympathetic representation of subalterns immediately after decolonization i.e. the post-independence era and then proceeds towards frank narratives of Shobha De on the new woman of urbanized elite segments of 1980's and 1990's and finally to the picture of 21st century new woman as presented by contemporary writers like Manju Kapur and Rupa Bajwa through their discourses on issues of women like education, marriage and divorce etc. The objective is to highlight the fact that if the social situations, economic scenarios and religious patterns of female characters of each of the chosen authors are diverse, their forms and manifestations of growth are also varied.

All the writers under study are similar in the sense that they refuse to be associated with any specific school of feministic thought but apparently represent their own feminist mindset. A mere set of demands for fundamental rights for women is not the agenda of their discourse rather an honest representation of what actually is going on in the society and to what extent women can go to establish themselves as an essential part of society is the underlying design of their discussion.

Mahasweta Devi has used her ingenious not to discover the reasons for their endless sufferings in the patriarchal society but to recommend a way out which in her view "lies in the hands of the oppressed, when they rise and fight back, only then history can be changed". It is her radical feminist realism that persuades her women to find a solution out of the problem as we see in the case of Sanichari and Bikhni in *Rudali* who, eventually grow up to take advantage of their repressive exploitative structures. An extensive assessment of personality of Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* brings out De's sexist outlook in her handling of women's questions. She raises her protest against the malist culture and endeavors to deform the traditional good old image of woman 'as a subordinate' who voices for independence and parity but her cries go unattended to. Through Virmati and Shakuntala in *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur accentuates the fact that her new woman should not be branded as a mutineer. A 'new woman' is one who happily and sincerely performs her duties in all domains of her life and also wants to be considered as an equal individual to men though with a different biological composition. Her

new women are neither egotistical nor mutinous rather are brave, educated, self-sustained, sincere and resolute. Virmati and Astha exemplify what Susan Polis Schultz states that “the new woman arises full of confidence, she speaks eloquently, and thinks independently, full of strength. She organizes efficiently and directs proudly” (Schultz 39).

Bajwa’s women also lead a life of empowerment, personal preferences and self-determination as we see in the case of Rina Kapoor, Mrs. Sachdev, Mrs. Bhandari and Mrs. Gupta etc. Besides presenting the vanities of upper middle-class women, Bajwa also sympathizes with the miserable condition of the women whose families are the victims of capitalistic culture. Thus, it can be said that a truthful and sensitive portrayal of Indian women’s subjugation, their resultant rebellion perpetually add feministic elements into works of all the writers under study. Except for Mahasweta Devi’s new women who were not much exposed to the impact of industrialization, education and western culture, the new women of Shobha De, Manju Kapur and Rupa Bajwa exhibit the traits of post-feminists as they lead a life of empowerment, personal choices and autonomy and are driven by consumer culture.

One common underlying factor that brings about the emergence of new women in the works of writers under study is that all these females are the part and parcel of post independent Indian society. The scientific and industrial developments in post- independence era, the widespread of education and western culture motivated Indian women to reject the patriarchal hegemony and strive for their individuality. New values and cultural transformation which urbanization brought in its wake altered the psyche of women. Moreover, the ideas of the welfare state and new rights preserved in Indian Constitution further led to women empowerment.

This factor of post-independent social and political awareness is less significant if one talks about the growth of new woman of Mahasweta Devi because the underlying purpose of her fiction is to hold a mirror to the lives and problems of all those people who have no voice elsewhere and to create a forum of expression for the same. Devi’s narratives of activism on tribal realities- their dispossession, poverty, abuse and the struggle for survival cover her own observations and involvement in various social and political events of colonial India such as World War II, the Quit India Movement of 1942, the Bengal famine of 1943, the division of 1947. Just as globalization in the name of technological, scientific and business advancements has left the third world countries (developing nations) marginalized, the same way political independence of our nation from colonial rule has not provided assured growth and freedom to all the segments of society. Devi’s narration proceeds to question the relevance of various social and political objectives of a newly independent nation which is evidently directed towards the growth of materialism, capitalism, democracy, and nationalism.

Having played a determining role in personification of idea of women empowerment in India, Devi never thought of women as separate beings rather believed in the fact that their subjugation was a part of the oppression of class and caste. Mahasweta Devi in an interview with Anjum Katyal in Calcutta on May 26, 1993 stated that “set against the exploitative system is the issue of survival. ‘Rudali is about... “how to survive”..... “bread and mouth”. It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this” (Katyal 9). Apart from this common factor, the growth of all new women discussed in present paper is led by their respective socio-cultural backdrop, prevailing economic conditions and the purpose of their creator. That’s why the tools used by these female characters to achieve success are relative depending on their situation. Heilmann and Beetham rightly remarks thus:

The common feature which recurs again and again in different cultures is the identification of the New Woman with the modern and with the disruptive, that is with challenges to existing structures of gendered identity. Resistance to the New Woman frequently calls on traditional, cultural or national identities. (Heilman and Beetham 2)

In *Rudali*, it is the matter of sustenance, shelter and economic security after the death of her son Budhua that force Sanichari, a woman of immediate post independent era to take up the work of a mourner. The evolution of Sanichari and her friend Bikhni as new women lies in their courage, strength and willpower to which they turn a social ritual of mourning into a profession. Eventually, Sanichari is able to understand weaknesses of the same exploitative system of sinful wealthy lords at whose hands she and her family had been suffering for so many years. To these exploiters, if sorrow on the death of some dear one is just a public show of effective mourning by hired rudalis then these depraved women shall leave no chance unused to turn this profession into regular business. Thus Sanichari uses her exploitative system as a tool to come out as a new woman.

The gomastha would agree to everything himself. What option did they have? Everyone wanted them after seeing their performance at Bhairab Singh's funeral. They were professional. The world belongs to the professional now, not to the amateur. In big cities, the prosperous prostitutes competed for such jobs. In this region, it is Sanichari who has taken up this business. After all, this is not the big city. There are no prosperous prostitutes thronging Tohri. So, he has to agree to Sanichari's demands. (Devi, *Rudali* 74)

The growth of Sanichari is modeled on what Gayatri Spivak states "when the subaltern 'speak' in order to be heard and gets into structure of responsible ... resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual" (Spivak, *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* 215). The author is not bothered about bringing to the forefront various gender-based issues rather she is focused on providing a solution to the subjugation of tribals in general and of women in particular. The character of Dulan "might be perceived as a male playing mentor and guide to helpless females is not a concern of author's and as a Dulan and Sanichari interact as peers, unselfconsciously free from any hint of asymmetry" (Katyal 10).

Despite its criticism for blatant description of sex and sex exploitation, Shobha De's works are serious attempts at discovering Indian society through Indian eyes. Each and every aspect of her writings may not be commendable yet her dealing with the challenges, dilemmas, principles and present-day urban Indian way of life is her most noteworthy contribution. Aasha Rani is led by her intense career-orientation, her innate instinct to live an independent and successful life and her craving for authority to govern money-matters. She wants to enjoy this authority and even fight to obtain and hold on to such authority. These goals of life force her to go for the sensational and demanding careers of modeling and acting. In fact, the strategy used by De's new women against men, to achieve material success in their careers is sex. That's why they have come to be recognized as new urban women in 20th century. For all intents and purposes, Aasha Rani is liberal about her sexual life. She is well conscious of her sexual potential which she can use to make the men fall at her feet. She flouts all the sexual taboo like anything with great courage and enjoyment. By the reward and punishment, she obviously means providing and withdrawing sexual pleasures. Aasha Rani says to Kishanbhai: "All of you are just the same, but wait I will screw you. I will screw you all, beat you at your own game" (Shobha De, *Starry Nights* 26). To the conventional middle class Indian society, this subverted kind of lifestyle is very unwanted. That's why, they have been labeled with the

adjectives like ‘modern’, ‘westernized’ and even ‘characterless’. Still, the union of bodies has its own meaning and significance in De’s fiction. Repetitive sexual & psychological abuse continued existence despite a succession of shocks and separation from a loving husband cannot restrain Aasha's inborn instinct to live an independent and successful life. The way Aasha boosts her sister Sudha to fulfill their appa's dream by reestablishing their studio and making films illustrates her traits as a new woman. “Our name will rule the industry and the studio will regain its glory. I promise you that, appa. You will see that I shall do it and prove it to you” (Shobha De 234). Herein, one finds the growth of new women of Shobha De.

21st-century writers like Manju Kapur and Rupa Bajwa, through their discourses on sociologically and psychologically responsive issues of women like education, marriage, identity crisis, divorce, and polygamy etc, have tried to project the new women of post modern era. A thorough examination of Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* brings home the fact that she has tried to portray a new visage of Indian women who are self-determining enough to condemn their age-old slavery to conventions and make their society a place where ‘self’ has occupied the centre and values, ethics and morals have become secondary. Taking up those subjects on women that are so widespread in India, she has made her readers understand how hard it has been for the women to reach such developed state of mind already caught within a complex milieu of religion and ritual. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati’s evolution as a new woman is because of her intellectual longings, her love for a scholarly man and her desperation to be socially recognized as the legally wedded wife of a Professor. She uses her education as a tool to counter resolutely the family’s pressures for her marriage. Veena Singh (2000) rightly states that “for Virmati herself Education is an escape...an escape from the reproaches of her family from and her mother’s silent disapproval” (Singh 165).

Thus by deciding the priorities of her life, she is able to win her independence. “Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore” (Rollason 2). The success of Kapur’s art lies in the manner the journey of her new women is explored through the depiction of three generations of women in *Difficult Daughters*. Furthermore, this journey is narrated through the perspective of Ida, a woman of the young generation of contemporary India. The role of women in Kasturi’s generation was as ordained by the society i.e. childbearing and domestic work. Virmati, Shakuntala and Swaran Lata from the second generation are aspiring individuals and must be admired for their resilience and strong will power in their insistence on their right to be educated, their participation in the political movement for India’s independence, their economic sovereignty, and their social repute. They reject the kind of life led by their mothers Kasturi and Lajwanti. The second generation is against the first one and the third generation is the second one. Virmati dares to puncture the patriarchal code of morality and laws to lead an independent life. Just as she proves a ‘difficult daughter’ because of her craziness for education, freedom, and individuality, Ida too like her mother becomes a ‘difficult daughter’. She is sincere to the core of her heart and remains with Harish under all good and bad circumstances and liberty-loving woman.

Through Virmati, Shakuntala, Swaran Lata and Ida, Kapur gives us new women of 21st century whose passion for education, self-sufficiency, equality, and individuality become instrumental in their fight for liberation from financial, political and social repressions prevalent in their contemporary society. Dora Salvador Sales (2004) in her notes to her Spanish Translation of this novel points out,

Kapur emphasizes the efforts made at that time by numerous women who, while demanding equal opportunities, equal access to education and life opportunities

going beyond convention were a visible force in the non-violent resistance to the British. (Sales 361)

Like a rich collection of sarees in Sevak Sari Shop, one finds an array of women characters in Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*, all distinct and apart in style, language, mannerism and ideology. Like Kapur, her new women are also astute, self-conscious, intellectual and ingenious. They use their resourcefulness, education, and position in society as the weapons to solve disputes and counter all the challenges against their career, within and outside their home. Rina Kapoor, Mrs. Sandhu, Mrs. Gupta etc. have been presented in one way or other the products and victims of the commercial world. They include the domestic housewives of rich & affluent families and the learned working women. What brings them together under the umbrella of new women is that they are led by their inclination towards education, modern shopping culture, style, fashion, hybridism, and absurdity. Rina is a 'new woman' in the sense that she is progressive, open-minded and socially conscious. "I am not one of those girls who'll just marry a rich man and go to kitty parties. Besides, I don't really need any more money" (Bajwa, *The Sari Shop* 82). Mrs. Sandhu signifies 'power psychology'. Chander's wife Kamala and Sudha are the representatives of economically weaker sections of society, who work hard a lot to earn their bread and butter and seek shelter. These women are courageous enough to stand against the patriarchal suppression and the corrupt economic system of Indian society though their raised voices get subdued in a highly selfish world. Thus, Bajwa's new woman emerges in the context of her socio-cultural ethos and economic standards prevailing in the society. Teresa Sebastian (2013) states thus:

The chasm that separates the privileged and the less privileged in a multicultural, multilingual Indian urban society is deep. One can find here, at the same time, an emancipated woman and her emaciated counterpart. But the women in India cannot confidently embrace their own power unless they balance the disparity between the economic classes and free all women from the strands of victimization. (Sebastian 6)

There is a point of similarity between the renowned German psychologist Karen Horney and the characters of Aasha and Virmati. Just as Karen had "poor history with regard to relationships with women (estrangement from her mother and daughter) but particularly men, with many affairs in which she sought desperately to be loved... (qtd. in Ridgway 3), these women also suffer disaffection and distancing in relationships because of the basic anxiety in their personality. This anxiety is created by their own over idealized self. Even a stage comes when these women appear problematic. Now the question arises what is there that takes them to the stature of new women. It is their voyage from neurosis to self-realisation that paves their rise as new women.

The tradition of marriage is of unparalleled implication in the life of young people, particularly in India. It has always been a period of blossoming and growing in the life of the woman. It has always served human society and culture with affection, safety, and family. But in the present times, due to sexual promiscuity, increasing economic independence of women and increased number of divorce, the superlative of marriage has lost its age-old significance. Today, a woman who earns sufficiently with a roof over wants to marry someone because she wants to share the joys and sorrows of her life with somebody in true sense not because she wants some bread winner. Such a woman can also not be compelled to perpetuate a failed marriage.

Talking from the perspective of roles and responsibilities in marriage, we find that De's new women stand apart from the new women of rest of the authors. Economic factor being an indispensable part of their power struggle compel them to enjoy sexual liberty at the cost of marital responsibilities and mutual commitment. De suggests that women must develop in themselves qualities such as command, capability, confidence, and boldness as these traits have always been considered as the special inheritance and safeguard of men only then she can come out of their protection shield and face the real world. It is appropriate to state here what Bhaskar Shukla (2006) opines thus:

Educated, attractive, confident and assertive socialite women in Shobha De's novels define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity till death (Anticrime) is replaced generally by sexual freedom. The change in attitude towards marriage represents, according to Shobha De' a big step forward. (Shukla 119)

On the contrary, Devi's Sanichari sets an example of a fully devoted wife, caring daughter in law, responsible mother and a loving grandmother. From the beginning of the story until the end, she is seen taking care of her sick mother, supporting her husband, after his death bringing up her son Budhua and after Budhua's nurturing her grandson Haroa. Even Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* considers it as moral transgression on her part to continue her physical and emotional relationship with professor without getting married to him and is anxious to give it a social name so she instantly gets ready to become his second wife. Her wish is fulfilled though it is not the end of her unhappiness rather beginning of her life of social isolation. She tries her best to become a responsible wife and dedicated daughter-in-law though the stigma of having become the second wife of Harish doesn't let it happen. In Amritsar, "Virmati went to the *angle* to bring the clothes in. The line was bare except for her own, hanging forlornly at the end..." (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 215).

When compared to their male counterparts, the female characters of both Mahasweta Devi and Shobha De are more audacious and remarkable to fight the system and take a lead for their reasons. They resemble the 19th century new women from the West. The males in Devi's fiction seem to be deficient in understanding into what is happening to their existence and are unable to distinguish between right and wrong. Sanichari's husband Ganju is a relevant example of such males who act as an inert audience when their wives pass through tough situation created by the same unconcerned establishment. Ganju's attitude on the death of his mother, his brother, and sister-in-law is passive. "When her mother-in-law died, Sanichari didn't cry... Dragging the neighbors home with her, and handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry" (Devi, *Rudali* 54-5). Even Aasha in *Starry Nights* is also more methodical and sensible as compared to her companions, who appear meek, indifferent or even feeling less.

The new women of De do not feel culpable about their moral laxity and attitudes or to put it another way the question of morality and ethics cannot stop them from marching ahead successfully on the difficult road chosen by them. Indeed a daring woman, Aasha in *Starry Nights* should be appreciated for her fortitude and patience. Had she been a traditional woman, she would have succumbed to the deadly evils prevailing in the pseudo-glamorous world of Bollywood. She also comes out as more commanding and gutsy than Akshay. Even the meeting between Aasha and her sister Sudha towards the end of the novel is a perfect example to show that regardless of so much moral laxity to climb the ladder of success, somewhere in her conscious, Aasha still values relationships. Vats (2010) opines that "despite her indulgence in indiscriminate sex and professional opportunism, Aasha Rani has a critical eye for the sanctity of relations, which she unconsciously cherishes like a wish" (Vats 63).

Conclusion

To sum up, we can say that Mahasweta Devi has brought in her new women Sanichari and Bikhni to make an appeal to the subalterns to find out, not the causes but a solution to their subjugation out of prevalent power system itself. Subaltern women must learn not to accept their suppression as ordained by their destiny rather stand up and understand the lacunas of repressive economic and social structures and prepare themselves accordingly to make the exploitative system addict to their strengths. Shobha De, through her artistic brilliance, has gifted her new women a skill to pierce into men's psyche. Frequently men in her fiction are unresponsive and feel endangered by self-possessed and self-dependent females. Her women puncture the conventional image of Indian womanhood both in expressions and actions, be it their career or carnal pleasures. Her new woman symbolizes that frailty is no more a synonym attached to her if gets a chance she turns to be a woe-man. Like other writers of their generation, both Manju Kapur and Rupa Bajwa have also made their new women their spokespersons to emphasize the significance and essence of emancipation and learning for Indian women. Neither they hold high nor they add any special importance to the Indian womanhood rather keep the focal point of their discussion on the manifestation of woman as a woman, woman as a human being, woman within her family, woman outside her family and woman in her private relations. Through Virmati, Rina Kapoor and Kamala, they uphold their concern for women "with a missionary zeal and seems to suggest that a married woman's job is not to complete wifing, child-bearing and housekeeping but to do something more" (Singh, *Indian Woman Novelists* 65).



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