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Suchitra Bhattacharya's "Good Woman, Bad Woman": A Critique of the Patriarchal Practice of Ascribing Feminine Stereotypes

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Abstract:

Suchitra Bhattacharya (1950-2015), one of the most prolific and popular Bengali women writers of the contemporary literary arena, has always vividly portrayed the sufferings, exploitations, aspirations and struggles of women irrespective of their class and creed in a patriarchal socio-cultural background. Suchitra Bhattacharya's literary oeuvre, being grounded in contemporary social reality, have time and again unflinchingly depicted gender-related issues like patriarchal scheme of feminine stereotyping, male domination, gender inequality, and sexist oppression on women as primary leitmotifs. The process of feminine stereotyping by attributing pre-specified gender traits and roles to women and by appending tags of 'good women' to those women who conform to traditional gender roles and 'bad women' to those who violate those roles is an underlying yet effective means of maintaining the status quo of male domination over women in a traditional socio-cultural backdrop. This paper aims at analyzing Suchitra Bhattacharya's story "Good Woman, Bad Woman" by focusing on the repressive living experiences of the two stereotyped women in the story, Urmi and Ria, with a view to unveiling the author's distinctive way of critiquing and countering the process of feminine stereotyping as a patriarchal tool for sexism.

Key Words:

Stereotyping, Good Woman, Bad Woman, Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Sexual Domination.

In the species capable of high individual development, the urge of the male towards autonomy - which in lower animals is his ruin - is crowned with success. He is in general larger than the female, stronger, swifter, more adventurous; he leads a more independent life, his activities are more spontaneous; he is more masterful, more imperious. In mammalian societies it is always he who commands. (Beauvoir 52)

The above quote from Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* candidly upholds the true nature of man-woman relationship, which is a relationship of dominance and subservience, in a world dominated by the male. Throughout human history, the image, ideals and roles through which woman is identified as well as branded are designed and devised by man to suit and fulfill his needs of maintaining authority and power over the subordinate sex. Hence, since men hold power and authority, women have to suffer varying degrees of sexist oppression and gendered violence at the hands of overriding male. Following the same argument, Kate Millet, the famous American feminist writer and activist, in her *Sexual Politics* astutely pronounces that "sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (Millet 25). In an analysis of the reason behind this male supremacy, she articulates:

This is so because our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance - in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands. . . What lingers of supernatural authority, the Deity, 'His' ministry, together with the ethics and values, the philosophy and

art of our culture- its very civilization- as T. S. Eliot once observed, is of male manufacture. (Millet 25)

In a patriarchal social structure, a man holds the 'masculine' attributes of virility, belligerence and capability. By contrast, women are invariably imposed with the 'feminine' categories of passivity, obedience and ineptness. A man performs the role of the strong, rational protector while the role of the submissive, emotional nurturer is attributed to a female. In view of that, grounded on the age-old tradition of antipodal distribution of men and women into social roles, it is commonly accepted that men are more *agentic* than women, agency being similar to 'masculinity', 'instrumentality' or 'competence'; while women are more *communal* than men, communality being equal to 'communion', 'femininity' or 'warmth' (Hentschel, Heilman, and Peus 2). In fact, "gender stereotypes are generalizations about what man and women are like, and there typically is a great deal of consensus about them" (Hentschel, Heilman, and Peus 2). These oversimplifications about gender roles, characteristics and performance result in sexual inequity as well as generate separate expectations for both sexes which pressurize them to mould their respective identity to fit in with the generalized distinctive images socially-prescribed for men and women. Gender stereotypes, as Nichole M. Bauer posits, "differentiate between the traits individuals expect men and women to embody. Divided into agentic and communal characteristics, stereotypes distinguish the appropriate roles and behaviors for women *relative* to men" (Bauer 27). Besides, these stereotypical credos about male superiority and female subservience, despite having baleful consequences on the private and public lives of both the sexes, invariably engender discriminations against women and result in violations of a wide array of fundamental human rights for women in a world dominated by overriding men. What is more appalling for women is the way in which men in a doctrinaire socio-cultural set-up concoct and impose stereotypical labels of identity on women to have a firmer grip over women and their fundamental rights. Men tag the label of 'Good Women' to women who devotedly serve and care for the men in the family. On the contrary, those women who do not possess this single-minded devotion are branded 'Bad'. In essence, these stereotyped stickers, whether 'Good' or 'Bad', and 'Ideal' or 'Fallen', turn women into utterly helpless and dependent creatures devoid of any agency and autonomy to exercise their own individuality.

Lois Tyson in his *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write about Literature* states that patriarchal stereotype of women attaches the labels of 'virginal angels' and 'selfless caregivers' to women who comply with the traditional gender roles, and includes the generalized characteristics of 'nags', 'gossips', 'seductresses', and 'bitches' for women who defy the traditional gender roles or rebel against patriarchal norms (Tyson 140). The 'good women' are idealized as angelic creatures or true women "whose sense of self consists mainly or entirely of their usefulness to their husbands, fathers, or brothers" (Tyson 142) without aspiring for leadership roles, professional careers or other accomplishments outside domesticity. On the contrary, the 'bad women' are "relegated to the role of *sex objects*" (Tyson 142) and discarded after being used as objects of satisfying men's 'masculine' pleasures. In both cases, the women, whether good and bad, are reduced to their roles as patriarchal objects without having their own aspirations and goals as autonomous human beings. In essence, women are judged merely on the basis of their ability to live up to the demands of the sexist norms of a patriarchal order. This forced objectification of women with fixed roles and preconceived ideals of femininity in a male-dominated society turns women into dutiful followers of the dictates of dominant men who are always in charge. Furthermore, these artificially constructed categories of feminine identity never allow women to take control of their own lives. Consequently, women fail to "fulfill their full potential as human beings regardless of the extent to which their abilities and inclinations differ from traditional (patriarchal) definitions of femininity and masculinity" (Tyson 139). Eminent Bengali writer Suchita Bhattacharya in her short story "Good Woman, Bad Woman" imbued with the agenda of protesting against gender oppression and

opposing the patriarchal stereotyping of women addresses the unequal power relations between men and women in a male-dominated society.

In a fictionalized rendition of a real incident, Suchita Bhattacharya in “Good Woman, Bad Woman” represents the predicaments and struggles of two women, the respectable wife of a successful criminal lawyer and a notorious bar singer-cum-prostitute, who, though living their lives on extremely opposite ends of the social ladder, surprisingly demonstrate quite contrary responses towards sexual repression and male coercion. The story opens with the prosperous lawyer Samiran’s “usual routine of yelling” (Bhattacharya 117) repeatedly the name of his wife Urmi to attend to his petty demands of either looking for his shaving cream, towel and handkerchief or getting his shirt ironed and shoes polished. The dutiful wife Urmi is seen rushing breathlessly around the “neat, affluent bungalow-style house” (Bhattacharya 121) to get everything ready for Samiran before leaving for the court. Even a slight slip on Urmi’s part works up Samiran’s temperament and results in more yelling. Though Samiran’s harsh words hurt Urmi, she decides remaining silent. The narration goes, “But where’s the time to say so much? And did Samiran have the time to listen? . . . Perhaps he’d start saying other things too, in the full hearing of the domestic helpers. When angry, Samiran just didn’t have any control on himself” (Bhattacharya 119). Besides her husband, Urmi also has to attend to their son Tublu to get him ready for school. Selflessly performing the obligations of a good wife and an ideal mother, Urmi gradually annihilates herself and turns into an all-giving and all-healing source of comfort for her husband and her son. Once they both leave, Urmi is on her own for the whole day with a desolate sense of boredom and loneliness. The fate of Urmi in Samiran’s household is a candid representation of the lot of a so-called ‘ideal housewife’ whose proper sphere of work is the home and who never ventures beyond that sphere since doing so is considered to be going against the edicts of traditional gender roles of an acquiescent and deferent wife.

Suchitra Bhattacharya dedicates the next few pages of “Good Woman, Bad Woman” to describe the effect of wealth, luxury and marital sex on the life of the ‘Good Woman’ Urmi. The obsessiveness to the superficial sense of well-being and protection that marriage seems to provide a ‘good woman’ with secretes the fact that compromise, adjustment and outright surrender on part of the woman are the key factors in sustaining the interpersonal heterosexual relationship with her all-powerful husband. Urmi also tries to stifle the sense of disgraceful powerlessness of her own self as well as her feelings of intense boredom of her married life by thinking about the pseudo sense of happiness and comfort provided by her wealthy husband. With a surprised look at the rich interior of her husband’s huge two-storied mansion, she muses, “So much of happiness, so much wealth were entirely hers. Yes hers. Samiran seemed to wave a magic wand and purchase desirable commodities one after another. He was propelling her upwards. Higher and higher” (Bhattacharya 121-122). Indeed, Urmi barter her own independent self with the false sense of contentment and comfort emanating from luxuries like brand new car, TV, VCR, air conditioner, beauty parlour, domestic helpers, shopping, new herbal cream, skin care, expensive gifts, jewelry, laptop, cinema, club, ladies’ circle, film magazine, foreign outings, massage, day outs, trendy dresses, and marital sex. The significant point to mark in this context is that a man’s superior economic position in the family restricts the helpless wife to the supposed ‘womanly’ domain of duties like entertaining, pleasing and satiating her husband. Without having any economic independence, the wife is forced to seek survival and security through the approval of her husband as he shoulders the financial responsibility of the household. Samiran’s ‘ideal wife’ Urmi, in like manner, overpowered by the narcotic daze of material wealth, affluence, extravagance and status due to Samiran’s soaring prosperity as a thriving lawyer gradually but unconditionally loses her self-image and autonomy, and takes the disgraceful trail of self-effacement and self-abnegation of a stereotyped ‘good woman’.

Just like Nida, the female protagonist in Faiqa Mansab's debut novel *This House of Clay and Water*, Urmi also believes that "Love was the duty of a wife, the right of a husband. . . And angels spat on wives who refused their husbands" (Mansab 24). The lovemaking between Samiran and Urmi often takes form of marital rape due to Samiran's crude, childish and wild demeanor. However, Urmi has to quietly endure the pain of Samiran's clawing and biting just as a 'good wife' is expected to be always at her husband's beck and call. Even Urmi's wish for Tublu's future career either as a professor like her father or a scientist like her uncle does not hold water before Samiran's desire to make his son either an engineer or a management professional so that "he'll earn in millions" (Bhattacharya 129). The narration goes: "So let it be. When Tublu's father desired it, it was the same as Urmi's desire." (Bhattacharya 129). Urmi's total self-effacement reminds us of the educated and urbane female protagonist Sumita in Ashapura Devi's short story "Opium". Sumita in Devi's story ultimately resorts to unconditional surrender to her overweening husband Sudhiranjan towards the end when she writes him a letter in a tone of compromise which Ashapura Devi says "the whining voice of a woman!" (Devi 25). Being overpowered by the attraction of a materialistic lifestyle at her in-law's place, Sumita in a state of restiveness feels, "It seemed as if she just couldn't fit into the orderliness of this [her father's] modest household any more. She felt . . . what a small house it was! The lifestyle options were so insignificant! . . . The long days were so meaningless!" (Devi 24). Thus, both Urmi and Sumita along with the likes of them slowly but surely end up complying with the myth of traditional gender roles and unconditionally accept the patriarchal stereotype of a 'good wife' under the authority of their men in a male-dominated socio-cultural set up. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* has remarked discreetly on the fate of objectification that befalls an alleged 'good wife':

Deprived of her magic weapons by the marriage rites and subordinated economically and socially to her husband, the 'good wife' is man's most precious treasure. She belongs to him so profoundly that she partakes of the same essence as he; she has his name, his gods, and he is responsible for her . . . He takes pride in his wife as he does in his house, his lands, his flocks, his wealth, and sometimes even more; through her he displays his power before the world: she is his measure and his earthly portion. (Beauvoir 191-192)

Suchitra Bhattacharya soon afterwards introduces us with the 'bad woman' of the story Ria, a bar singer who is forced to use her sexuality to earn a living for her family. She needs to cater for the liver treatment of her drunkard husband Subrata as well as the expenses of her school-going daughter. Urmi first meets Ria when she comes to Urmi's house to meet Samiran as a client regarding her much talked-about rape case which is being tried at the High Court. Two men whom she knows well have raped her while offering her a lift in their car. Though Ria "is a fallen woman" (Bhattacharya 136) in the eyes of this patriarchal world having many legal, illegal, and pseudo husbands, Samiran tells Urmi that he takes the case as a social service without any fees to get the helpless woman justice. Despite being "a third rate prostitute" (Bhattacharya 137), Ria has the right to get justice. Samiran tells Urmi, "Yes, she does sleep around. But at her own will. But you can't possibly force her. Even a prostitute has a right to refuse . . . Forcible cohabitation is rape. Those men should be punished" (Bhattacharya 137). Urmi is immediately overwhelmed with the magnanimity of her husband's heart who has compassion for such "an insignificant woman as Ria, whose lifestyle too wasn't above reproach" (Bhattacharya 138). However, the true face of the hypocrite Samiran is revealed afterwards at the celebratory party at his house when he whispers to his friend that he has doubled his fees after winning the rape case of Ria. The seasoned lawyer adds in a note of triumph that Ria's case saves him from the publicity costs of getting his name in the media for the past six months. After the party, Samiran pulls a long face when he comes to know from Urmi that Ria has come over that afternoon to express her gratitude with a box of sweets and a sari for Urmi as gift. He cannot simply accept the fact that his wife, the good woman, has accepted

“a fallen woman’s gift” (Bhattacharya 152) whom he has repeatedly told never to cross the gates of his house. Samiran’s attitude towards Ria visibly epitomizes Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of man’s attitude towards a ‘bad woman’ as propounded in *The Second Sex*:

Man does not devote himself wholly to the Good which he sets up and claims to put in force; he retains shameful lines of communication with the Bad. But wherever the Bad dares indiscreetly to show its face uncovered, man goes to war against it. In the shadows of night man invites woman to sin. But in full daylight he disowns the sin and the fair sinner. (Beauvoir 204)

The most remarkable feature of “Good Woman, Bad Woman” is Suchitra Bhattacharya’s deft deconstruction of the myth of patriarchal stereotyping of women by providing the ‘bad woman’ Ria with the autonomy of agency and the power of resistance to stand up for her own cause of getting justice in a public court and to demand due punishment for the two rapists who “looked upon [her] as a woman! . . . A mound of flesh” (Bhattacharya 148). Ria, in her unwillingness to demean herself in her own eyes, decides to fight for justice despite her husband’s firm opposition to her going to the High Court on the ground that her professional career as a bar singer may get affected if she is cross-examined in the most vulgar form in a public court about her character, profession and, obviously, the incident of the rape. In essence, Suchitra Bhattacharya makes Ria, the so-called ‘bad woman’, a strong and courageous personality possessing a sense of self-respect who earns her own living and never forgets her responsibilities towards her daughter unlike her parasitic husband. The author’s masterstroke of opposition against the patriarchal practice of feminine stereotyping comes towards the end when ‘the fallen woman’ Ria on their sudden meeting at Hatibagan makes the ‘good woman’ Urmi speechless with the following words:

Sometimes I have thought, Madam, what would I have gained if I had been a happy housewife? After a hard day’s labour I’d have got a plate of rice. Or else I’d have got it by appeasing someone’s desire at night. What’s the difference between that and the life I lead? Society accepts one and doesn’t accept the other. But how can I say the other is unacceptable? Those who enjoy and indulge themselves in our company, they too belong to this society. Someone’s elder brother. Someone’s father. Someone’s son. (Bhattacharya 147)

By contrast, Urmi, the ‘good woman’ from the upper class of the society, being miserably trapped inside the splendor of affluence and helplessly restricted to her traditional gender roles under male domination does not dare search self-actualization and self-autonomy by subverting the hackneyed characteristics of femininity imposed on her being by her commanding husband. She believes that she has stature, power and a sense of purpose simply by being the woman her husband Samiran wants her to be. That is why, despite being terribly hurt at the shrewdness and duplicity of the men at her husband’s celebratory party, she has to go on with her role of a ‘good host’ with a convivial attitude to the guests. The narrator says: “There was a thorn pricking her heart. . . Yet she had to keep on smiling. She had to welcome her husband’s guests. She had to charm everyone with her coyness and lasciviousness. Etiquette demanded it!” (Bhattacharya 151). Finally, Urmi’s helpless surrender of her icy, unresponsive body to Samiran’s demand of forcible cohabitation on the night of the celebration of his winning the rape case of Ria clearly demonstrates Suchitra Bhattacharya’s genuine concerns over the tradition of tagging imposed identities, traits and roles on women in a patriarchal society which ultimately results in the total objectification of women. Being unable to file a case of marital rape against her husband and capable only of shedding secret unnoticed tears, the ‘good woman’ Urmi says to herself, “Are we able to do that? We are, after all, good women! We don’t have the spirit of bad women like Ria!” (Bhattacharya 153).

Overall, Suchita Bhattacharya's "Good Woman, Bad Woman" is a forthright illustration of the patriarchal convention of stereotyping the roles and characteristics of women as well as the exploitive effect this hackneyed generalization has on their lives by turning them into objects of 'masculine' power and pleasure in a traditional society. The story also echoes the idea that it hardly matters whether a woman is labelled 'good' or 'bad' since as long as she is a woman in a male dominated society, she has to suffer the same grim fate of subjugation and violence at the hands of the dominating male. Besides, the writer's inherent urge to end gender inequality and sexual domination has found a brilliant expression through her dexterous mode of critiquing this traditional masculine practice of devising restrictive labels of identity for women with a view to perpetuating male control and authority over the so-called weaker sex. Above all, through the representation of the 'good woman' Urmi's shocking realization of her inability to transcend the barriers imposed on her by the patriarchal value system and the 'bad woman' Ria's bold resistance against the objectification of her female being by the dominant male, Suchitra Bhattacharya in her "Good Woman, Bad Woman" has herself taken a laudable stance against the patriarchal practice of feminine stereotyping and the consequential gendered violence perpetrated and perpetuated on women in male-dominated social structures across cultures.

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