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The Subaltern Speaks: Short Stories by Indian Women Writers

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Abstract:

Women writers in India have contributed immensely to the development of the short story. Rather it has proved to be one of the better mediums for them to give expression to their thought process, ideology and their views regarding the social issues on one hand and at the same time have presented in their works the customs, traditions and conventions which are intrinsic to the Indian ethos and culture. Writers like Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahri, Manju Kak, Tara Deshpande, Atia Hussain, Lalitambika Antaranjanam, Kamla Das and Anita Desai etc. have discussed in their works issues like struggle of women for their existence in society, their oppression at the hands of society, failure of marriage, man-woman relations, frustration and loneliness, alienation and death, values of life and diaspora themes.

Keywords: Revolt, raising-voice against silent, subaltern, sufferings.

This paper discusses some great women short story writers of India whose works have been included in the book *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women*, edited by Lakshmi Holmstorm. These writers have raised some important and similar issues pertaining to the position of women in contemporary India. The stories discussed in this paper are about those women who tried to free themselves from the centuries old defined role of women and revolt against it. They are not like the traditional woman who suffers silently but raises her voice against the injustice and discrimination breaking many myths in the process.

Krishna Daiya in his work *Post Independence Women Short Story Writers in Indian English* (2006) quotes Mary Wollstonecraft:

... I call with the firm note of humanity, for my argument, Sir,
Are dedicated by a disinterested spirit – I plead for my sex – nor
for myself. Independence I have long considered as grand blessing
of life, the basis of every virtue – and independence I will ever
square by contracting my wants, though I were to live on a barren
health. (12)

The development of Indian women writings can be associated with the development of women's movement in India. By the end of nineteenth century education for women was available in institutions like Queen's Mary's College, which was the first of its kind for women in Madras in 1914; in 1916 Karve established the first university for women in Pune. The first

autonomous women's organizations came into being in 1910s and 1920s. They were concerned with the variety legal reforms to do with the women – property rights, dowry, polygamy etc. – but were always strongly linked with the Nationalist movement, whose first and primary aim was freedom from colonialism. During this time many autobiographies thinly disguised as fiction were published by women. Raj Lakshmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife* (1876), Ramabai Saraswati's *The High-caste Hindu Woman* (1886), Shevantibai Nikambe's *Ratnabai: A Sketch of a Bombay High-caste Hindu Wife* (1894), Krupabai Sattianadan's *Kamala* (1894) and *Saguna* (1895). These were almost propaganda material, telling individual stories of struggle against respective forms of orthodoxy, and pleading for the better education for women. By the 1930s to 1940s there were some remarkable short story writers like Lalitambika Antajanam writing in Malayalam, Ismat Chughtai in Urdu, Ashapura Devi and others in Bengali and Atia Hossain in English to name a few.

Lalitambika Antajanam born in 1909 was an active member of Indian National Congress and later was associated with Kerala Marxist Party. She has to her credit nine collections of short stories, six collections of poems, two books for children and a novel, *Agnisakshi* which won the *Kerala Sahitya Akademi* award for the best literary work of the year in 1980. The story "Revenge herself" is based on a true event in the late nineteenth century about a woman in Kerala from the Nambudiri Brahman caste who became a prostitute and during her trial argued that her partners in prostitution be punished as well.

Lalitambika being a social reformer highlights in "Revenge Herself" the plight of a downtrodden woman who suffered at the hands of men. The story itself asserts the basic humanness and selfhood of women that they are not objects but persons. It is related to the helplessness of women who are victims of patriarchal power, where they are compelled to obey their family even if it is unbearable. The objective of the writer has been to liberate them from patriarchal control of minds and bodies.

The writer has skillfully used the ghost as a medium to depict the tragic tale of a woman named Tatri. The ghost has been placed in closest relation with this character. It is midnight and the writer is sitting on her writing table as usual. The atmosphere is haunted with terror and mystery, which compels the writer to shut the windows as she is struggling to write an interesting story:

I shut the window and bolted it, adjusted the wicks of the oil lamp, checked on the children to see if they were awake, came back and sat in my usual place. I had to write about? Where to begin? The problem overwhelmed me. It is not easy to write a story, particularly for a woman in my position. I want to write out of my convictions, but I fear to hazard my name, my status. When my stories mirror the reality of society, I am open to the criticism of all kinds of people. When they abuse me, how should I retaliate? I dare not even approach the question of religious customs.

And yet in spite of all these scruples, whom will I displease this time?

Which Literary movement will I offend? (Antarjanam 1-13)

Many characters come across her mind but she is unable to pen down anything. At this critical juncture she hears the sound of footsteps coming nearer to her. She is scared when the voice of a woman asks her to raise her head and look at her. The writer raises her head and encounters a woman whose eyes are burning with fire:

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I am scared. Of this night. Of all that is happening now. Who are you? How did you manage to come here? Weren’t the doors closed?’ ‘Who am I?’ She laughed aloud. ‘So you would like to know whether I am human being or devil; ghost or evil spirit. You have courage.’ Her laughter had the sound of a wild river that had burst its dam. Wave upon wave of that unearthly laughter filled the room, echoing, reverberating. By this time I was prepared. (4)

The woman narrates her tale of woe and introduces herself as someone who is hated and looked down by all. Accordingly she marries a man without any objection on her part. She loves her husband but after sometime he begins to stay away from her. He indulges in extra marital affairs with other women. One day he comes home with a second wife which she could not tolerate. She suffers all the indignities and brutalities heaped upon her by her beastly husband. He calls her a prostitute, but she has no words in her defense. In front of her husband she is helpless, weak and pathetic. It is her passiveness that sends her to doom. Even her husband taunts her that if she were a prostitute he would have loved her more. She goes to her father’s house where there is a huge family with the five wives of her father, her two widowed sisters and the wives of her brothers. The woman whose name is Tatri has an exceptional physical beauty; she has all those refinements which can capture the hearts of men. Due to this reason her mother and sisters never liked her company. But she prepares herself to take revenge for the atrocities committed on her by her husband:

If should be made outcast, it should not be for being innocent. Women, too, I thought, can willingly choose the path of debasement. And if I should choose to fall, I would bring down with me several cruel men who were the means of that fall. I would see to it that in the clear light of justice many more men that I should deserve excommunication. ‘On a certain night a new courtesan appeared on the festival grounds and temple precincts.

She was beautiful and witty. Her modesty attracted men even more than her beauty. Princes, courtiers and Nambudiris, all sought her company. (9-10)

She has real motive through which she advances and ultimately justifies her actions. She starts to visit the temple and attract men who visit her at night. The night of encounter with her husband marks the end of her revenge. After that she is put on trail and she accuses sixty five men including land lords and Nimbudiris. After finishing her story Tatri looks at the writer who is numb struck. As she says:

And now tell me sister which one do you think was worse, the man who led a woman into prostitution for his own satisfaction, or the woman who willed herself into prostitution to counter him, which one should you hate, which one should you shun. (11)

The statement is highly quotable and deserves much appreciation. The writer tells her plainly that she has taken a wrong way to punish her husband. But her act of sacrifice would never go unrewarded. It is a testimony to her brutal treatment. At that very moment Tatri disappears and the writer wakes up from her strange dream. Her statement at the end deserves much appreciation when she says:

I understanding you were speaking for many – for the weak against the strong, for women calling out for justice, for all human beings whose emotions and instincts have been stamped upon. What you did was not an act of personal revenge. It was a protest born out of grief and despair. (12)

The story in away depicts the individual protest against society at large. As far as the atmosphere of the story goes it is embedded with violent emotions and mental anguish of women who are treated as mere bodies by men. The gender dimensions of the story highlight the oppression of women in a man-made social order.

Mirnal Pande was born in 1946. She was the editor of *Saptahik Hindustan*, the Hindi edition of leading newspaper *The Hindustan Times*. She has a distinguished career in journalism and media. She has written a number of short stories as well as plays and novels. Her short story “Girls” was first published in 1983 in *Dharmayug* and later both translated and published in English in the same year in *Manushi* – a journal about women and society.

“Girls” is a poignant story which penetrates deep into the heart of the readers and thereby evokes pity. The story in a straightforward manner depicts the treatment meted out to the girls in the society which is embedded with traditional values, where female foeticide is a common practice. The writer has used a minor girl of eight years as her mouthpiece so as to convey their

sad plight. The story begins when the eight year old girl, who has always been a source of trouble for her mother, goes along with her mother and two sisters to her maternal grandmother's house as her mother was expecting a child. The mother was desperate to have a boy this time in order to avoid getting pregnant again which in turn shows that even today in Indian society having a boy is considered as a matter of pride and also he is superior to a girl child. Her mother while talking to one of her neighbors says:

'I hope it's a boy this time. It will relieve me of the nuisance of going through another pregnancy'. I could just imagine Saru's mother, in her usual manner, shaking her head and saying, 'Why not? ... why not? (56-64)

All of them are received by her maternal uncle and aunt, and are taken from the railway station to her maternal grandmother's house. In this house these young sisters are not treated well. Her maternal grandmother loves her uncle's five years old son, takes utmost care of him. She remembers her father whom she calls Babu, because he is the only person who showers all his affection upon her, where as her mother considers her the cause behind all her troubles:

'You are the cause of all my problems!' Ma hissed at me through tightly clenched teeth so that no one could hear. She then grabbed hold of my arm as if to prevent me from falling over but actually pressed it so hard that my shoulder hurt. (58)

As soon as she enters her Mama's house she is told to touch her Nani's feet; which she as a girl is supposed to do all her life and which reflects the fact about her low position in the society and her being the second class sex:

I was told to bend down and touch Nani's feet. Someone from the family said, 'Not like that ... bend properly. You are a born girl and you will have to bend for the rest of your life, so you might as well learn. (59)

Everyone in the house from her Nani to the old lady from the neighborhood, Tulsa dai pray that her mother should give birth to a male child this time. That lady talks about the complexion of her mother, how it used to be pink when she expected a girl and how it is yellow which indicates that she will give birth to a boy this time. For her Nani it is a matter of pride and honour that atleast this time her daughter should go back to her in-laws with a boy, "Nani folds her hands and prays: 'O goddess, protect my honour. At least this time let her take a son back from her parents' home. At the end of the prayer she dries her tears with her Pallav"(59).

She remembers that her father once told her that she could become anything she wishes for if she works hard, as Dhruva became a star. But she knows that she cannot become a boy

which shows her utter frustration. Her elder sisters warn her to stay away from elders, but being a sensitive child, she is inquisitive to know more. They have told her about the gap between the world of children and that of the elders. Her sisters have also told her not to intervene in the lives and matters of elders, but she will not listen to them, “My elder sister says on should never trust grown-ups because if they want to know something they will prying out of you by hook or by crook, but they themselves will never tell you anything” (60).

One night she hears the voice of her younger aunt who is crying. Even when she enquires from her mother about the well being of her aunt, her mother slaps her and warns her not to intervene in these affairs. She is saddened by the discrimination done to her and her sisters. Her Nani’s more love and care for her Mama’s son and her mother’s desperation to have a boy make her realize about her being inferior as compared to the males.

The very next day falls Ashtami festival when young girls are worshiped as goddesses and are given sweets and money. This little girl who is not given any name gets angry to see all this. Her agony is reflected in the statement:

‘Today is Ashtami, the devi’s day; you must not hit a Kanyakumari, it is a sin.

I jump down from the ledge with a thud and see Nani serving
The other girls halwa-puri with a tightly clinched mouth.

‘Go on take the Prasad from the Nani. Why do you make your
mother cry when she is in this condition?’ Maasi asks me irritably.

‘When you people don’t love girls, why you pretend to worship
them?’ My voice breaks into a sob and I feel so furious with my
self that I want to swallow the burning camphor to choke my
treacherous throat. (63)

The statement is highly quotable, as it allows to peep into society which is embedded with gender discrimination. The very concept of gender discrimination is a social constraint which needs to be wiped out. Though the biological distinction between male and female is an accepted fact, but the notion that a girl child is a curse for her family should be no longer acceptable. The story ends with a loud cry of this young girl which reflects her pain and agony.

The use of first person narrative adds a sense of immediacy to the story. As the protagonist narrates the pain of being a girl-child we empathize with her and understand the double standards of our culture where women are worshiped as “devis” in temples, but treated like “daasis” inside the four walls of the house.

Mahashweta Devi was born in 1926 and has numerous short stories and novels like *Amrira Sanchay*, *Andharmanik*, *Chotti Munda* or *Tar Tir* in Bengali to her credit. Her works are infused with a sense of history. She has written a number of articles on peasant labour in West

Bengal. “Draupadi” is one of the three stories from the collection *Agnigarbha* published as a collection in 1978, and set against the Naxalite activities of 1967-72.

Mahashweta Devi’s short story “Draupadi” was translated in English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak which first appeared in *Critical Enquiry* (1981), with a critical foreword, by the University of Chicago Press. The title of the story has been taken from the legend of *Mahabharata* and has been juxtaposed with the tribal uprising of 1971 and onwards. This historical event has been used as a literary device to present an exposure of the human predicament. The story is set in a tribal area of West Bengal and the protagonist is herself a tribal woman named Dopdi which is the tribal name of Draupadi. She along with her husband has been instrumental in this revolt:

Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad, and Bankura. In 1971, in the famous Operation Bakuli, when three villagers were cordoned off and machine gunned, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the main culprits. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper-caste wells and tube wells during the drought, not surrendering those three men to the police. In all this they were the chief instigators. (89-105)

Both of them started a movement by killing the landowner Surja Sahu and his son. They have been held responsible for the killing of grain brokers, bureaucrats and money lenders. They have also been responsible for the mental anguish of Arjun Singh who was sent in the operation Forest Thakhani so as to put an end to the tribal uprising. Another character Senanayaka plays a vital role in the story. He could think of clever plans on the spur of the moment and for this he wants to be remembered for ages and none can see through the web he weaves around. He changes his colour as per the needs of the time. In fact he is never what he seems. None can understand his real nature, none can see through his dissimulation. He believes that to destroy the enemy, one has to become one with them by putting on an air of friendship and says that the most repulsive style of fighting is guerilla warfare. Dopdi and her husband Dulna belong to this category of fighters:

I should mention here that, although the other side make little of him, Senanayaka is not to be trifled with. Whatever his practice, in theory he respects the opposition. Respects them because they could neither be understood nor demolished if they were treated with the attitude. ‘It’s nothing but a bit of impertinent game playing with guns.’ In order to destroy the enemy, become one. (93)

Finally Dulna is killed by the police. His dead body is kept on a stone so that whosoever comes to take his body will be killed. But one comes to take his body. Meanwhile the search for Dopdi is on. The police under the orders of Senanayaka have decided to trap Dopdi as she is the only person who can lead them to other fugitives. One day while walking through the rocky terrain, she hears someone calling her name. She does not respond to the call as in the forest area of Jharkhand she is known as Upi Mejhen. She feels suspicious about several persons who might have informed about her to the police. She is not at all terrified by the police. Dopdi and her husband Dulna, who later gets killed, are a part of a radical uprising.

Dopdi has no fear of the police whom she sees as something remote, quite detached from her. At this critical juncture she gets suspicious about Shumai and Budhna. She even remembers the sacrifice of her husband who never led the police to the fugitives. She even remembers the clash that took place between landlords and untouchables, over the distribution of water. She is captured by the police where she is seduced by several officials. She comes to know that it was Senanayaka who has been instrumental in her arrest. When she woke up she realizes that her honour has been ravished. She gathers all her courage to rebuild the ruined piece of her life. One of the officials takes her to Senanayaka. He gives her clothes, but he refuses. Senanayaka too gets startled to see Dopdi nude. Dopdi gives a strange smile to him and says:

“What is the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” She looks around and chooses Senanayaka’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on counter me. Come on counter me?” Dopdi pushes Senanayaka with her two mangled-breasts, and for the first time Senanayaka is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (104)

The writer makes it clear that it is patriarchal society that has reduced women to a mere object. Dopdi is repeatedly seduced by several police officials, while other male fugitives are either hanged or killed. The portrayal of Dopdi personifies the tyranny of one sex over the other which needs to be questioned. Dopdi shows her true sexual body to Senanayaka and other officials in the police camp, which serves as an eye opener to all that a woman is not defined simply by “lack”. She along with other associates actively participates in the revolt despite being ravished. The story in a way serves as an exploration of a woman’s psyche. The language employed by the writer is rooted in female biology so as to articulate an identity of a woman freed from patriarchal organization. The portrayal of Dopdi is comparable to Draupadi in *Mahabharata*, whose honour was saved by Lord Krishna, but here in the story no one comes to the rescue of Dopdi. Even her encounter with Senanayaka is reflective of her bold spirit which serves to shatter the iron framework of patriarchy.

To conclude, all the three stories present a continuance of women's voices which visiblise women as the subalterns of the society but it also celebrates the heroism of women like Dopdi and Tatri who take the fight to the enemy. "Draupadi" and "Revenge Herself" salute the resilience of Indian woman who still has the strength to fight back against the centuries old oppression she has been subjected to. Sometimes the Subaltern can speak.

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