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Three Voices, Three Languages: One Pain!

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‘Wife’ the word has many connotative shades especially in Indian context. It strikingly reminds of duties and responsibilities and hardly speaks of the rights as an equal human being. Though in the last century there have been serious reforms but what was imbibed from ages and centuries, will find it difficult to completely evaporate from the collective conscious of the people. It is obvious for women to express their experiences, they have gone through. The paper aims to study the vent, anguish and annoyance of being a ‘wife’ in three essays in three different languages by Judy Brady(English), Chhaya Datar(Marathi) and Anupama Shrivastava(Hindi) in their works, ‘ Why I want a Wife’, ‘Purush mhanje Surya ani Striya Suryaful?’ and ‘Biwi ka Sabstitute’ respectively.

In his visit to India some years back Professor U. R. Ananthmurthy asked that, why Indian vernacular literary texts receive rare attention of critics that is given to major European texts. Taking into consideration the need for extended textual readings as well as cross cultural, cross regional analysis of the literary texts. He called for textual comparisons that highlight similarities and differences in the way common themes and similar social situations are treated. He argued that several strands of cultural and social influence run through-out Indian literary texts, strands that are impossible to see clearly if our focus remains so confined to the works of any one linguistic or regional tradition.

‘Alternative Modernity’ strongly suggests that fine grained historical, cultural, and philosophical analyses will show how distinctly modern values such as individuality and radical egalitarianisms were articulated on other contexts, than capitalist.

These three essays written in three different languages in almost the same period (Later half of the last century) have very striking similarities. The women have developed a kind of nausea for the word and responsibilities of, a ‘Wife’. They want to break the barriers of the society’s collective conscious and the things that treat them unequally no matter even over a petty issue. The subaltern treatment is no longer being tolerated and a great wave of awareness towards it is shown through these essays.

The first essay- ‘Why I Want a Wife?’ (1971)

Judy Brady the writer complains about women’s function in the house that is obliged to fulfil and fit in certain roles that have been set for women and how they aggravate gender discrimination.

It reminds us of the poem, ‘Introduction’ by Kamla Das where she is not ready to be a quarreller, an embroider or assume any identity, for instance, ‘Madhavi kutti’. Where, to be free from the social mores, she wears shirts and trousers and cuts her hair short. Here in these essays all of the women writers want to fight against the intellectual shackles and against all that, that forbids them from not being recognised and treated as intellectually equal to men, and of course especially for the freedom of decision making and freedom for all those exercises where she is required to apply her brain, (gray matter) and think and decide as an individual. This is a wave of individualism for women. Judy Brady’s first line is very sharp,

she says, 'I belong to that classification of people known as wives.'¹ The very word resonates her responsibilities, duties, and exertion.

The essay lashes against the typecast social order to which women fall victim and patiently carry out the 'earmarked' duties. The woman in the essay asks that if it is chalked out this way, then she too would like to have a wife!

She writes,

"I would like to go back to school so that I can become economically independent, support myself, and, if need be, support those dependent upon me. I want a wife who will work and send me to school. And while I am going to school, I want a wife to take care of my children.

My wife must arrange to lose time at work and not lose the job. It may mean a small cut in my wife's income from time to time, but I guess I can tolerate that. Needless to say, my wife will arrange and pay for the children while my wife is working."

*"I want the liberty to **replace my present wife with another one**. Naturally, I will expect a new life; my wife will take the children and be solely responsible for them so that I am left free." At last she says, " My God! Who wouldn't want a wife?"²*

Feminism functions in two ways. First-it identifies the dissimilarity and discrimination in the way girls and women are treated in a particular society, and the disadvantages that come out of it. The second- it stresses the value of women, their self-worth and contribution to the society. Here the word self worth is very important; in all these three essays we see that the women writers as well as characters are completely aware about their 'self' and are demanding 'self worth'. They even highlight the futility of some of the marriages as an institution and the present threat to it and that is, regarding the head or authority of the family. Instead of one polar system in today's context it should be a bipolar one. Because today working women are earning and sometimes more than their male counterparts, if economic powers are considered then women too are self dependent and are helping their husbands in that area, so they have the equal right to be called as the head of the family. Women have been both culturally and emotionally dependant on men, any disruption of attachment of affiliation was seen not as a loss of relationship, but a 'total loss of self.' Women do not allow today that their **do's and don'ts** should be decided by someone else and especially by males.

The second essay, '*Purush Mhanje Surya ani Striya Suryaful?*' meaning, 'Men Mean the Sun and Should Women Mean Sunflowers?' by Chhaya Datar, born in 1944, a well known name in the arena of feminism and work for women, a recipient of best woman writer by 'Shashwati', an organisation that studies various women's problems.

In the present essay the author objects the mindset of women in accepting and continuing the patriarchy. According to her, even to some extent women are responsible for the patriarchy in the society. There is a friends' gathering at the narrator's house where they are seeing off a friend, who is going to America as her husband works there. In the course of gossip they reveal that all of them have one problem in common and that is the absence of intellectual freedom, the inability to decide something, the inability and the dubious treatment to them to apply their minds on things. The friend, whose husband is (going to America) objects about her mother-in-law asking her to stop the subscription of English newspapers and weeklies, as her son (the friends' **husband**) is not at home.

Furthermore the friend questions that, '*When I can read and understand English, why should they be unsubscribed?*'³ the answer was, '*why to waste unnecessarily money for a single reader?*'⁴ Her other friend asks an obvious question that, the same expenditure is

unobjectionable when it is being done for the 'Man' in the family, how come it becomes unnecessary for a woman? Why a 'woman' should not be treated as equal to read the newspapers? The fact is that reading newspapers and that too, 'English Newspapers' is an activity that is supposed to be done by the Man first. She expresses that women are expected to read the newspapers after the reading of the men, in the noon time or if she could spare some time from her household work but then too, it is treated as a luxury and as if she is given some rare liberty. That, *'we are giving you the opportunity to read. So... read!'*⁵ they consider reading newspapers to be a "by-product" for the women in the family. It is even disgusting to know that Prakash, the husband too, thinks on the same line and asks in a letter addressed to her, to discontinue the dailies and weeklies. It is not considered that a woman too should have the subscription exclusively for her and could read it. She calls, it as a 'collective statement or opinion' 'Representative statement' of the society.

This clearly shows that the ladies are trying to break the 'class' barriers, category barrier and getting free from its shackles to rise upward in the intellectual and cerebral world, in the Indian context.

The stereotype image of a 'wife' is reflected through another friend's comment as she says, *'...it's ok not to waste money for an individual lady in the house. Instead you can save money and buy a new saree of it.'* The attraction of women towards sarees is a well known fact and that is being considered to shun and replenish the habit of reading which is something new and against traditions, the author objects this framework of mind of ladies. The friend strongly objects that, *'if the husband does something for himself only it is approved but if the same thing is done by the woman in the family then how come it becomes unnecessary expenditure? and she as a spendthrift?'* and if one wants to demand such type of liberty, the society and other members in the family expect her to be economically independent, and she thinks that it is the exploitation of being economically dependent. Another friend supports this point and says that her husband whose job required a lot of travelling and touring, while returning he used to bring many costly gift items and sarees for her. She admits that initially she liked it but now she don't even want to wear the costly sarees because under the heaviness and costliness of the gift the husband demands uninterrupted party with friends where he is allowed to drink and enjoy up to late night. This is another form of exploitation and the friend questions, *'can't we have a separate personal own world?'* Husbands have the reason that their job requirements are so, that, they have to go out and work but we are left with home and the household duties round the clock and round the year. Her husband replies on this remark and says that she too can have a group where she can enjoy. She remarks-

*Wife: "Only to be teased and taunted by you that we have started our 'womanly gossip' / 'Feminine Gossip', 'When we don't get to see the world, (Brave new world) how could the orbit of our gossip be widened and global?'*⁶

The friend then continues that she learns 'French' and goes to coffee clubs and enjoy it. But when the husband returns she again goes back to her 'Magic Mantle' of the so called 'ideal housewife' who is delicate, soft, docile, obedient, sweet, role of a wife. She continues *'At least I learn something my other neighbours only sleep in the afternoons, and my husband too says that I should not go out in the noon time. Instead I should take rest or sleep so that, when 'he' returns from the office I should look fresh and appealing (entertaining) to him.'* The other friend asks, *'are we prostitutes? To entertain the husband? This is like men are the sun and we are like sunflowers, to change ourselves/ the direction wherever the sun goes?'*⁷

And the writer then poses the question as to how far this is right? As this situation can be applied to almost all the households in India, the author has not given names to the characters, they are just called as first friend, second friend and likewise.

The third essay is from Hindi by Dr. Nirupama Shrivastava, '*Biwi Ka Substitute*' 'Substitute for a Wife', the word substitute itself underlines the subaltern existence of women and specially that of wives. Here the case is of distribution of duties and the rights of women. Again as aforementioned here too the wife is considered to be the one responsible for all the household work. The husband who earlier was on some very ordinary post was then promoted to a high post and then onwards turns the house into his office and the members of the house into his office staff! The children play the role of peons and messengers, the wife had to submit the estimate of the expenditure with an application justifying the expenses, in advance, then the husband would check it, verify it and if it is ok he would approve it. (And similar situation without the official framework is found in many households) This procedure is exercised for even the smallest thing in the house. The husband ceases to be a husband and a father, and becomes more and more of an officer. He maintains the punctuality and strictness of the office in the home too. His children and wife find themselves to be stuck in a troublesome situation. They want some way out of it and to change the situation too. A wedding of a close relative comes in the form of the relief. The wife and children apply for 'leave' to go to the wife's mother's place. But the leave is sanctioned to children only and wife's leave was not approved because if the 'entire office staff' is going somewhere there must be some provision of an alternative or substitute. The entire office cannot go on leave at the same time!

The wife was an educated and intellectual lady. In order to teach her husband a lesson, she makes a robot for the household work, programmes it according to the timings, requirements and demands of the husband and goes to the wedding.

The husband, when he comes home is surprised that the door was opened by the robot and there is a note stating that the wife has left for the wedding. He in the beginning gets angry but after seeing the execution of duties by the robot feels proud about his wife and enjoys the services of the robot.

After two-three days, when he does not feel well and starts his day late the robot as he was programmed could not understand the change, and there is no provision of changing the time settings and the husband's entire day gets spoiled. All of his routine things change upside down and he feels pathetic. The climax occurs when the robot does not open the door on the return of the husband, as the robot's time setting restricts him from doing so. The husband then tries to enter from the backyard, seeing this, the robot calls the police that some thief has entered into the house. When the husband tries to snatch the receiver from the robot it slaps him very hard. When the police arrive the husband narrates the entire episode to them. Then he realises his own mistake and feels guilty about it. He realises how his wife has to work hard fulfilling the household duties and keeping the times of all the members. He then appreciates his wife and her devotion towards the family and goes to bring her back at once. He realises the importance of the wife only because she is shouldering the household responsibilities. Otherwise as a person whether he would have ever realised her importance or not that is not known. The treatment to the wife is that of a subordinate and afterwards that of the office staff. This patriarchal dominance is seen in near about every Indian household.

These three women writers and their essays, suggest three different waves of feminism one, Judy Brady where she is revolting and wondering that Women too should have a wife, in the second, Chhaya Datar is pondering for the equality in the house and the treatment to women as an object to entertain or lure men, and the underestimation of the cerebral qualities of a wife, and the third one where Nirupama Shrivastava's 'wife' takes some action and replaces herself by a robot (because if she has to be there for the sake of the 'work' mechanically and is not treated equally and as a human being then the robot too can perform the 'work'). The noteworthy fact about all these women writers is that, their character fight back against the "male chauvinism".

All these three stories have one thing in common, the women in them want to rebel, revolt and change the situation. They are not merely complaining but are ready to act for the change. The most important factor is that they want to be known and acknowledged for their mental abilities too. It is like 'Jude the Obscure's' struggle to raise form the level and be known as an intellectual. They want to be treated as equal when the question is of mental abilities; they are not ready to take the back seat. These stories are in a way social discourses which reflect the state of women in Indian society and in educated households. One can imagine the problem in uneducated and illiterate backgrounds. The 'so called' equality will not help, the mental set up of the people needs to be changed then only there can be equality in the real sense.

Note: Some of the sentences (cited above) are translated by the author herself, from Marathi essays.

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