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Flaming the Torch: The New Women of Post Independent India by Nayantara Sahgal and Ruth Prawar Jhabvala

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Women writers, thus, explored many vistas; from the subconscious to the unconscious, from reality to abstract, from self-denial to self-assertion, from negation of the physical to an affirmation of bodily charms. Alienation or protest against tradition was the first move towards autonomy and freedom. Nayantara Sahgal's women question conventions and seek changes in society to permeate self-fulfillment and individual happiness. Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, through her delicate irony and wit dramatizes the situation in her novels. These women accept the western notions of freedom of spirit, only to get a suitable boy as a partner for life. Full of possibilities, growth and grace, female writers have created characters who are strong, yet conforming to values; vibrant, yet enduring pain; prominent, yet having an anchorage towards coercive togetherness. They have broken silences, built bridges, filled in the gaps and still formed an identity of their own. The Indian woman emerges intact and whole, having undergone a catharsis. Her voyage for freedom and space has come full circle.

The early Indian women novelists defined woman as a victim of tradition, fate, circumstances, dominance, etc. She emerges, at the end of her trial, vibrant, independent, with an inner strength. She accepts convention as a means of survival. Her search for the self ended not in self-denial or self-negation of values, but a merging of her self with that of a daughter/ wife/ mother/ sister so on. Thus, woman created a space for herself, along with a coercive togetherness of the family.

The writers of the new breed concentrated on the varied persona of the Indian woman. She reflected the concord of ideology and imagination. She also heralded a change in the medium of expression. Women writers, thus, explored many vistas; from the subconscious to the unconscious, from reality to abstract, from self-denial to self-assertion, from negation of the physical to an affirmation of bodily charms. They projected their intimate experiences, sexual and moral dilemmas, along with championing the cause of women in an uninhibited candour. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes: The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways, but they do not succeed in living completely the life of a human being. (30)

Social and political change in the post-independent India offered equal rights and opportunities for the Indian woman to develop her capabilities. Impact of Western education, convergence of liberalism to Indian order, a growing awareness of self-identity, called for a drastic change in the image of woman in society. It is through her presence and consciousness that the woman writer of the century sought greater conformity to individual freedom and recognition of the self. The woman writer tries to assimilate modern ideologies with tradition, thereby creating a space for individual growth and contentment. She awakens with a new sensibility and greater understanding of the woman question. Alienation or protest against tradition was the first move towards autonomy and freedom.

Nayantara Sahgal's women question conventions and seek changes in society to permeate self-fulfillment and individual happiness. They move towards a more liberal and unconventional way of

life; the process involving the hardships of attacking an established order and the shattering experience of alienation from society thereof. According to Shanta Krishnaswamy:

She (the Indian woman) is no longer the paragon of virtue and chastity to be extolled by poets and philosophers. She is the symbol of imagination, of sensibility itself, of nature arraigned versus the forces abroad actively denaturing humanity.... The woman has now become the perfect image of the artist's insecurity. His isolation, fear, bewilderment, vulnerability and sense of acute violation; potential and actual; are all mirrored through the consciousness. (*Women* 3-4)

Faith and fidelity form the core of a successful marriage. Sahgal's women suffer on account of loveless marriages, and domestic turmoil. Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is aghast to learn about her husband's infidelity. She has to excuse him to maintain domestic harmony but her soft confession of a pre-marital affair with a boy is not a passport to win Inder's love. Lack of communication leads to anger and suffering, and Saroj is helpless, "she could not tear away the blinds between herself and Inder or take him to her thoughts" (98).

Saroj refuses to adhere to the dual standards of morality, and prefers to leave home and seek refuge in the company of Vishal Dubey. For her, human relationships should be changed with understanding, faithfulness and not as puppets:

two people who happened to live under the same roof, no real bond between them, only the accumulation of a life-time's living habits. (228)

Urban forces, economic, social and political, paralysed human sensibility. Sahgal's novels reverberate with the life behind the façade of luxury. The urban woman, like Mara (Vishal's wife), free and bold, Westernized in outlook, hopes to find an outlet in running a school by herself. Her hankering for wealth and power mars her marital life; and she withers in the engulfing power of the urban civilized society.

Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) snaps a meaningless conjugal relationship which did not have "intensity, depth, devotion or partnership". Cowed down by Som's need for self-advancement, she feels separation to be a path to freedom and individuality. Divorce becomes another entanglement, another battleground on which she has to prove herself as a person. In her work *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Woman*, Meena Shirwadkar professes that Simrit is the image of:

a frustrated woman, angry wife, trying to inject tension or even disintegration into the family in the process of asserting her individuality. These women leave the family or turn to a man older than the husband, thus shattering the prime rule of chastity in the individual code. (77)

Echoes of such dissatisfying experiences and moments can be found in Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's Judy in *A Backward Place* (1965) and in Anita Desai's Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1963). Nita and Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* (1965) by Sahgal, protest against accepted norms. Nita wishes to judge her prospective life-partner before going through any conventional alliance. Sahgal projects the modern woman as a victim of sexual desires and the liberalism of the West; a theme to be dealt with future writers therein. If Nita's love for Kalyan is an extension of her primal desires, Rashmi seeks an escape from her shattering marriage, by a relationship with Neil. In an age of transition and impermanence of values, the woman's psyche is caught in a flux. Unable to bear the trauma of a meaningless relationship, women seek freedom and autonomy elsewhere.

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, through her delicate irony and wit dramatizes the situation in Shakuntala in *Esmond in India* (1957) and Nimmi in *The Nature of Passion* (1956). These women accept the western notions of freedom of spirit, only to get a suitable boy as a partner for life. Nimmi receives higher education, is allowed to have a haircut, is introduced to clubs and dances, as an accomplishment to perfect marriage. Jhabvala's women are treated only as possessions, whose only function in life is to get married and assimilate herself in her husband's home:

... a woman is a woman and her duties in life very different from the duties of a man ... it is a woman's fate to leave the house of her father and go to her husband's house, to bear his children, to look to the comforts of his family. (112)

As the sacredness of marriage still holds true in India, Nimmi, in spite of her temporary lapses, adheres to family's honour and faith.

Nimmi's love for Western attitudes, finds an extension in Asha of *A New Dominion* (1972). Widowhood does not shrink her life-styles. Sentimental, impulsive and with a passion for life, Asha craves for merry-making and enjoyment. Her passionate love affair with Gopi, a young college student is a challenge to the otherwise accepted norms of chastity and fidelity. Oscillating between self-indulgence and self-disgust; extreme exhilaration and deep depression, she questions the social pattern and behaviour. Aware of her weaknesses, she is true to her self. Her attachment for her parental property, score for her brother's political uplift, her affection for her kith and kin, form a woman with strong feelings but weak determinism.

The modern woman is further enhanced and matured in Jhabvala's novel *Get Ready for Battle* (1962). Taken together, Kusum and Sarla Devi feature the contrasting personalities of a modern woman and her search for a new vision. Sarla Devi crosses her threshold to work for the poor, weak and destitute. Though she "has never really cared for anyone, only herself" (14), she is determined to prevent the take-over and development by her husband's company, of the land acquired by the poor. Her step brings about an open conflict with other members of her family, but she is constant in her promise to the destitute. Her walking away to a life of filth and prostitution is a voyage for self-assertion. She emerges a strong character battling against injustice.

Gulab in *Esmond in India* (1968) awakens a new sensibility in woman. Like M.R. Anand's Gauri, she suffers her husband, Esmond's abuses and physical assaults; who in turn, dislikes her abominably. Her passivity makes her indifferent to life. When her man-servant tries to molest her, she jolts out of her reverie of unquestioning acceptance to male order. She decides to leave Esmond, who has failed to protect her identity, both as a wife and a human being. With a determined effort to leave her household, she leaves the door open and does not look back. Neena Gupta explains the working consciousness of Jhabvala woman's mind:

Jhabvala allows us a glimpse of the stirrings within the Indian woman, of having an independent say in important matters, of desires which leap beyond the confining walls of her home, of longings for a share in the world beyond, of an identity of her own. Though in the end the male factor threatens to swamp her identity, yet she succeeds in making an indelible impression on the reader's minds. (68)

Full of possibilities, growth and grace, female writers have created characters who are strong, yet conforming to values; vibrant, yet enduring pain; prominent, yet having an anchorage towards coercive

togetherness. They have broken silences, built bridges, filled in the gaps and still formed an identity of their own. The Indian woman emerges intact and whole, having underwent a catharsis. Her voyage for freedom and space has come full circle. The journey from change through conformity has ended with a change through understanding, patience and humanity. Jasbir Jain explains:

Receiving its impetus from the feminist movements, a process of self-discovery and of recovery of a female tradition has been set in motion. It is a journey of questioning of the form of epistemological formulations and of personal awareness. (*Women' Writing 4*)

After the gender revolution in 1970s, writing by women about women has become a socio-political act. Women writers feel compelled to justify their fears, tensions, conflicts and observations. With a strong element of protest, like their Western counterparts, Indian women writers have deliberately sought the novel as their medium of expression. Through it, they capsule the situation of the modern woman. They question the oppressor or the social other, analyzing the form, context and reasons for protest. The 'other' or the oppressor in the Indian context is not just the husband, lover or any male member but the entire family, sometimes the system or the society as a whole. Viney Kirpal analyses that the writing of new female writers is feminist in character:

It is a frontal attack on patriarchy and its tools – the processes of socialization, traditional myths, social customs and practices – that are responsible for the zero worth of women in our society. Women have always been told to conceal, edit, and suppress the facts of their biological experiences such as menstruation, sex, pregnancy and childbirth. Like Feminists in the West, some Indian women novelists have begun to speak uninhibitedly about their bodily experiences and to write as Mary Jacobus has said, 'of what cannot be written'. (qtd. in Jain 171)

Intimate feelings and emotions of women are caught in great detail. If the major novelists delineated the pleasure of motherhood, that contented and fulfilled desire that every woman encounters, modern novelists would rebel against the idea. They focus on the maddening pain, the feeling of being left with a raw wound, and the view that the social acceptability of motherhood can be quite disheartening for a woman. Nayantara Sahgal in *Rich Like Us*, captures the feelings of Nishi at childbirth, from this angle:

Her selves lay torn in jagged halves on the delivery table, under the masked indifferent scrutiny of strangers and their implements.... It was night and a scientific light fell mercilessly on her exposed and wounded flesh, her cry deranging no one but herself. Their announcement of motherhood revived, fresh raw protest.... A stranger laid the child she hadn't wanted.... By morning ... a wall shutting out the memory of the night's violence had implacably, invisibly encircled her. (234)

Subverting social dogmas, ethos, tradition, beliefs and looking at the world from a woman's point of view, is the crux of new woman fiction. There is nothing novel about their experiences, but the ability to enliven the experiences and emotions on paper and narration of private feelings as an insider to those experiences, enhances human sensibility. Women's writing, thus, seeks to rewrite history. It is continuously working for the transformation of the female characters into assertive human beings. The literary work provides role models, instilling positive sense of feminine identity and portraying women who are self-actualizing, having a separate identity of their own. The characters of these women novelists are bold, courageous and fight for their survival. They seem to have an aversion for dependence, vulnerability, self-absorption and pessimism. K. Meerabai opines:

... they aspire, attempt and strive to be their true selves. They rebel against sexist discrimination, question the double standards, and refuse the dual morality. They continue their struggle unmindful of the outcome. They are women who respect their selves and hence register a vociferous protest against intimidation and humiliation meted down to them. They refuse to be cowed down and crushed. (138)

Women, through their writing, have handled language which had developed through masculine constructs. Men's discourses had trapped women in a male-perceived truth. Women were forced to adapt to their image, as conceived by the man. Under the patriarchal system of society the female's language was considered to be inferior, weak, trivial and uncertain. In contrast, man's voice was stronger, deliberately forceful, and objective. As Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* sketches "a plan of the soul" writes:

... in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female, and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man, (93-94)

Hence, a writer's attitude is a replica of his narrative strategies. With immense courage and sensibility, women's writings have deconstructed literary forms and social constructs. Moving out of cultural and disciplinary boundaries, it seek to bring forth the literature of silence, all that had been submerged and suppressed in the clamour of male voices.

With the accessibility to education, the right to economic earning, the right to property and the right to vote, women are fully aware of their rights, liberties and weaknesses. Women's writing presents the disturbing awareness of the precarious nature of woman's position in society. The upcoming of women's pressures, the acknowledgement of publishing houses of women's writing and the financial help rendered thus, all sought to create a general awareness for women's literature. Viney Kirpal suggests:

Thus, in different though complementary ways, both male and female Indian English novelists have sought 'to light the torch' to extirpate existing gender inequalities and transform patriarchal society. (178)

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