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Ethical Dilemma in Portrayal of Woman Characters: A Study of Fiction From *New Woman Magazine*

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Abstract:

In India, Women were held in high esteem in the Vedic period. They enjoyed a position of respect and stature in the society. Though the freedom movement gave women the opportunity to break the hegemony of men in the literary works, the writings of women were not properly appreciated in the society. Despite constitutional and legal guarantees concerning the equality of the sexes, women in Post –Independence era could not be at par with their male counterparts. Post-Independence period was influenced by the west especially on Indian social framework and more so through their literary works. Many Indian writers have translated their works from regional languages to English by homogenising them and in the process had an impact of the west. In India, marriage has a high degree of respect and has had a spiritual and religious base, but eventually it became contractual. With this transformation, extra marital relationships have become aberrations or transgressions of such contractual obligations. Writers in the fiction section of ‘New woman magazine’ have written on various issues concerning women. It includes themes such as love, marriage and extra-marital relationship. The author has taken up the theme of ‘extra-marital relations’ which has created an ethical dilemma in the minds of the readers. In this context, the author analyses various aspects citing the various women characters in the select fiction from ‘New Woman’ magazine.

Keywords: Ethical Dilemma, Women, Marriage, Extra marital Affairs, New Woman Magazine (NWM), Post- Independence.

In the Post-Independence era, woman’s education and her economic independence have given rise to conflicts as society is in a confused state of transition between traditional values and the modern outlook. Some writers are advocating a change, while the others are not quite sure if the economic independence will lead to boosting women’s self-confidence and bringing in the concept of ‘New Woman’ in them. At the same time, women writers took up this issue while realising the enormity of the social bias meted out on them while taking up other new issues and the problems associated with women.

Short story, as a literary genre, has a unique position in the modern era. Indian woman writers in English and other regional languages like Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, Chitra Mudgal, Vasundhara Patwardhan, Krishna Sobti, Anita Desai etc., are some of the names that deserve mention who gave an impetus to the genre and popularised it. These writers have taken up the initiative to expose the plight of women into the open. Short story is mainly fostered and promoted by magazines and journals. During the last few decades, the scope of the short story witnessed a significant expansion and it became a popular genre in all Indian languages.

Adultery or Infidelity considered a sin; a taboo so far, has ceased to shock the readers now, though it has become an 'Ethical dilemma', some writers look at extra-marital or pre-marital relations as sympathetic understanding. Likewise, love-marriages, divorce etc., have also been dealt with realistically by short fiction. Problem encountered by the urban society is that of adultery which is now seen under the mantle of 'freedom'. These stories look at sexual desire from a new angle and do not consider adultery as a sin or even as an aberration.

Writers in the fiction section of *New Woman* magazine have written on various issues and problems pertaining to women. It includes various themes and one of them taken up by the author is 'extra-marital relations'. Such stories have created an 'Ethical dilemma' in the minds of the readers.

In this context, the author has analysed four short stories from the *New Woman Magazine* citing various aspects about the woman characters in the select short stories from *New Woman* magazine and highlighted the issues causing 'Ethical dilemma'.

Deshpande's, "An Antidote to Boredom" (*NWM*, Jul. 2006) is a short story that depicts the picture of the society where modern educated Indian women find themselves in a difficult position with no means of escape. 'An Antidote to Boredom' reflects the loneliness and boredom of a woman whose married life lacks spark and happiness. The story touches the heart with its simplicity of plot and narration. The woman monotonously performs her household chores, and waits in vain for her husband's words of appreciation. Living together as a couple, they are leading an artificial life lacking love and feelings for each other, as there is nothing interesting to add a spark to their dull life.

The story begins with "Do you want more sugar in your coffee? sugar? No...no. Maybe a little bit. Half a spoon...I got the sugar, stirred the coffee. For that again was something he would not notice" (59). The story emphasizes the protagonist's craving for emotional support from her husband and her inner conflict when her needs remain unfulfilled.

The story highlights the condition of women in the contemporary society where they are educated and committed for their family yet their lives lack that happiness and satisfaction which they deserve. The protagonist in the story longs for the love and affection but her husband is carelessly unconcerned about the feelings of his wife. She states, "he would notice nothing but that he had been served his coffee" (59).

At this point in the narrative another man enters into the protagonist's life and changes it by adding spark to it. She meets the man at her son's school. The protagonist experiences a longing to meet this man, for she states, "the thought of meeting him kept me keyed up to a more intense pitch of living. His frank admiration was as refreshing to me as cold water on a hot day. Until then, nobody had cared what I wore, how I dressed" (60).

Their gradual attraction develops into an obsessive fascination for each other. Deshpande highlights the inner struggles of a married woman who experiences tender loving relationship with another man but is unable to enjoy it due to the pangs of guilt which remind her of her moral responsibility of a committed married woman. It seems that she wants to hammer her significance and her presence to her husband, she states, "I feel like shocking him, shaking him out of his lethargy by screaming in his ears" (61).

The protagonist faces an inner struggle, a state of confusion due to which she is unable to take the right decision at this point of time. One fine day, when asked by her husband to accompany him, the woman gets startled, for she feels that he is aware of her intentions. The

protagonist states, "I saw adull, red light flicker in his eyes, like a warning" (61). In a decisive moment the wiferealizes and thinks, "it had been no mere antidote to boredom, but thebest part of my life. And I let it go" (61).

Eventually, she sacrifices her love for the sakeof her marital life, by not breaking the social customs and taboos. Herethe protagonist givesin to the demands of the society and the institution called 'marriage' and as a result ignores her own personal feelings and does what thesociety expects out of her.

"The Dearly Beloved Kept Woman"(NWMOct.2004)is a storywhich highlights the plight of the 'other woman' which is about a lady student who falls in love with her teacher, an English professor. Though the protagonist knew that he was married and had children, she could not stop loving him. One day late in the evening, the young woman, was setting in the library when he came in and confessed. "I have missed you. Will you come with me? (81)". She consents and they both go to her parents, though reluctantly they had to permit their daughter lead her own life. The two then go to a cottage in Juhu where they stay for 3 days in complete tranquil and bliss.

She started loving the cottage and that was her home for twenty years. Later she lost both her parents so the professor was only her love.The protagonist was not married to the professor she often felt bad for not being married to him,"My love was quite well-known so I could not be seen with him too often. He was still married. If I had been married to him I would have not given him up. So I could understand his wife, I think. So I was his kept woman, his mistress, and the other woman.Ofcourse, he called me his beloved, hislove, his companion, his best friend."(82)

She often wished that the wife of her lover dies so that she could take her place, "I want her to die, it is my turn"(82) But sadly the story ends with the lament of the protagonist who is left behind alone after the death of her lover.

The story depicts the sad plight of the lonely 'other woman' in a society which is yet to openly accept the 'other woman'.Infact,the age old conditioning does not allow any woman to think of another man.

In the story,"Lingering Doubts"(NWMOct. 2004) the protagonist husband's wayward nature forces the wife to doubt him on various occasions which wounds her emotions deep within. They were married for 20 years and blessed with two grown up teenager daughters. RaghuramVedam was a successful medical doctor from New Jersey, a charmer and an ideal husband and father in many ways.

"It's not the first time I have found something disturbing incriminating amongst my husband's personal belongingness. I have never summoned the courage to question the mysterious smudges on his clothes,thetraces of perfumes on himon many occasions, the unexplained charges on his credit card. And this time she finds asingle red hair on his jacket which he recently discarded."(127)

Dr.Raghu, one fine evening insisted on going out for dinner with the protagonist, his wife.Once at the restaurant, Dr. Raghu introduces his wife, Mira to the waitressand her immediate reaction makes the protagonist wonder."He is on a first name basis with this woman? Is it the Lasanga or the busty Lindsey that brought him to this particular restaurant, I wonder?"(128)

Later, Ms. Lindsey narrates how Dr. Vedam saved her daughter when she got injured and that's when the protagonist realises that she doubted her husband unnecessarily as she saw the fiery red hair of Lindsey and a whiff of Gardenia which she smelt in Dr Raghu's jacket. The story highlights about male infidelity and the plight of woman who in spite of knowing that something is amiss cannot openly question her husband about his wayward nature.

The theme of male infidelity is dealt with in another story, "Annie's necklace" (NWM Oct. 2006). Annie's maid Maria takes care of the household chores efficiently. One fine day an expensive diamond necklace gets lost and Annie suspects that she drops it in her neighbour's car, but eventually gets to know that it was found in Maria's chamber and ironically, was not stolen by Maria, but by the protagonist's husband.

Annie discovered that the maid was sexually exploited by her husband and she gets pregnant. Annie prefers to keep mum and get her aborted and at the time of abortion doctor clearly said that Maria would not conceive again. The protagonist was clear about her plan to have Maria as her maid forever. "It is only because of Maria that I have my material comforts and I am not willing to let it just go!" (137)

"This problem will be never settled even if one Maria is sent away! There would be yet another story with yet another maid!" (137) Annie was sure that her husband's wayward nature won't change, then why should she sacrifice her comforts.

The protagonist knew that all this will surely not change her husband John so she says, "Will John ever be mine? Then why should I let go my material happiness?" (138)

Here the liberal attitude of the wife is highlighted. Instead of creating a scene, she behaves as naturally as she does daily. She feels that her life is her own and nothing should disturb its inner harmony. Withdrawing into herself, she feels contented. As she does not want her material comfort to be lost.

Post-independence literature in India portrays all these trends and gives voice to women for a new and just order of society. Over the years, the age-old image of woman seems to be blurring slowly and gradually transforming into a new image called 'New woman'. An insight into women's characters, their thoughts and modern outlook is portrayed in these short stories. These stories, although are set in different backgrounds, yet it reveals realistic representation of women's condition in the patriarchal society. All the women characters mentioned are juggling between the domain of tradition and modernity. Also these short stories portray women characters in such a manner that it leaves us in a state of 'Ethical dilemma', a self-questioning state in the patriarchal, male dominated world.

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