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Literature and Identity: The Portrayal of Female Struggle for Identity

Rushika Gill

Assistant Professor in English
BBK DAV College for Women
Amritsar.

Literature is a medium for bringing before the readers the true picture of society and its inhabitants. Literature is the channel which can portray before society its devilish attitude towards women and can also help in rectifying that attitude. Women have been a part of literature. Literature mirrors life and the response of society towards the portrayal of females. Society is a dominion of males where women are given very less importance. The expectations of society reign over the will of the individual irrespective of his or her gender. In such a scenario, the condition of women becomes all the more pathetic.

A good literary work should provide realistic insights into the personality of females so as to enlighten the consciousness of masses. This can be done by portraying women as self dependent entities whose identities are not framed by the male dominated society. Freedman in his work, *Feminism*, has quoted Firestone who defines woman's liberation as "a struggle to break free from oppressive power structures set up by nature and reinforced by men" (69). The female characters of my stories are enlightened beings who refuse to be guided by the thought patterns handed down to them by society. This idea is clearly illustrated in the two short stories that I have undertaken in my research paper. The stories, "Draupadi" by Mahashweta Devi and "Spirits of Silence" by Venita Coelho present female characters as ones fighting to establish identities of their own.

"Draupadi" by Mahashweta Devi presents the story of a female dalit rebel named Draupadi who is shown engaged in the militant struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. Beauvoir in her work, *The Second Sex*, has rightly opined, "For the males, it is always another male who is the fellow being, the other who is also the same, with whom the reciprocal relations are established" (75). Women, for men, are not human beings as men look upon females as mere commodities having no desires and dreams of their own. But Mahashweta Devi, in her story, has positioned her female protagonist not as a passive object but as an active agent; one who makes her presence feel in the text. Her actions are completely contrary to her mythological namesake i.e. Draupadi of *Mahabhart*. The mythological Draupadi prays and seeks help from Lord Krishna during her predicament while Mahashweta's Draupadi acts for herself unaided by any divine male agency. Devi's Draupadi's actions resemble the actions of Durga and Kali as like them, Devi's Draupadi is the destroyer of male authority.

Devi's Draupadi succeeds in establishing an identity of her own through her actions. "Devi portrays the true face of feminist assertion where Draupadi uses her wholeness of mind and body to fight against her marginalized identity" (Hugar 156). In the story, Draupadi is presented to follow either of the two courses of action. She has two choices one is to follow the status quo and second is to go against the tide of the times. She belongs to that class of people who observe, analyse and rebel against the standard norms, rules and traditions of the social set up.

The story is replete with various incidents that highlight the strength of Draupadi. She is physically, emotionally and psychologically a strong personality. Emotionally, she is attached to her husband Duryodhan but she refuses to lead the life of a typical conservative house wife, rather she and her husband decide to devote their lives to the elimination of the blood sucking money lenders and landowners. Psychologically also she is a strong woman. The death of her husband does not break her and she is strong enough to carry on her struggle. Her idea of changing her route, so as to save the lives of her comrades, is indicative of her mental strength. She doesn't want to deceive them by leading the cops to their hideouts, therefore, she decides to change her way.

The last part of the story highlights the physical strength of her character. Towards the end of the story, the readers see that when Senanayak arrests Draupadi, he tortures her by raping her. In a patriarchal set up, rape is looked upon as a symbol of power and authority of men. Women are raped thinking that the abuse of their bodies is the best way to violate their honour. But Draupadi does not let the rape of her body touch her soul. She, in Yadav's words, emerges as a "terrifying super object- an unarmed target" (244). Her last words, "My honour does not lie between my legs" assert the strength of her character (Devi 33). After having raped Draupadi, the guards make fun of her in order to make her feel as if she is a mere commodity. They, then, ask her to go to Senanayak. They force her to wear clothes before going to Senanayak but Draupadi decides to go there completely naked. For the first time in his life, Senanayak, undergoes the fear of facing an "unarmed target"(Devi 37). When Senanayak sees her wounded body, he does not relish that sight, rather he feels afraid to see her. The female agency finds full expression through her body.

At the end of the story, the guards offer her a pot of water to drink but she refuses to drink it which shows that she is mentally and physically strong enough to refuse to succumb to her thirst. In Rajan's words, "Draupadi adopts a new way of subverting the binaries. She moves from reasoning to protest, from silence to articulation and from ostracism to self-confidence and self-assertion. Draupadi does not let her nakedness shame her, torture her, or rape diminish her" (352).

The second story, "Spirits of Silence" by Venita Coelho deals with the idea that women have been silenced, isolated and maltreated by men. Freedman opines, "Women's moral voice has gone unheard for so long because their ways of making moral judgements are deemed inferior to those of men, whose voices are taken as norms" (19). The present story brings before the readers a strong female character who dares to raise her voice against the existing social set up that does not let females to speak for themselves or to express their personal ideas, thoughts, emotions and feelings. The very first line of the story sets the tone as it highlights the pathetic condition of females. "There is a country where the voices of women have men talk, sing, shout greeting at one another, but the women have learnt to live with silence" (Coelho 45). Not speaking does not mean keeping the mouth sealed completely But it means that women are not allowed to give vent to their selves. Women are not allowed to hold any ideas contrary to the ideas of the males.

The story shows that not even a single woman in the land has had guts to raise her voice either to express joy or anger. It is expected of women, as a part of their duty, to remain silent even if they are physically and psychologically tormented by their lovers, husbands and sons. Beauvoir opines, "There is no other way out for women than to lose themselves, body and soul, in men who are represented to women as absolutes, as essential"(675). Women of the story create a

language of their own but their language remains confined to the four walls of their houses. It is a means for women to supervise their households chores. It is the language that comes not through their mouths but through their gestures. “Women run the house with a lift of an eyebrow, a turn of the head” (Coelho 46). On the other hand, the menfolk are satisfied with the fact that women are not speaking. They feel happy and at peace with this fact. But, suddenly, the readers come across a woman, “who had a voice” (Coelho 46). Her name is Najma.

Najma is brought up in a traditional and orthodox family where her mother was treated not as a human being but as a commodity. Her mother, Alia was married to a Maulvi who was not emotionally attached to her. All that he cared about was the fulfillment of his basic desires. Even when Alia became pregnant, he did not keep company with her. It was with the help of the village midwife that she was able to deliver her baby. After the death of her husband, Alia was forced to live her life according to the desires of the members of the village panchayat. She was forced to get her daughter, Najma married because in the male dominated society, women are not expected to take decisions for their family members. Decisions making is looked upon as an asset of males in this patriarchal set up.

The early days of Najma in her in-laws house were good but with the passage of time, she begins to realize that like her mother, she has been expected by her husband and her in-laws to conform to all the rules and regulations of her family. Whenever she wants to speak out in her family, her husband rebukes her and asks her to speak at night. As a result, when she sings or speaks at night, her father in law begins to suspect as if she is in possession of some evil power. He holds her responsible for defiling the pious atmosphere of his house. Therefore, he along with other members of the Panchayat, decides to throw her out of his house. Najma’s husband, being a male, decides to be on the side of his family and not with his wife.

The whole village gathers around Najma as the people of the village want to see, “How had she retained her voice? Who taught her to speak? How long had she been talking?” (Coelho 52). They begin to ask her various sorts of questions. Najma continues to answer them without stopping. She has got an opportunity to express her ideas and emotions. This shows that males can succeed only in sealing the mouths of the females but the thoughts and ideas, that continue to surge in the hearts of the females, cannot be controlled. If the thoughts and feelings of women are suppressed then they will resort to revolution and rebellion. Beauvoir opines, “When women are called upon for concrete action, when they recognize their interest in the designated goals, they are as bold and courageous as men” (634).

Similar thing happens to Najma as well. She has been brought up in a house where she was forced to keep her real self behind the bars. But now she has got the chance to give vent to her ideas, thoughts and feelings. She talks about her mother, her childhood and all the things that she deserved to get but owing to her gender, she couldn’t get hold of them. Everyone gets surprised and therefore the Maulvi decides to execute her in front of the eyes of the other village women so as to give them a lesson that if they dare to follow the footsteps of Najma, they too will suffer the same way as Najma. Inwardly, they are fearful of the fact that if they won’t punish Najma then she would be successful to install a statue of her in the hearts of other women and they too, like her, would begin to speak. As a result, Najma is gullitoned.

But Najma appears before other women as an agent of action. She, through her sacrifice, succeeds in lighting a lamp of freedom and wisdom in the hearts of her female counterparts. For

the first time, the village women speak in protest to the heinous murder of Najma. The whole atmosphere of the village reverberates with the voices of females as the last paragraph of the story suggests.....

Now the country is covered with an uneasy silence. One that is haunted by many ghosts. Ghosts with creaky voices. Ghosts that click and hiss in the night. Ghosts that whistle unafraid in the dark. Ghosts that talk, tell tales, whisper reason. (Coelho 54).

Ghosts, in this story, refer to women as in a male dominated social set up, women who speak are looked upon as ghosts i.e. something that don't belong or owned by them.

Thus, these stories present before us two strong female characters that, in their own ways, make a mark for themselves. They appear before the female readers as role models. Moreover, they also bring to the fore the superficiality of patriarchy which has relegated women to a subordinate position. Women, over centuries, have developed the habit of applying misconceptions to themselves but now the need of the hour is that women should deconstruct these misconceptions and endeavour to achieve an esteemed position in society. It is not important for female gender to belittle males so as to achieve respect in society; what is important for females is to struggle hard so as to maintain equilibrium as Beauvoir has rightly opined:

Genuine love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties....; neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would manifest values and aims in the world (700).

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