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A Textual Analysis of the Role of Women in Kamleshwar's *Partitions*

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Abstract:

This novel is originally written in Hindi language in 2000 and wins Sahitya Academy Award in 2003. Kamleshwar records the lives of women who have been the prey of preconceived notions about their gender which is the cause of discrimination on each and every level of their existence across the globe with the especial emphasis on the representation of Indian women. The author uses historical facts, personae and settings concerning the different time periods to make his reader aware of the underlying patterns of gender politics and its repercussion over the whole womankind. Hence, Kamleshwar strives to look into the dynamics of feminine gender throughout the history of human civilization. He brings up the issues of women not only in the time and space of mythologies but also scrutinizes their condition in modern world.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Indian Novel, Kamleshwar, Partitions.

Kamleshwar Prasad Saksena or Kamleshwar is a prominent figure in the Indian literature in Hindi of the twentieth century. He is distinguished story-teller, writer, critic, translator, script writer, diarist, editor, journalist, and eventually held the post of 'Additional Director General' of Doordarshan. He is regarded as one of the group of writers of post-independence India who radically subverted the conventions established by pre-independent writers and give new sensibilities and insight to the Indian literature. These are Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972), Amarkant (1925-2014), Bhisham Sahani (1915-2003), Rajendra Yadav (1929-2013), Mannu Bhandari(1931), and Nirmal Verma (1929-2005), among others who lay the foundation of *Nayi Kahani* or "New Story" movement. New Story narratives deal primarily with relationship between the sexes and problems faced by them in society in due course, especially with the emergence of the working woman in the newly independent India. The pioneers of Nayi Kahani movement based their stories in rapidly urbanizing and industrializing India facing the problems of unemployment or underemployment. Their motive is to present number of difficulties and hardships faced by the growing number of middle class in the everyday negotiations of urban life and work.

In the novel Kamleshwar has challenged the essentialist ideas related to the construction of feminine gender to prove social, cultural and political discourses and practices of societies are

responsible for subordination of the women. In brief, the notion of gender can be understood to be referring to the cultural assumptions and practices that govern the social construction of men, women and social relations. The concept of gender gains much of its strength through a contrast with a notion of 'sex' as the biological formation of the body while gender is social construct¹. Hence, a masculine gendering is supposed to bring to mind positive connotations while a feminine gendering is supposed to evoke negative ones. Thus, femininity and masculinity as forms of gender are the products of the cultural regulation of behaviors that are regarded as socially appropriate to given sex. In the matter of femininity which is a subject position of marginality is regarded as an identity category that suggests to the social and cultural characteristics linked with being female. Hence, femininity is to be understood as the culturally regulated behavior held to be socially appropriate to women.

As a true observer of society and human nature, Kamleshwar strives to show the various social evils, iniquities, and prejudices with regard to women in most objective manner. He candidly brings to light the evils of patriarchal social system where discrimination and violence against womankind has become a norm. He presents his views on victimization, idealization and objectification of women by creating different female characters in this novel. The characters of the novel are sometime based on real historical personae while on the other time purely the product of his own imagination. For example, the characters of Gulbadan Begum, Roshan Aara, Gauhar Aara, Sara Shagufta, Bina Ramani, Begum Musheer, Kim Huk Sun, Edwina Mountbatten, and Bilqees, are taken from the real world. While the characters of Zainab, Salma, Vidya, and Surjeet Kaur are the products of his imagination. He also takes the mythic female characters such as the deities from the various mythologies such as Ahilya, Runa, Anu, Tanya, Ena, Susosti, and Kalpa among others. Although most of the female characters of the novel is some way or the other the victim of patriarchy –silenced, muted, raped, feeble, abandoned, and vulnerable yet he portrays the some very positive dominant female characters such as Salma, and Vidya. Besides them there are the characters of Gulbadan Begum, Noor Jahan and Roshan Aara who are very active in the daily affairs of the Mughal palace in their time.

In *Partitions*, Kamleswar investigates the condition of women historically. He starts uncovering the underlying patterns of patriarchy in the depictions of women in time and space of mythologies across the cultures in the world. Then he goes on to investigate the position of women in medieval era and finally discusses the life of women in modern time. But these stories are not narrated in linear manner but all of them are intermingled and sometime interconnected. The following quote from deities will clear whole picture, as they speak, 'we goddess are distressed by the injustice meted out to us by gods like you. You have always victimized us' (24). This denotes the extreme condition of patriarchy that even deities are the victims. A very interesting example is here goddess Tanya's rebuke to supreme god Anu, she claimed:

‘mankind’s discovery of friendship and love has evidently left you deeply perturbed. But what has prevented you from cultivating the same virtues yourselves? You are the epitomes of arrogance. You have allowed yourselves to

forget that it is to mankind's worship that we owe our very existence and our privileged position. Everyone of you is self-centered and utterly devoid of sentiments. In your arrogance, you band together to outrage a women's modesty and father illegitimate offspring. Your selfishness knows no bounds and you cannot fathom the value of friendship. Lacking the spirit of unity, you perpetuate rivalries. Your immoral conduct renders you incapable of creating either a culture or a civilization. You forget that besides love and friendship, mankind has also established the pious rituals of childbirth. All you are capable of is unbridled passion, not love. You have fostered malice, not camaraderie. In your abode reside your illegitimate offspring who are ignorant of traditions and values' (22)

Moreover, goddess Tanya's argument presents the critique of patriarchy even in time and space of gods. For its scathing attack on the ways of gods and the way they treat the female deities. It brings to light male-gods' immoral deeds, licentious life-style, and sexist attitude toward the deities. In spite of so many negative aspects, all of them are being worshiped and temples are being built on their name. While female standing on the periphery has no choice but to obey men.

Kamleswar wants to speak by describing lives of deities that entire womankind is in the clutch of patriarchal monologism² irrespective of their social positioning in the world. Therefore starting with analyzing the women's representation in mythologies, Kamleswar brings the reader into the real world. He sets a stage for healthy debate concerning women's role in society in the modern world. He gives different historical and fictional account of female characters to highlight violence, brutalities, and injustice inflicted on the half of the humanity. He narrates the story of Lady Mountbatten, who occupies the higher social status in society but could not break the manacles of patriarchy. Over and again she is being reprimanded by his husband, as he admonished her: 'listen, Edvina. You are no longer Edvina Ashley. You happened to be the lawfully wedded wife of India's viceroy and Governor-General. You are expected to honour the traditions of the British empire...' (41).

Hence, Kamleshwar recounts the various instances to show how modern women are feeling suffocated by the repressive social norms which ascribed the different role to men and women. The narrative of this novel is replete with numerous female voices and consciousness. There is presence of meek and submissive voices that has been the victim of men's brutal treatment and being unheard for long time at one hand while some dominant and subversive voices on the other. But all these different voices and consciousness' are associated in a way that they talk of the same thing i.e., patriarchy, while maintaining their independent existence and autonomy.

In this novel readers are acquainted with the consciousnesses of Zainab, Vidya, Salma , and Sujeet Kaur. The consciousnesses of these four characters dominate the whole feminist discourse in the novel. Salma is most vocal character of the novel somewhat seems the female protagonist. She is educated, assertive, bold, beautiful, and well-informed widow whose love

interest is outside of her religion. Therefore she presents the consciousness of modern woman. She acts subversively against established order, norms, and male-centric worldviews. The following quote will demonstrate her confrontation with patriarchal values in the space of male-centric world to affirm her identity:

'Ask no question. Nor seek answers. Let's not interrogate each other about the mundane matters in our lives. Let's put aside our mental blocks and live life the way we want to...like the pearl diver who brooks no questions while descending to the depths of the ocean' (103).

This shows that Salma asserts her independence and uses her intellectual and sexual autonomy to shatter the stereotypical image imposed on whole womankind. Furthermore, when her deceased husband's cousin Naim forbids her to choose a Hindu man Salma asks him, "does anyone ever inquire about a beloved's religion before falling in love?" (111). She retorts that if in the name of Islam I agree, "...to sleep with you, your shariat, your hadith and your revered Koran would rush to accommodate me! ... So don't bring up the issue of religion! There are many depraved bastards like you who use religion as an instrument to satisfy their own carnal desires!" (113).

It is clear from the above quoted statements that Kamleshwar wants to present the idea that modern women are no longer willing to stay in their traditional place, surrendering their voice, identity, and freedom. The fact of the matter is that Salma is the creation of novel's protagonist's imagination but her voice dominates over every male character that comes into her contact. She has full control over her language and consciousness to interpret various happenings of her time. She fearlessly disrupts the REASONED male-centric arguments and puts remarks over the official public discourse. This is the reason her very conception of religion is based on her own consciousness. She neither gives preferentiality to the opinions of the followers of her own religion nor does she support those beliefs of Hinduism which are not based on humanism. She is of the view that "the roots of culture lie in religion, but with the passage of time, culture liberates itself from the shackles of faith and takes on a humanitarian aspect" (94). Moreover, she explains that: "Religion does not establish the parameters of national identity. Much before organized religion came into being, every society functioned on the basis of some kind of faith or principle" (112). For her the very act of creating Pakistan itself is sin because its foundation is built on hatred. Hence she challenges and deconstructs the dominant and authoritative patriarchal discourse while presenting the marginalized viewpoint in most emphatic manner.

The voices and consciousness of Zainab, Surjeet Kaur, Vidya, Kim Huk Sun, Sara Shagufta, Shaheen, Bina Ramani and some other unnamed female characters portray the persecution of female gender and sexuality. With the portrayal of these characters, Kamleshwar wants to delineate the despicable picture of women in modern world. In the realm of marriage and sexuality there is only a limited space for women to raise their voice and choice. They are degraded to the level of merely an object, or a commodity. The novel's first scene of attempted

rape with Zainab makes it abundantly clear what it means to be a female sexual object in this world. The man who attempts to rape her says to Buta Singh who forbids him to do so, ‘After Pakistan’s borders were established, this Mussalam girl became a part of my spoils’ (29) and subsequently sell her in fifteen hundred rupees to him. There is also the voice and consciousness of Kim Huk Sun who was abducted by Japanese soldiers in WW II. They raped her “fifteen times a day without respite” and made her “comfort woman” with forty thousand women (79). There is also the voice of Bilquees who is exploited by Bilal, an Emiratian officer, with impunity. When court of Adeeb summoned him he says, “Oh Bilquees... no Hindustani woman’s life is so precious that I should answer for it! In your own country, many Bilqueeses lose their lives in riots. Many of them are molested, but you choose to remain silent” (78). The story of Surjeet Kaur is no different. To save the life of her son she leaves Multan. She wears a resplendent dress and jewelry as Adeeb explains, “she knew the rioters would target her jewelry and thus diverted, they would spare her son when the jewelry would gone, they would rape her. Once again they would leave her son alone” (318). Vidya also faces the same fate. Two boys of her own community raped her in godown as Adeeb explain, “In a godown filled with potatoes, they had used her to satisfy their hindu lust. Out of shame and fear, she could not bring herself to utter a word about it to her babuji” (333). Adeeb also narrates the story of an unnamed married woman of Bangladesh who is gang-raped before her family by the soldiers of his own country after liberating her village from the enemies.

So the aim of Kamleswar is to show the abject realities of modern world as far as question of woman is concerned. Going through the several female consciousnesses and hearing the subdued voices in the novel, reader would realize how gender differences and religious commitments can be used in the time of conflict, tussle, riot, and war where men uses rape as not only to quench their carnal desires but also as an instrument of traumatizing not just the women in question but their families and, finally, the community in which they live. Adeeb says in this regard that “Man will never cease to reap harvests of thorn from fields irrigated with human blood. Women will remain perennial victims of rape and assault” (36).

Thus in *Partitions* Kamleshwar unravels the layers of so called civilized world that could not have given equity and justice to half of the humanity. Even today it objectifies womankind and treated them as sexual object to be valued and to be defiled. By using the voices and consciousnesses of several female characters Kamleswar bring to light the exploitation and victimization of whole womankind from the days of the beginning of human civilization to present day. He also snatches away the masks of bigotry, chauvinism, and racism. For these three disseminate the divisive elements in the society and are being used by the rulers from the earliest period of human history for their political gains. The worst victim of the confrontation in society as a result of these conformist notions and manufactured truths are women. They always dwell on the periphery of power struggle and lost irrespective of who is the winner. They sometime lost their husbands, sons, and relative at one hand, honor, virtue, and life on the other. It is

woman that suffers some time physical abuse and sexual exploitation while psychological traumas, emotion distress, and never-ending pangs of guilt on the other.

Endnotes:

¹Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York; London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

²Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryln Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas, 1982.

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