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The Quest of ‘New Woman’: A Cultural Change from the Fiction of *New Woman Magazine*

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Abstract:

Women writers in Indian English Literature have ably portrayed and reflected the culture that was prevalent in the society right from the Pre-Independence period and the transition that took place over the years in our society. These women writers have expressed their opinion in human relationships in terms of social institutions like marriage and family and the role women played in them. The woman, in her journey, wishes to suggest that she is a ‘New Woman’ who is more than a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister or a homemaker and can compete with her counterpart in terms of job challenges, in addition to her domestic challenges. This paper showcases how women characters are seen in select stories in the fiction section of the *New Woman Magazine*, though portrayed as traditional women, undergo a lot of suffering and sacrifices for the institutions like marriage and family, and take decisions at par with their male counterparts. These women think independently, set their own boundaries and in this sense they bring about a cultural change in the society. The author is of the opinion that this new avatar of a traditional woman makes her the ‘New Woman’, as she is competing with her male-counterparts in the society, beyond feminist.

Keywords: English Literature, Marriage, Family, Cultural Change, Feminist, New Woman.

Women were treated on a high pedestal and Goddess worship was widely prevalent throughout the history of humans. But slowly and steadily women were marginalized, their voice was throttled and they were subjugated and dominated by men in due course of time. In the 1970s, feminist political and intellectual culture came into existence to counter patriarchy where women fought and agitated for their rights, demanded that their points of view be heard and be taken up seriously by the society. This aspect of feminine aspirations closely matches with that of ‘New Woman’.

American writer Henry James advocated ‘New Woman’ as a concept. In due course of time the term ‘New Woman’ emerged as a feminist ideal in the late 19th century and had a major influence on feminism. The ‘New Woman’ pushed the limits set by the male-dominated society.

These women as described by Henry James were affluent, educated and independent career women.

Women writers in Indian English Literature have ably portrayed and reflected the culture and tradition that was prevalent in the society right from the Pre-Independence period and the transition that took place over the years in our society. Women writers like Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Mahashweta Devi, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur and Shashi Deshpande are some of the writers who have expressed their opinion in human relationships in terms of social institutions like marriage and family and the important role women played in them.

The stories in this paper are select stories from the fiction section of *New Woman Magazine*. It highlights how the women protagonists challenged the deep rooted and age old cultural and traditional role women played or were expected to play and transformed themselves into modern 'New Woman'. Thus forcing a change in the accepted norms of culture and mindset, they stretched and changed the boundaries of what women can do to challenge and conquer gender bias, inequality, subjugation and the patriarchal mindset widely prevalent.

Sanjukta Dasgupta's "Selfish" (*NWM* June, 2004) describes the plight of aged and widowed parents who are exploited by their children. They are remembered or tended to only for their property and money or to look after the grandchildren, else shunned into loneliness and largely ignored. The protagonist, Nandini lived alone in her Kolkata home after her husband Barin passed away. Her daughter was married and settled in London while her son worked in a bank at Bangalore. She wanted to stay with either of her children, so she could spend time with her grand children and remain occupied. But unfortunately, both her children had not encouraged her and persuaded her to stay alone in Kolkata. It is a sad reality that parents are welcomed only when they are needed to look after the grand-children etc. else they are treated as a burden and forced to stay isolated. The protagonist's friend Samita, a professor at Calcutta University was a widow too, it took her a year to come out of the shock of losing her husband. But gradually she took to her work with a vengeance and kept herself occupied to come out of the trauma of losing her husband. Samita realised the crisis Nandini went through and coaxed her to turn her hobby of designing clothes to a profession. Samita was a career-oriented New Woman of the modern age and knew the importance of economic independence and empowerment. Nandini though hesitant initially takes up the advice. When she informed her children about her new business they were not very encouraging, Kunal, her son, even told her that if she lost money he would not be in a position to support her. Parents go through various difficulties to ensure the best of education and upbringing for their children but are treated by the very same children as a burden in their old age.

Kunal, after getting transferred to Calcutta wanted the protagonist to stop her flourishing business venture so that he and his family can stay in the same house. Kunal said "We'll be

reaching Kolkata in May. That's enough time to wind up your tailoring venture. You'll have a lot to do anyway, once we are there. You'll have to drop the kids to school, pick them up, and help with their homework, apart from fixing four tiffin boxes every morning for us all. You loved cooking and now you can cook everything you couldn't because there was nobody to eat it" (127). The protagonist boldly refused this patriarchal mindset of her son and replied "No, Kunal. I don't need anything. But I can't wind up my business. I just won't do it, so don't let's talk about it, please. I'll ask the local agent here to look for a good apartment with affordable rent for you. How many rooms do you need?" (127). The son assumed that the house belonged to him rightfully, but, she reminded him that he will inherit it only after her death.

The son was of the mindset that women were meant to be subjugated and their role was limited to the kitchen and looking after her own children and grand children. But, the protagonist did not want to lose her independence and was firm at continuing her business venture and living her life on her own terms even at the cost of being away from her grandchildren. Her rebellious and defiant attitude showed her evolvment from a traditional to a modern or a 'New Woman'. The author conveys that aged parents whether widowed or not should be *selfish* and not be emotionally attached to their children. They should be engaged in some activity to ward off loneliness and boredom and to avoid being exploited by their children to their advantage. Age is never a barrier to re-establish or re-invent oneself.

Shobhan Bantwal's "Sonogram" (*NWM* Oct, 2005) is a shocking story of the regressive, patriarchal and sexist mindset of a conservative, God fearing and religious Hindu family. Sarita, the protagonist was a Doctor by profession and a mother to 5-year-old twin daughters, married to Anand, who was an engineer. They were residents of New Jersey, United States of America. Sarita was pregnant again and her in-law's had been prodding her to get a Sonogram done to find out whether it was a boy or girl. Sarita replied "The doctor had an emergency this afternoon, Amma. I'm rescheduled for next week." (119) and kept on postponing for the fear that they will force her to abort if it was a girl again. The deep-rooted gender inequality and bias towards the girl child is exposed by the author. The story shows that education and exposure to the western way of life has done little to change the psyche and attitude of the society at large towards the girl child. The thirst for a male child to carry forward the lineage is deep rooted in the Indian DNA structure. It is sad that the protagonist had to hide the fact that she carried a daughter in her womb for the fear of being forced to abort the unborn girl. The story also brings out that the protagonist though educated and a doctor herself failed to take a stand or voice her opinion or act on it openly and had to resort to hiding her test results. At the same time, the fact that the protagonist lied to avoid the abortion showed the deep affection, love and her professional life attitude. She defied convention to protect her unborn, thus showing the New Woman attitude.

Though her husband accepted the birth of a girl, his parents were clearly devastated. It is the biggest irony of India even in 21st Century that the mother-in-law, herself a female, is most

affected by not having a male child in the family. Further, she showed no remorse, qualms or regret to the option of aborting an unwanted girl child which is akin to murder by subtly hinting “Vimala Shastry’s daughter had an abortion; it is easy these days.” (121)

The protagonist thought to herself “Anand was their only son and he was forty years old. At the age of thirty-eight, I had just given birth to yet another girl. There’d be no boy to carry on the family name.” (121)

It is alarming that a Sonogram or Sex determination test though banned in India but freely available in the west is used as a tool to kill or abort an unwanted girl child. The perpetrators are oblivious to the damage it has caused to the demographics and the sex ratio in the society.

“The Last Straw” (*NWM* Dec, 2006) by Chandrika R. Krishnan is about the protagonist who takes the courageous step to end a farcical marriage after 22 years of suffering. The protagonist married Rakesh Kumar who was ten years her senior. He was dark and handsome and ran a flourishing business house. The protagonist was still immature and yet to be a graduate. She thought of her husband as straight out of a romantic novel. But within a few days of her marriage it dawned upon her that her husband was an antithesis to the ideal novel hero she thought him to be. Rakesh Kumar was a curt, to the point, no nonsense typical Indian Male with a patriarchal mindset and considered his wife and women in general to be door mats. He did not have an iota of love, compassion or warmth in his entire body. He was emotionless and rigid in his views. He had no time for anything other than business. The protagonist did everything possible to please him but he remained cold hearted, unapproachable and aloof. Even her sex life was reduced to just another chore to be done. This attitude was hereditary, as his father wholeheartedly supported him and his mother was the only source of support and understanding in the house for the protagonist. His sexist and patriarchal mindset was further reinforced when he became father to two daughters. He was deeply disappointed and dejected that there was no son to carry forward his legacy and his business empire. The protagonist had sort of come to terms with the misery and with the support and encouragement of her mother-in-law completed her graduation, post-graduation and acquired a B.Ed. degree.

The seeds of her transformation from a demure, suffering and timid woman to a courageous, bold and new woman had been planted by her mother-in-law. The story also conveys that acquiring educational degrees empowered the protagonist to stand up to her husband for the sake of her daughters. Rakesh had fixed his elder daughter’s marriage to the son of a business tycoon but she had secured admission and scholarship in a business school abroad and was not interested in the alliance. Her husband’s insistence on getting his daughter married off against her wishes was the proverbial Last Straw and the catalyst for the protagonist to confront her husband and seek a divorce. She informed her daughters “I’m leaving your father. I don’t think that I can take any more of indifference from him. I hope you both will forgive me ...” (131).

When she informed her husband of her decision, he retorted “Don’t be childish.” She replied “I need a warm person, a man with whom I can cry, laugh and shout without feeling childish! Childish, how I hate that word! You ever noticed the immature me turning to a cynical one, right? I hated your Rakesh” (132).

The protagonist ensured that she supported her daughters in their quest to educate themselves and not suffer the same fate as she did. She realised the importance of education and financial independence to be a strong, independent and new woman.

Kalita Kapay’s “Coffee in the Mountains” (*NWM* Nov, 2010) is about the protagonist and her daughter Priya and their love for mountaineering. The protagonist was an avid mountaineer in her youth but was not able to pursue her passion because of her parents. They were more worried about what their relatives, friends and neighbours will say if they sent their daughter with strangers on overnight treks. Her parents were of a traditional and orthodox mindset and when she asked permission to go on a trek to the Himalayas, her mother said “Are you out of your mind?? One month you want to stay out with god- knows- what-kind-of-people. Why don’t you understand that you are a lady now?! A good-for- nothing bunch they are. Stop thinking about this and concentrate on your studies.” was her mother’s reply to which she replied “It’s just one month! Why are you being so adamant? I am not eloping or something.” (142) She was tired of the constant fights and arguments and ultimately gave up on her hobby totally.

But, when her daughter shared the same passion, the protagonist ensured that she encouraged her and provided her with all the support, both material and emotional. She helps her pack for the expedition and starts envying her, thinking how her passion was crushed by her very own mother. The narrator overhears Priya’s conversation with a friend on her way back from the coffee shop “You know, my mom was a great trekker during her college days. But, Nani didn’t allow her to go for treks. So, she had to give up her dream of becoming a mountaineer. I know she misses those treks in the mountain. How I wish I could take her with me today.” (144) Her friend asked “Was your mom really good?” (144) “She was much better than I am today. It is only because of her that I have been qualified for this expedition” (144), Priya replied.

The protagonist having been a victim of gender bias and societal pressure in her youth had evolved into a ‘New Woman’ with liberated ideas and values. She did not want to deprive her daughter the happiness and satisfaction of pursuing her hobby. The emotional, mental and physical well-being of her daughter mattered more to the protagonist than the opinion of others who did not matter. Her family and their happiness came first and she set her own rules and standards to follow and live by. The transformation and evolution from a traditional woman who gave up fighting for her rights to a liberated ‘New Woman’ who put her children and family first above everything else was complete.

Sandhya Ranade's "The Intruder" (*NWM* May, 2009) is about Mukta, the protagonist, who single handedly brings up her daughter Sai, after her husband dumped her on learning that she was pregnant. Mukta was married to Shashank. She had reluctantly agreed to his demand of not having a child on the very first night they were married, thinking he would change his mind in due course of time. He was selfish and egotistical; he only put forward his condition after they were married, for the fear that she will refuse. But after three years of marriage when she conceived, Shashank remained firm on his decision despite pleas from his parents and the protagonist. He had no regard for her emotions or that of his parents.

The protagonist on seeing his reaction announced "I say, if he does not want my child, then I don't want him" (85) and decided to walk out of the marriage but save her unborn child. She was a modern woman, who had conviction and confidence in her abilities to raise a child without the moral, emotional and financial support of her husband. She was not a submissive wife who would agree to all the unreasonable demands of her husband, but a New Woman who was not afraid to stand up to her beliefs and for the sake of her unborn child put her marriage and future at stake. The protagonist rebuked her ex-husband once again when he wished to gift his property and money to their daughter Sai and categorically told him "You will come as a guest, a guest she has never met before and barely heard of! Come and bless her just like them! The girl born as 'Sai Shashank Kirtane' has long turned into 'Sai Dilip Inamdar' and even she doesn't recall since when! It is only because she did not object that I will send you the invitation --- as a guest! My request is, please respect your limits and don't try to be an intruder" (87). Though she was moved by his self-inflicted plight she was in no mood to forgive him for his past sins. She stuck to her ground and made him know in no uncertain terms that he should not be an Intruder in their life. He was free to come to the marriage as a guest and behave like one. He had extinguished all rights to call himself a father.

The story highlights the paradigm shift in the thought process of the Modern 'New Woman', who is firm, resolute and courageous in her thoughts, beliefs and actions. She will not think twice to act and defy accepted norms of society. She will set her own rules and standards giving priority to herself and her children. (Translated by Jyotsna Nene from the original Marathi story "*Pahuna*").

Garima Goyal's "Ricky" (*NWM* June, 2011) is about the protagonist and her son Ricky. The protagonist is married to Suresh a charming, successful and rich man but a dictator, a control freak, rude, arrogant and temperamental. She suffered all his atrocities and insults silently and tried to maintain peace and calm in her household for the sake of her son. Ricky (her son) was her only reason to live in an otherwise unhappy marriage. The protagonist was a traditional woman and tolerated the wrong doings of her husband without any murmur or protest. When her son was grown up and wanted to open a salon, her husband was furious, but Ricky stood up for her and said "I have started my hair dressing salon, and it is hardly mother's fault." (111) Her

son even suggested to her that she should stand up to her husband and not tolerate as she was an equal partner in the success and wealth. She should resurrect her identity and individuality and stand up for her rights and be assertive and live her life on her own terms. Ricky told her “He is not my ruler, and not yours either.” (111)

Her world came crashing down when her son Ricky suddenly passed away of a heart attack in his sleep. She went into a depression and took almost a month to come back to normal. She suddenly remembered about Neha, Ricky’s fiancée who helped him manage the salon. She ran to the salon and got in touch with her. They both loved Ricky and were determined to carry forward his dream and keep the salon running. She told Neha (Ricky’s fiancée) “This was his dream, and I can’t allow it to be shattered.” (113)

Ricky’s death was the catalyst for the protagonist to redeem her original self and live life the way she wanted to. She totally reinvented herself in her appearance, looks and dress sense and did everything her son always wanted her to do. It was not only a change in her outer façade but she shed her traditional image of a suffering woman to a modern ‘New Woman’ who was confident, suave and assertive. She credited her transformation to her son Ricky who had inspired and motivated her to be a ‘New Woman’ and get her identity and independence back from the clutches of her husband.

Conclusion:

The stories above highlight the struggle; subjugation and ultimate triumph of the women protagonists to make their voice heard and be counted. The Women characters in the stories boldly stood up to patriarchy, regressive societal / social norms, and downright subjugation - be it refusing to tend to grand-children, avoiding the abortion of a girl child, protesting early marriage of daughters, allowing the daughter to pursue her passion, refusing to accept gifts from a father who had abandoned his wife and daughter to divorcing an obnoxious husband after years of abuse.

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