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Male 'Feminist Consciousness': An Analysis of *The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land*

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Abstract:

Feminism, a movement initially started by women for the cause and rights of women, has changed in recent years with men too willingly participating in the cause, adorning the role of pro-feminists, thereby claiming women's privileges at the social, political and economic level. Illustrative of this point is a man's participation from India in the recent days, since he not only talks of women's issues, but places himself in women's position discussing the taboo issue of menstruation and sanitary pads, trying to create a better bodily experience for women. Arunachalam Muruganantham is the man who stands for female emancipation in his own way by attempting to make low-cost sanitary pads. This paper is an attempt at analyzing the feminist gaze that Muruganantham's fictionalized character Bablu Kewat in the short story *The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land* has upon the women of his country. The author, Twinkle Khanna, through the short story throws light upon the point as to how men too can plunge into action with regard to the so-called exclusively female experience and that feminism is all about equity.

Keywords: Feminism, men's gaze, menstruation taboo, female emancipation, political consciousness, equity.

Women have been looking for a cape and have been handed an apron for centuries. But here was a man who wanted to help women swing their apron around, let it flutter down their backs and watch them soar through the clear blue skies. (TSMML 206)

This quote clearly sums up the feminist theme underlying the paper. It is common knowledge that Feminism is a range of political and social movement, and ideologies, which share a common goal, i.e., to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social rights for women. And a feminist is someone (most often a woman) who claims equal rights for women.

But here is a man who breaks the stereotypical roles allotted to men and women and instead engages himself with the taboo subject of menstruation and making low-cost sanitary pad.

Twinkle Khanna, the actor-turned-author's *The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land* taken from her short-story collection *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad*, a fictionalised story

based on a social entrepreneur from Tamil Nadu named Arunachalam Muruganantham and his marvellous invention, the low-cost sanitary pad making machine, discusses about a man's contribution to female emancipation.

One might wonder what role does man play in the Feminist movement. But we can see that right from the beginning of the Feminist movement, and even before that, men did voice for women's cause. Some examples that could be cited are: Frederick Douglass, John Stuart Mill, Jusetin Trudeau, John Legend, etc. Men's role as a feminist is not only found in the Western countries, but also in a developing country such as India with revolutionary men such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Keshav Chandra Sen, etc., discussing issues such as the abolition of the barbaric practice of Sati, protest against polygamy, child-marriage, favouring widow remarriage, women's education in India, fighting for women's equal legal rights etc. even men too have played a significant role

Though Feminism and its goals have had a wide- spread growth, yet even in this era of feminism in India, menstruation and discussion on a sanitary napkin are still thought of as the most muted topic, not to be talked of in the public sphere. However, Arunachalam Muruganantham went around wearing a sanitary napkin to solve this social menace, since women sanitation is still seen as a minor issue.

In this regard, Twinkle Khanna, the author, opines how she too felt embarrassed in discussing sanitary pad some five years ago thinking that it is a taboo subject. But now she has realized or become aware of the fact that menstruation is a problem which crops up every month and that there is dire need to talk about it.

Arunachalam came to the forefront, breaking the stereotypical roles and took up the challenge of voicing female body experience when he saw his wife hiding a rag cloth during her periods. On further inquiry he found that they would have to cut on their daily milk budget if she had to afford a sanitary napkin. He is shocked to find that even in the 21st century, when social media, education and awareness are bringing about a revolution, sanitary pad, a necessity for all the women, is still a luxury to a few. Determined to discuss this issue, Arunachalam with a feminist gaze wears a sanitary napkin to understand the anguish of a woman undergoing her periods and toils day and night, undisturbed by the insults hurled at him to invent a low-cost sanitary napkin manufacturing machine and also does not give patent rights to anybody for his invention, keeping in mind the only aim of making women socially and economically independent.

The short story by Twinkle Khanna throws light upon the tiring yet victorious journey of the 'Menstrual Man' Arunachalam, replaced by the fictional character Bablu Kewat who lives in the small town of Dewas in Madhya Pradesh. The story begins with Bablu's childhood friends Naamdev and Hariprasad not returning Bablu's greetings; the schoolboys laughing and mocking at Bablu throwing pebbles so that Bablu wobble down in his cycle; and Bablu's neighbour Parul an expert in gossiping and an "expert at the art of intimidation" (TSMSL 109) calling him a 'Pervert' (TSMSL 109). However, Bablu ignored all of this.

Even when his wife Gowri asks him the reason behind his lunatic gestures to Parul, he doesn't tell her of Parul's cheap words at him.

As the story progresses, we find how Parul openly scorns and tells Gowri that Bablu is completely mad. She says, "Gowri, why don't you take your husband to some big doctor, he is stark raving mad, I tell you!" (TSMSL 110) But despite being treated as a subject of scorn, Bablu always had the feeling that Gowri would stand by him through all his good and bad times. But probably he was wrong. Gowri too felt that he must stop his experimentation, since the entire town and his mother herself felt that he lost his mind. In Gowri's words, "It does not matter if it is right or wrong, please just stop all this. Everyone in the town is saying you have lost your mind. You want to know the truth? Even your mother has gone to consult Goraksha Baba hoping he can suggest some remedy!" (TSMSL 112) This sentence which points out that even his mother is looking out for remedy shows the adverse situation that Bablu is in, even amidst his own near and dear ones. No one seems to understand him. He simply sighs and says, "There is no point in explaining anything to you people" (TSMSL 112).

The incident wherein his sanitary pad experiment turns out a failure – with blood all over his crotch and his attempts at washing the bloodstains in a well, spreads rumours all the more about his experimentation. Lata, Parul's sister, who comes to the well is shocked at the bloodstained spectacle and believes that Bablu has turned into a 'demon', a 'vampire' and is involved in 'perverse sexual activity'. The text reads,

The next day myriad rumours spread all over the small town. Bablu had turned into a demon, he was a vampire who wanted to suck the blood of virgins, and he was involved in perverse sexual activities with female goats. Parul paraded Lata in front of the entire neighbourhood as the lucky victim who all thanks to God's kindness had escaped from Bablu's diabolical intentions. (TSMSL 115)

The word diabolical clearly points out how Bablu is looked at as Evil with devilish intentions.

Unable to tolerate all this disgrace brought about by her husband Bablu, Gowri takes decision to go and stay at her mother's house for an indefinite period of time.

The progression in story further describes the circumstances that lead Gowri and the entire town to look at Bablu as a fiend. It is due to his urge to give Gowri a gift, a habit practiced by him right from the beginning of his marriage. Since Bablu and Gowri had an arranged marriage, he tried his best to make her fall in love with him by presenting glossy gifts such as; bangles, bindis, chocolates etc. and she in turn gave him a warm smile reciprocating her love for him.

Such habitual practice of gifting Gowri is that which has made him now a stranger – for he now wanted to gift her sanitary pad. Bablu noticed that Gowri used a "grubby cloth" (TSMSL 122) during her menstruation time. Wanting to surprise her with yet another gift, Bablu goes to a store to buy the sanitary pad packet, but is shocked to see the reaction of the

shopkeeper in handling it to him and more so of the price that he has to pay for the purchase. We hear Bablu say how the shopkeeper,

wrinkling his nose distastefully as if he was handling the day-old carcass of a mangy cat, he quickly wrapped the packet in an old newspaper, looping a string around it several times before knotting it, and slipped it into a black plastic packet. Bablu was startled at the exorbitant price and dutifully took out forty rupees from his shirt pocket and paid him. (TSMSL 127)

Having bought such a high-priced gift, he keenly examines the contents of the pack. When he finds that the pad is nothing but just "cotton wrapped with a gauze sheet" (TSMSL 128), he calculates the approximate weight of each pad and estimates that the amount of a pad is just ten paise; but for which he was instead paying four rupees per pad.

Though Bablu bought the sanitary pads with great enthusiasm and gifted it to Gowri envisioning happiness on her face, Gowri's reaction to the gift makes him realize that it is not possible for him to get the pads every month. Gowri's statement that, "if Shalu and I start buying these packets every month, then let alone curd and ghee, we will not even have enough money to buy milk" (TSMSL 132) makes him to work on a new project – the project of producing sanitary pads.

Within twenty-four hours of his decision to make a sanitary pad on his own, he manages to make one and gifts it to Gowri explaining his craft and the less amount of money that he put in the making of it. Bablu points out how the multinationals cheat by selling things at a higher rate. In his words, "Those rascal multinationals are bloodsucking parasites charging a fortune for just a bit of cotton. I have made this in less than fifty paise" (TSMSL 133). But to his dismay, Gowri asks him to wait till the next month. She says, "It is not a ceiling fan that I can switch on and off" (TSMSL 134). Bablu's experiment is thus put to a pause.

Bablu waits patiently till the next month of Gowri's menstruation time, but is disappointed to hear from Gowri that his crafty piece did not last for more than 10 minutes. Furthermore, when Gowri declares that she feels uncomfortable discussing these things with him and that he should stop indulging himself in such an experiment, he feels bad and at the same time builds an "uncompromising determination" (TSMSL 140) within himself. We hear Gowri say to Bablu, "I know you are doing it to make me happy but please stop asking me about these things. It makes me very uncomfortable. These are women's matters, leave them to us" (TSMSL 137). And Bablu "had not foreseen this easy dismissal of his creation" (TSMSL 138). Gowri's statement points out how women often tend to exclude men from discussing issues pertaining to their body, thinking it is their issue, their problem and their living experience. However, Bablu is not the kind of man who gives up so easily; he wishes to understand women's bodily experiences and thus we hear him announce to Gowri with uncompromising determination, "These rascal big corporations are only trying to cheat people, charging so much money for a simple cotton pad. You wait and see, Gowri, I will find a way to make a pad for you at quarter the price" (TSMSL 140).

With great resolve in his mind, Bablu repeatedly tries his best by using different qualities of cotton to make a perfect pad, but Gowri terms all his efforts as inadequate. Gowri felt that Bablu's project was turning into an "unnatural obsession" (TSMML 141) and therefore suggests that he spend time in earning money to buy the sanitary packets rather than spend his effort and money in making one by himself. She fails to understand the urge that drives Bablu to undertake the sanitary pad project, till he explains to her the situation of young girls and women all over the country. He says to Gowri, "I can try and earn more and buy an expensive packet of sanitary pads for my wife, but what about everyone else's wives?" (TSMML 142) He recounts to her how the compounder at a clinic revealed the current situation of women's menstrual hygiene. He got to know that, "Most women use dirty cloth, leaves and even straw and that they have seventy percent more chances of getting diseases. But no one seems to be bothered about these things" (TSMML 142). And here was Bablu who was trying to understand these women related menstrual hygiene issues, who in return was not understood by his own near one.

Despite Bablu's attempt at explaining the fatal situation in which women were dwelling in, Gowri could not understand his aim and this brought about an invisible chasm between the two. While Gowri feels that she is undergoing continuous "onslaught of his unseemly obsession" (TSMML 143), Bablu remains single-minded in attaining/fulfilling his aim.

Not only Gowri, but Bablu's entire family feel it a disgrace for a man to show "sordid interest in women's menstrual cycles" (TSMML 144). The incident wherein Bablu's nephew Pintu pulls out a sanitary pad from Bablu's bag in front of a neighbourhood guest Uma, spreads news about Bablu being a 'pervert', and the entire town looks at him as the "local pariah" (TSMML 145).

Worried that he would no longer be supported by the women of the family in his experimentation, Bablu seeks the support of his friend Akram, asking him to provide some fresh goat's blood for testing. It is during this experimentation that Bablu is disgraced by Lata at the well, after which Gowri and the entire family tell him that they would return only if he gives up his madness.

Despite being neglected by the near and dear ones, we find that Bablu becomes more strengthened in his resolve and with a strong will tries his best to find out the exact material used by big corporations in the making of the sanitary pads. Impressed by Bablu's perseverance and curiosity, Bhaskar Sharma, one of Bablu's distant relative, Professor in the Sociology department at the Indian Institute of Technology comes forward to help him by letting know the details of the factory that supplied cellulose material to a company named Procter & Gamble. Bablu discovers that the material dispatched to him was nothing but wood pulp cellulose from the bark of the pine tree pressed into sheets. Next, Bablu decides to win a big victory by trying to make on his own the crore-costing machines that the big corporations use to break down the raw material into sanitary napkins. Eventually, after months of trial and error method, Bablu succeeds in his attempt and goes on to the next step one by one and gets his low-cost sanitary napkin making machine certified by the Indian Institute of

Technology , though being initially criticised by the fellow presenters as an “uneducated idiot” and as a “pest” (TSMSL 169).

Bablu further realizes that English language does play an important role in making his invention known and beneficial to the entire country and the world. He goes to an English class taught by Sarita Jagpal, a person whom as we see is a big support to Bablu, by way of understanding the amount of interest that Bablu has in spreading his invention for the beneficial use of women. Bablu narrates of his interest with utmost sincerity and dedication to the English tutor Sarita ji. His thought of installing vending machines in schools all over the country to stop women from sitting at home because of the menstruation problem, makes Sarita ji to wonder at Bablu, for,

He was one of the few men she had met who looked at women not as objects to be slotted in their place, or as beings that only existed to do their bidding. . . here was a man who wanted to help women swing their apron around, let it flutter down their backs and watch them soar through the clear blue skies. (TSMSL 206)

We also witness how after winning applause for his invention with a ‘strong social implication’ (TSMSL 179), Bablu, under the guidance of Professor Sharma gets patent right for his invention, but he does not sell his patent rights to another company to make money. In his narration to the freelancer Prashant Batra during a train journey, Bablu says, “ I had a choice, Prat Bhai, I could sell my patent to another company and make money or I could do something for the women in this country” (TSMSL 186) ; and that he chose the latter option. Bablu felt that he should sell his machines only to women, for women to earn their livelihood and improve their social and economic status. In his own words,

I began to observe that when a woman’s economic status improves, her entire family’s condition improves, whereas for a man that may not necessarily hold true.

He will spend on himself, buy a new bike, spend on drinks and friends but a woman will spend all her money on her children. And that is when I decided that I would sell my machines only to women so that they could start their own sanitary pad making units and earn their livelihoods along with making low cost sanitary napkins accessible to the women in their neighbourhoods. (TSMSL 187)

Thus Bablu explained to Prashant Batra how he turned the sanitary napkins into a “security blanket for women” (TSMSL 188).

Towards the end of the story, we find Bablu clearly bringing to limelight the pathetic situation prevailing in our country with regard to menstruation and women’s issues. During his speech in Bhopal witnessed by a panel of dignitaries from around the world and by the Minister of Commerce , Industry and Employment, Bablu says how we feel it a shame in discussing menstruation, or in holding a sanitary pad. “It is as if menstruation is not a natural

function, but a sin that women unwillingly commit through their uterus and have to hide away from prying eyes, lest they be declared guilty of the crime of bleeding” (TSMSL 209). Bablu’s statement regarding the removal of the concept of menstruation as a taboo awakens everyone, making everyone to feel that, “Let us all refuse to be a part of this game of shame because it is nothing but a losing game for all humanity” (TSMSL 209).

The analysis of the short-story points out how Bablu is a feminist in taking a political position, by making both the women and men realize that women’s bodily issues and experience is not a subject of negation, but one of much importance and of inquiry in society. Gowri, the women in Bablu’s family, and all his neighbourhood women, possess a cultural mind-set wherein certain things are considered as acceptable versions/experience of being a female, and certain other things as male denominated experience. This cultural mind-set in men and women constructed by patriarchy perpetuates sexual inequality. It is precisely this construction that Bablu wants to get rid of and provide equal space to women and their female experience. Bablu wants to re-value women’s experience.

But the question that arises is how we can define men’s role in feminism, since it is essentially a women related arena. Generally speaking, men are termed as pro-feminists if they are able to understand the female experience. However, they cannot remove themselves from their power in relation to women. Klocke in his article says, “To be a feminist one must be a member of the targeted group (i.e. a woman) not only as a matter of classification but as having one’s directly lived experience” (Klocke “Roles of Men with Feminism and Feminist Theory”). Here in Bablu’s case, he is not just a pro-feminist in just ‘understanding’ women’s menstruation, but is rather a feminist himself since he occupies a place in the targeted group i.e. women, and undergoes directly the menstruation experience himself (though not naturally, but through artificial means). He develops within himself a political consciousness and works hard to achieve his goal. During this journey of revolution, he tries his best to convince his wife and other women in the family and the town, to dismiss off the cultural mind-set constructed by patriarchy perpetuating sexual inequality, and instead acquire feminist political consciousness. But they do not understand/embrace his beliefs, instead they cling on to the same old internalized sexist beliefs and behaviours constituted by the patriarchal society. Bablu engages himself into practice (in making the low-cost sanitary pad) rather than just preaching to women about the use of sanitary pads, thereby trying to build a society nourished by love and justice.

In this way Bablu is a feminist in the real sense, since he not only understands women’s menstruation/bodily issues, but also plunges into action by providing a solution to menstruation and other women related socio-economic problems rather than terming them as exclusively female experience. Equity is the underlying principle behind feminism, and Bablu tries his best to bring about equity in the society by making every individual realize that proper livelihood for women means proper livelihood for the entire family and in turn a proper way to build a prosperous nation.

Thus we can come to the conclusion that feminism neither means prejudice against men or exclusion of men, nor do feminists reject men’s participation in emancipating women.

The short – story presents to us the view that men too can be feminists and that they too can envision things with a feminist gaze, by way of possessing active awareness regarding women's bodily experiences and by empowering women in a complete manner by equipping them economically, politically and socially. The paper thus justifies the title Male 'feminist consciousness': An analysis of *The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land*.

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