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Giving Shape to Wollstonecraft's Ideas of Women and Marriage through the Characters of Richa and Abhilash

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Abstract:

Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of marriage was quite radical for her times. She said, "Were women more rationally educated, could they take a more comprehensive view of things, they would be content to love but once in their lives; and after marriage calmly let passion subside into friendship".

It gives a clear idea that Wollstonecraft's primary emphasis is on the literacy of women which would eventually provide them an opportunity to enter into the outside world of progress and development. Education of women is the cornerstone of women emancipation and empowerment. When a woman is educated and financially independent, she is capable of surviving without any male support. In Wollstonecraft, marriages were more like a financial contract than a bond of love and emotions. The opening lines of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." ironically describe and illustrate the transactional nature of marriages in European societies which was more or less true for many parts of the world, including India. Sadly, not much has changed over the years. Even today, marriages are all about the amount of financial stability that a man can promise to his wife. Love and understanding are not even secondary in this list. However, Professor Sharma's novel in this context proves to be as radical as the views of Wollstonecraft because it not just promotes woman education and participation in the jobs but also presents a different angle of Live-in- relationships which have recently become the talk of the town. His novel discusses how friendship should be the base and root cause of any relationship that blossoms in the future. This paper attempts to analyse how Professor Vikas Sharma's novel *Love's not Time's Fool* gives shape to the ideas of an independent and dignified women through

the characters of Richa and how the novel eventually ends up highlighting the significance of a marriage whose foundation lies in friendship and not in the dominance of the either partner.

Keywords: equality, space, understanding, acknowledge, respect and dignity, women empowerment.

Since time immemorial, women have been considered secondary to men. Vikas Sharma cites an instance from the Bible according to which, Eve was created from the rib of Adam to provide him companionship. This idea of females as being a source of entertainment and pleasure for men was itself objectionable. Women's position was reduced to just being satisfying to men and therefore hardly any importance was given to their education, employment, growth and progress. All that was expected of women was to look charming and attractive. Physical beauty, and skills to run the household were the sole criterion of judging women. Lack of education and skills disabled them from any financial stability and they had to always depend on the men of the house, be it father, brother, husband or son to fulfill even the very basic requirements of their life. Lack of employment made their lives vulnerable because they could not step out or break even the most toxic marriages. The only option left for these women was to suffer endlessly and never speak up against authority. Such miserable conditions of women drew the attention of writers, poets and thinkers. One such feminist writer was Mary Wollstonecraft who efficiently talked about the rights of women, their education, development, access to equal opportunities and most importantly their rights, not just duties in marriage.

With the advent of the 20 and 21st century, many women have gained education and have entered into various work fields like academics, medicine, navigations, defence, engineering, management and what not. With education comes awakening. Now women have started taking bold steps such as ending abusive marriages, fighting for their financial and property rights, saying NO to domestic violence and so on. Lot has been achieved but a lot more remains unachieved. Vikas Sharma's novel deals with one such example of a bold woman character, Richa, protagonist of the novel. She is a highly educated woman with sound knowledge of commerce. She is well versed with the technicalities of business. She manages her husband's footwear business quite efficiently. Throughout the novel, her husband Malya never comes into the scene. It is only through mobile phone conversations or discussions involving him, among various characters of the novel that we get to know about him and his impotence as a consequence of being hit by a cricket ball.

He has been utterly ignorant towards his wife Richa and all that he cared for was his business. He kept on extending the time of his return from abroad every week without considering his wife's difficulty in managing the vast amount of production alone. He was more like a Business partner than a life partner. Malya and his wife's conversations mostly revolved around business. He never thought about the emotional and physical requirements of his wife. On the other hand Richa tried her best to manage both the house, business and her father in law's desire of looking after widows and poor orphan children. Though Malya did not restrict or dominate his wife in any way, he couldn't even understand the loneliness and vacuum of her life. He used her skills and education to his profit in expanding his own business empire. This neglect from her husband made her life gloomy until Richa met Abhilash and found a good companion in him. She gave him a job to support him financially in the initial years of his education and also provided him with shelter. Novelist Vikas Sharma deserves appreciation because he gives power to his female characters and provides them all the resources to live their lives according to their choices and aspirations. His character Richa is also a manifestation of that strong woman who enjoys her beauty, knowledge and sexuality. She doesn't get exploited at the hands of others. However she has a painful past of being deceived by Robert Lee who used her sexually and left her in a state of pregnancy. This heartbreak proved to be a crucial event in her life that ended up making her stronger. Richa's life took a turn and she made a strong decision to bring the baby into this world. Though she could not accept the child because of the fear of society and her mother's pressure. But she never abandoned the child. She hired a nurse Nora for her club footed baby and did all that she could. She even sold her jewellery to fulfill the requirements of her baby boy. During all these years, Robert Lee never turned back, not even to look at his own baby. Despite all this she did not become a poor, helpless woman but gathered strength and stood up again to face the world. Quoting Dr. Shashikant Tripathi,

Richa is the embodiment of a woman's earnest struggle for emancipation in every walk of life. She illustrates Professor Vikas Sharma's concept of women empowerment. In spite of her honest love for Robert Lee, she has been cheated by the latter. Despite her bitter disappointments in her first love, she did not put a stop to achieving her dreams. She continues to set her eyes on her goal, not on disappointments; she makes herself ready to prudently face every challenge. (Pg-148)

Dr. Tripathi accurately addresses her strength and struggle. In Spite of being deceived in love, she did not give up on the idea of love and a new beginning. Wollstonecraft mentions,

I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists. I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings are only the objects of pity, and that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.

These lines are a perfect rendering of Richa's personality. She didn't depress herself after the whole incident of Robert Lee, rather mustered her mental strength and stood up to fight back and never lose heart. She married Malya who lost his sexuality soon after marriage. The worst was that he never talked about this to his wife. In Fact he started avoiding her. He not just failed to satisfy her physically but also emotionally. He was never with her in times of stress. He kept piling upon her the burden of his business and finally died in an alien country.

Meanwhile, Abhilash had stood with Richa in all thicks and thins. Though she was smart at dealing with finance and stuff, advice always reveals better options. It was Abhilash who helped her in dealing with the problem of drug smuggling through footwears which could put her complete business in a mess. He suggested her to hire chemical engineers and Nikki and Rikki, Abhilash's friends proved useful at this crucial moment. Richa was extremely tense at the warning of the Excise officer. She lost her peace of mind and couldn't sleep. It is at this moment that she needed her husband the most but it was Abhi who calmed her down. He said in a polite manner,

Madam, complicated and complex problems of the new world of science and technology don't have immediate solutions as you are expecting at the moment. While removing my gown he asked me to forget the drug dealers and return mentally to bed. Forget everything and think of your duty to mankind as a whole and be true to thyself.(pg-34)

He further said, "You've got to bury this question. Such problems will make you bow down before a tough situation. Be bold and brave as you have already been. It is not that easy to run a big export business. Why don't you trust tomorrow? I'm with you round the clock."(pg-34) No matter how strong a person is, we sometimes need someone who holds our hand and assures us that he/she is always with us. We need someone to stand by our side and remind us of their presence so that we don't fall weak in these tough times. This is the role of a good friend and a caring partner,

which was well played by Abhilash in Richa's life. Her husband laid the foundation of the business and she carried it forward but later on, she could take her business to newer heights because of an extremely loving, caring and understanding husband, Abhilash, who continued to be her friend even after marriage. This is how this novel time and again reflects the ideas of Wollstonecraft. Matthew H. Hartman says, "Wollstonecraft suggests that marriage should be recognized as a concrete contract of friendship between two individuals as opposed to a male-female complementarity that ends in the propagation of the species through childbirth."

Wollstonecraft's accentuation of friendship between life partners for a successful marriage gets highlighted throughout the novel.

The reader never finds Abhilash trying to be dominant in the relationship. He never even objects to Richa's being sad at the demise of Malya. He never instructed or ordered her to behave in certain ways. He always recommended things to her. In the whole novel, it is Richa who takes all major decisions related to business deals, charity projects, purchasing land and expanding financial resources independently. He gave proper space and time to Richa so that she doesn't lose her individuality and identity in the marriage. He always acknowledged her support in his difficult times which proved to be life changing for him. One thing that might appeal to the readers is that Abhilash never sought to acquire his wife's property and assets. He was happy and content with getting Richa as his partner and nothing else mattered to him. No one can deny that a woman can reach the zenith of success if she has a stress-free environment at home. If she doesn't have to clarify herself at every step. If she has at least one person in this crowded world who never doubts her. The fact that Richa and Abhilash never coerced one another into sharing their secrets is a crucial aspect of their relationship. They said everything because of their adoration, faith, and trust for each other. Richa never felt comfortable telling Malya about her background of being duped by Robert Lee and having a child with him, but she felt at ease with Abhilash. There are so many other instances in the novel where Richa expresses how she shares everything with Abhilash. A woman opens her heart only to a person who accepts and loves her unconditionally, with whom she has no fear of being judged and this was Abhilash to Richa. This is the positive side to Live-in-relationship which Professor Vikas Sharma beautifully highlights. The kind of understanding and trust that our protagonists shared was not because they were a couple but only because they could spend a lot of time with each other. They could develop an understanding about their relationship. Obviously not every live-in relationship ends in a happy and a successful marriage.

Everything has its pros and cons and the same goes with the concept of Live-in. However, one cannot dispute the fact that a live-in relationship offers both partners an adequate time to have a compatible relationship. This is especially important for women. Because Richa came to know Abhilash through time, she decided he would make the perfect spouse. She knew that he would always respect her as who she is and would unfailingly provide her the space that every person needs.

Another crucial and worth mentioning feature of our protagonists' relationship is that it is the wife, a woman who initiates a sexual move. Abhilash never forces his wife to have sex. Infact Vikas Sharma gives agency to his female protagonist in initiating a sexual act. Quoting Dr. Tripathi, "In this novel, the initiatives in sex are taken by her as her partner, Abhi, is an inexperienced guy who later becomes her employee and then her husband." (pg-148)

Richa's stance on sex and love foreshadows the modern woman's obsession with unbroken romance. She represents the Female's passion for frank, fearless relationships that result in heavenly pleasure akin to that of "god and goddess." She desires love and adoration that 'makes' her "forget the whole world." In a state of celestial joy derived from and during lovemaking, she cries, "Hell with all people and worldly things. Love for the sake of love, nothing more and nothing less." (pg-77) This is one of the radical elements in the novel that put forth women's desires, primarily sexual desires. Conventionally, women should be sexually passive and just behave in a certain way to give pleasure to men. The idea of women having physical needs and being active in the process of love making is totally unacceptable in the patriarchal world that we inhabit.

Having mentioned and praised the bright side of Richa, it is now time to have a look at her shortcomings. Though Vikas Sharma's protagonist is a progressive woman with radical ideas, she has also not risen above the confines of society in some ways. It is manifested through different examples such as when she could not dare to accept her own child due to the fear of being stigmatised by the society. She loves Abhilash and wastes no time after her husband's death to materialize her love in the knot of Marriage as she questions herself, "Is a widow everyone's wife?" It goes unquestioned that she loved Abhilash deeply but couldn't dare to marry him before the death of her husband. She decided to marry him only after Malya passed away and she felt a little unsafe due to the lecherous eyes of her sister's husband. Marrying Abhilash at that point of time was more of a practical choice than an emotional one. Even a strong, financially independent and brave woman like Richa, needs a man to preserve her chastity and protect herself from the lustful

eyes of the men around her. This again brings into light the vulnerability of women around us. They can be geniuses in their fields but would still need men to shield themselves. Moreover, Richa is strongly dedicated to her present but often gets haunted by her past, “Past has its bitter memories and people like me spoil their present for a decent tomorrow. The feeling of contentment was not my fate and I wondered in search of the same crying ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...’”(pg-51) This is something interesting about Professor Vikas Sharma. He never makes his characters bigger than life. His characters are ordinary human beings with both virtues and evils. They are not free from human weaknesses such as envy, anger, lust, greed and so on. This is what makes his writings more relatable and exciting. Reader is able to connect chords and doesn't feel that the story represents some out of the world characters.

Returning back to Wollstonecraft's ideology, she lays stress on the fact that marriage should not reduce women to the mere status of being a slave to her husband. It should not act like a limitation in her life. She aspires to end the concept of an obedient wife where obedience means to blindly follow your man without using your own rationality. Quoting Wollstonecraft, “I love man as my fellow; but his scepter, real, or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man.” Wollstonecraft primarily argues for women's education that can open ways for her emancipation and provide her enough opportunities and capabilities to take decisions of her life and not being a puppet in the hands of others. She wants women to act more pragmatically than being slaves to their emotions, she wants men to expand their horizons of thinking and learn to respect the opinions and notions of their female counterparts. For her friendship is more important than love in any relationship because friendship retains an equal status among individuals and for her, equality is supreme. She says, “Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time.” Characters of Richa and Abhilash perfectly fit in with Wollstonecraft's idea of marriage because more than anything, they share a strong bond of friendship. They not just love each other, but have immense faith and reverence for one another. They both try to give and maintain “a room of one's own”. Their relationship is not toxic; rather it is organically healthy for new lives to blossom in a happy and sound environment. Novel ends with Richa informing Abhilash about her pregnancy and readers close the books with a sense of relief and contentment.

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