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## Treatment of the Ideology of Modern 'New Woman' Through the Character of Suvidha in Vikas Sharma's Novel *Ashes & Fire*: A Critical Study

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### **Abstract:**

*Ashes & Fire* is a famous novel written by Prof. Vikas Sharma after the successful '*Love's is not Time's Fool*' and *I A S Today*. This novel was well received by the readers. His first novel '*Raah Ke Pathar*' was published in the year 2021 which was well received by a lot of readers. The theme of the novel '*Raah Ke Pathar*' is based on Hindu-Muslim Unity. His novels present the major concerns of the contemporary world, and they are the mirror of the modern Indian society. He describes the differences and conflicts between urban and rural ways of life. In *Ashes & Fire* the novelist depicted Suvidha as contemporary Laxmi Bai and he is highlighted her as a triumphant woman who is strenuous to ashes by the criminals of Ghaziabad. She had learned the skills of shooting at the desired aim. She had practiced Judo techniques too and could defend herself well. She handled the robbers to defend her career and institution in the male-dominated-society. She is not ready to lay down her arms before tough circumstances. She is delighted by her father who took care of her father at every steps of life.

**Methodology and Approach:** The purpose of this paper is to discuss on the concept of 'New Woman' and to show how Suvidha, main protagonist of the novel, comes out as a modern 'New Woman' disregarding all the conventional and traditional ideas of a moral woman.

**Keywords:** new woman, conventional, traditional, progressive writer, contemporary, ashes, liberty, sexual fantasy, feminist.

### **Introduction:**

Professor Vikas Sharma is a progressive novelist of the present era. He is a well known writer of both Hindi and English novels. He is compared to Chetan Bhagat. He wants to establish a brave new world in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Prof. Vikash Sharma is a realist and he reveals in his novels

what he sees around him in the society. He has taught fiction at the post graduate college nearly for thirty years. So he knows how to narrate a story like Henry Fielding. He is a realist like Mulk Raj Anand and he knows the customs and ceremonies of rural and urban life. He draws his characters from all the sections of society. He has sympathy for the have-nots. He studied the books of Karl Marx and hence he quotes the theory of Karl Marx in his novels. Like Charles Dickens, he wrote for the sake of ethics as he likes purposeful fiction and supports the theory of art and morality. Prof. Vikas Sharma can soar higher and higher on the literary plane on the wings of imagination and his aim is to be heartthrob of his readers /students. Through his novels, he wants to create optimistic outlook in his students and youths so that they can learn the apt handling of the matters of life successfully.

The origin of the word/phrase 'New Woman' is not clear, but it is regarded that it entered the English language in 1894 and it was used by Sarah Grand and Mariae Rame. The feminists use the concept of 'New Women' to challenge the restrictions that society places on women. Beauvoir says that there is no pre-determined female nature or essence. It is believed in the Second Sex that women are bound to traditional roles such as wives and mothers. Beauvoir observes: *"For him (man), she (woman) is the sex-obsolete sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated concerning man and not he concerning her. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the absolute, and she is the other."*(16) According to Sarah 'The New Woman refers to a modern, independent woman who craves the radical and social changes.' Suvidha is such the modern woman who is bold and courageous and never bows before difficult circumstances. Deenanath, her father kept a strict watch on the activities of his daughter and he thought of the security of his daughter. He always warned her and said:

*"Look Beti if you take disadvantage of my liberty, results will be disasters for both of us. Take training for self-defense, and there is no need to waste time. if at all any young boy teases you, tell me his name. Rest is my job (7)*

In the nineteenth-century women's lives centered around the home but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the women stepped into jobs, politics, and culture beyond the home. The nineteenth century Suffragette as well as the urbanization and industrialization of Western countries played vital roles in providing opportunities. If we study the history, we will find that women have always been deprived of their rights, be it social, economic, or political. In his notes for A Doll's

House, Ibsen asserted, *“A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminism conduct from the male point of view.”*(436)

Suvidha was a cadet of N.C.C. and she had self-confident enough to cope up with society in which she lived. She had learned pistol shooting in the fields of two hundred bighas; she used to practice and got success in no time. She gathered very self-confident on account of her shooting skill. When she saw Samyak, she started thinking about him- *“a young engineer, intelligent, and appealing, worth trying for. As a smart girl, she took the lead and told him- ‘Anything that you aspire for, Mr.’* (7) She started liking of Samyak and she convinced her father for marriage with Samyak, both of them got married and started a happy life full of fun and love. Seth ji supported them in every way to get settled for their future. For the first time, Suvidha left her father for her new home, enduring the destiny of any daughter which the society has raised. Suvidha and Samyak started their new journey of life from Lucknow. Both of them loved making in their house perfect. Both of them always requested Subhadra, mother of Samyak, to come and stay with them but she always refused because she failed in getting proper dowry in her son’s marriage. Subidha enjoyed life in Lucknow. Many times she felt lonely and asked Samyak to utilize her time in her research work and at last she got her enrolment for Ph.D. from G.D.H. College Lucknow and bought a few books from Universal Book Depot.

She was extremely beautiful and charming; and sometimes Shamyak’s colleagues felt attracted towards the physical beauty of Suvidha and made light comments but she ignored them. Her prudence never allowed her to mix up with such lecherous people. Samyak told his friends that she is very bold and courageous and can defend herself well and said- *“She had practiced Judo technique too and could defend herself well. When Khyali Ram, a senior engineer, tried to overpower her, she gave a severe blow to him that he has to take the medicines for a week to get cured.”* (13) After fourteen months of marriage, Suvidha gave birth to a baby boy Arshdeep and Subhadra came to Lucknow to see her grandson, there was no limit of her joy and she looked after her grandson. After another twenty month Suvidha gave to the second son, Mandeep and finally after two years she gave birth to a daughter, Niharika.

But subhadra, Samyak’s mother did tolerate the hot weather of Lucknow. She advised Samyak to construct a house in Ghaziabad where his maternal uncle Sudesh lived and get himself transferred to Ghaziabad. Samyak discussed with Suvidha and Seth ji and finally the

bungalow was purchased by Seth ji in Ghaziabad. Both of them were hesitant but Sethji told them by saying, '*All belong to yiu both. Either you take it after my death or I give it to you now.*' (16) They shifted from Lucknow to Ghaziabad in a pleasant mood expecting prosperous life there. Samyak and Suvidha was an innocent couple in Ghaziabad and they fell prey to the gang of Jaggu. Samyak was murdered and left the family in half journey of life. The responsibility of the family was on the shoulders of Suvidha.

Professor Vikas Sharma is the master in the art of characterization and he has left no loop holes in painting the character of Suvidha, the protagonist. He showed Suvidha as a very strong and ambitious woman in the fiction. She revenged her husband's murder. Deenanath never expected such an attitude from his daughter but he remained silent. Suvidha believed that problems are to be faced wherever we go and one has to be very strong, rest is up to almighty God. She devoted most of the time in prayer to Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva, Lord Rama, and Lord Krishna. Finally, she submitted her thesis and viva-voce was expected shortly. Deenanath told her-- '*Hope is the thing with feathers.*' (23)

She had the support of her father and her mother-in-law and both of them had a very loving, caring attitude towards Suvidha. Both grandparents were busy in bringing up the three children. Suvidha's father always explained to her the importance of education. He always explains to Suvidha that patience is most important for all as slow and steady wins the race. He always advised Suvidha to take care of the children and not to join any job. He was taking care of all the financial needs. He also told his daughter that nobody can define her fate, and asked to try her best improve the situation. The German philosopher Schopenhauer said-

*'Be hard, nothing is easy in this complex world. Nature gave us wheat, gram, barley, vegetables, fruits etc, after the farmers have done hard labor in the fields.*

Our society has divided the works / duties between men and women, the men are likely to work outside and women are said to do the works at home. They are considered secondary. But Suvidha, the heroine of the novel, is not also exception. She is brought up under the guidance of her father, Deenanath who wishes Suvudha to follow the duties that the society has already predestined for women. After the murder of her husband she is forbidden to go out to work; and told to stay at home for upbringing of her three children. When Suvudha was offered the job, her father denied and said- "*You needn't worry about the financial aspects of the family as I can easily take care of that now. The most important thing is that the three children need*

*motherly affection and attention, and you can do that. (25) Poor Suvidha didn't object and she decided to obey her father as she used to do earlier too and said-"O. K. Papa, I won't join the job."(25)*

*"A woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir and one is surprised her horizon is limited, her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly...she cannot be expected therefore to go beyond herself towards the genial interest. She obstinately confines herself in only familiar area where she has the power to grasp things and where she finds a precarious sovereignty.(Beauvoir-660)*

The writer believes that it is acknowledged by the scientist that stones are not hindrances in the path of a river. Instead, due to these stones the water generates music and the rhythm of the flow is pleasing to human ears. Seth Dinanath understood the agony of his young daughter as she lost her life partner, the pain which Deenanath ji had already witnessed. She had been a very submissive daughter and he had a soft corner for her. Dinanath ji has engrossed his life studying the spiritual books of Satyarth Praksh and Bhagwat Geeta but he found it hard to isolate himself from new tension of Suvidha. Suddenly, Suvidha's life again came across an incident in which she meets Vijay Shekher who got selected in UPPCS who came to learn English from Suvidha and he was aspiring to be an IAS officer.

*"Who could help princess Sita after her being cunningly eloped by Ravan? After all she had to lead a lonely pathetic life in Ashok Vatika!"(39)*

Deenanath had firm faith in Lord Shiva and prays Lord Shiva to grant wisdom to his daughter. He studied the poem A Prayer for My Daughter composed by W. B. Yeats and different questions are born in his mind-"Will she remain innocent, virtuous and Prudent? Will she follow the customs and traditions of her husband's family? Will she detach herself from the vanities and frivolities of upper class women?....Will she sing sweet songs like linnet bird and not to be proud of her sweetness? Will she possess the hatred in her mind? Is she bound to be doomed? Quite often, women go astray though they possess material comforts in the plenty. He wishes-Let her soul recover radical innocence." He is worried about his daughter's future as she fails to realize the complexities and uncertainties of life.

Suvidha met ladies from different sectors who were united through kitty and offered certain social services in different sectors. They offer Suvidha to join their group and do certain social service for the society. Suvidha continuously urged to be independent. She always

requested her father. *"I wish to establish my own image in society... She has to sow the seed of righteousness, love, optimism, hard work, faith, light, reason, kindness, generosity, fortitude and rise above prejudices, hatred, brutality, prejudiced politics, degeneration etc. (47)*

She had a very strong insight from Virginia Woolf, she believed that the seeds of happiness are to be sown by her alone, and only she can mould the character of her children. Virginia Woolf asserted that a woman needs money and room. She became a writer. She inspired her woman listeners nearly ninety years ago that woman ought to read books on various aspects of life so as to be equal to man. She was also influenced by T.H. Green's theory: 'Human consciousness postulates liberty, liberty involves rights demand state'. But for Suvidha state is replaced by duties. She also accepted Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She wanted to give higher education to her daughter, Niharika. Indian woman have been enjoying several fundamental rights. She is not only a commodity for a physical pleasure, and certainly co-education is almost in all the intermediate and degree colleges, university and woman can enjoy and post based on merit. Majority of parents have become conscious of the rights of daughters and hence gave them equal share in the property.

Dinanath ji became aware of the attraction between Suvidha and Vijay, he explains to Suvidha the difference between love and lust but Suvidha couldn't control the relation between Vijay and her own self. Suvidha came across a very sad news of the death of Akshi' wife of Ayush Darshan on account of blood cancer. To the surprise of Suvidha she found that people were not discussing Akshi's death, instead they were discussing about the coming up life of Ayush, she saw that Akshi's contribution was out of sight and out of mind, and was been forgotten very soon.

Suvidha's life is full of ups and downs. Her father Seth ji got engaged with Lalli also named Lovely, the maidservant. Suvidha was always disturbed by Ayush who always called her to his place and arranged for her to fulfill his desires. Suvidha got annoyed and she threatened Ayush, keeping a very strong and determined rejection of Ayush's proposal. Suvidha came to identify that Ganesh Salil, the teacher in her college had wrong intentions towards her and she believed the he was following her. She espoused a strategy that,

*"One may smile and smile and be a villain".*

She got physically engaged with Ganesh Salil and all of it was captured on CCTV. She lost her sense of reason and repented of the relation with Ganesh Salil. She joined her duty and

got engrossed in official work. One day realizes her physical weakness and is highly conscious of her youth and beauty. She asked her father--*“Papa what happens when the widow marries with a widower having children?”* (124)

He answered, *“ Well marriage is a subjective issue and has no hard and fast rules. In our time widows adjusted with the situations for a healthy and happy atmosphere in the family. First, she adjusts with the mood of her husband, children and in-laws. Secondly, she gives birth to her own children and then tries to create harmony among them all. He says it’s not bad to marry a widow or widower.”* (124)

Suvidha got ready to marry Ayush. Rotary international Indian office, New Delhi asked the governor of district 3010 to select a team of five young man and women between the age group of 25 to 35 years to visit Michigan district 6290 for a period of 21 days with the aim of the team to create hermony, brotherhood and cooperation between Indians and Americans. In this team Dr. Suvidha was also nominated and preceded to Michigan. She came across Harsh Pal Harsh who was an Income Tax advocate. She got intimate and once again submitted herself before Harsh Pal Harsh.

Suvidha is compared to Luxmi Bai and the writer has built the main character of the novel with the characteristics of Luxmi Bai who has been portrayed as the symbol of bravery, patriotism and honour in the Indian history. But the character of Suvidha changes radically. She faces all the hardships of life. Though she a first tried to suppress her sexual desires, she soon placed great importance on her sexual autonomy. Deena Nath thinks himself, *“Times have changed and unethical sexual affairs are regarded normal by his loving daughter”* (53). He also asked himself, *“Was she Rosalind, Viola o Hero? Was she Regan or Goneril?”* (51). Suvidha’s father warns her against sexual desires yet she stepped into a world where unethical sexual affairs became normal for her and she continues her affair with Vijay. She is free to enjoy Champagne, Vodka or Shaw Wallace Whiskey at any time. She possessed sexual weakness and becomes like Nana and Lady Chatterlay—*“Perhaps she had become a nymphomaniac as she needed a robust man once a week. But alas! Sincerity and faithfulness are missing in both the partners, and hence life has become a fraud, another name for simulation! Out of hunger, she took unhealthy decisions in the last ten years.”* (167) she could not control her sexual love from Ayush. She says—*“Even Vishwamitra failed to control his lust for Menka! Almost all wedded girls aspire for sex at night! How was she different from them?”* (167)

The writer has painted the concept of the new woman through the character portrayal of Suvidha, who faces challenges in her life but she never surrenders before the hard situations. She bravely faces the new gangsters to protect her job and her institute in the male-dominated society and she tells her son in a time of danger—*"I find that you have no courage in your heart and mind. Remember, cowards die every day, and the brave dies once. I will be there behind the curtain to solve your problem. At the same time, keep your pistol loaded and prepared to fire in case of emergency."* (184). She is fearless and she kills the gangsters—*"Nobody could imagine—a woman could dare to kill the rascals."* (186)

Mandeep. Her son praises her, *'Really, you are a source of inspiration for all us. Gone are the days when a woman was regarded as 'abla', weak in all respects.'* (195). Her father also admires by saying it, *"This is exactly like my brave daughter Suvidha! I'm really proud of you, Beti. You are my bold son and not a weak daughter crying for help."* (195)

Prof. Vikas Sharma accepts that life is full of challenges, sorrows, difficulties and miseries but his characters face these challenges and problems bravely and in a positive way. He has discussed on issues of the female liberty and advocates that they should be respected. He also advocates of the female rights and place. He regards that man and woman are two wheels of a cart. If one wheel is defective, the cart cannot move. He talks of their important issues. He stands for radical changes; he is not in the favour of the use of immoral means to get success in life. He is conscious and described various contemporary issues in his works i.e. Covis-19 and its effects on the world, decline in G. D. P., unemployment, illiteracy, illicit love affairs, poverty, misuse of mobile and technology, prostitution, extra marital affairs, murders, lust and love, crime, robbery incidents, rape, immoral characters and want of reading habit of books in the students.

### **Conclusion:**

So, at present, the women are getting higher education and professional experience and they have achieved a place in the society on their own. For the middle class women have no longer full time profession; and they are trying to emulate the upper echelons of society. The challenges in life have been accepted by them. A woman has undergone a dramatic change. As she has developed from being a conservative woman in the 1940s and 1950s to a feminist reactionary in the 1960s and 1970s; she is a superwoman mother-wife-career woman in 1980s; and she is a woman in confidence in the 1990s who demands and enjoys her rights and liberty,

Today she is not afraid to stand alone; she has undergone a lot of transformation. Suvidha is a 'New Woman' in the novel 'Ashes and Fire' of Prof. Vikas Sharma.

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