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Tracing the Woes and Joys of Women in Mamta Kalia's *Dukham Sukham*

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Abstract:

Mamta Kalia belongs to the generation of women writers who have faced the transforming position of women in middle-class families of traditional Indian society. Rather than writing about vociferous aspects of lives, her literature carries nuances of life in its mundanity and more so for her women characters who have received an authentic representation in her works. The paper will analyse the homely world of her semi-autobiographical novel, *Dukham Sukham*, which has won her Vyas Saman. Charting the changes in pre-independence and post-independence lives of women in India, the novel becomes an important part of Indian women's writing for registering the changing quotidian of women with the changing scenario of their nation. Through the narrative of the novel, the paper will analyse various aspects of life at home for both men and women and analyse the trajectory of women characters from being subservient members to ones who do not flinch from standing up for themselves.

Keywords: women, family, struggle, quotidian, relations.

Women's writing in India has thoroughly germinated as well as mirrored the trajectory of burgeoning feminist thoughts and ideals in inherently patriarchal Indian society. Narratives about women within the domestic sphere and women in the larger world with issues different than daily drudgery of the house, contest for the validity of better literature by women writers and the latter mostly supersedes. However, amidst the flow of new interesting narratives, literature that represents the mundane lives of women at home, visibilizes their invisible existence and work finds prominent value in the literary landscape. Mamta Kalia is one such writer in the 20th century, who has written several novels, short stories and poems that cater to the different aspects of women's lives from different generations. With no offered didacticism, her literature seems to voice the feminine mystique felt by women within their homes. During an interview on AIR, Mamta Kalia says that she used to narrate her grandmother's tales to her

husband Ravindra Kalia and he suggested her to write these tales in the form of a novel, from there emerged *Dukham Sukham*, a semi-autobiographical novel weaving into it women across generations negotiating their woes and finding joys within and outside the home (*YouTube*).

Mamta Kalia in *Dukham Sukham* narrates an intergenerational trajectory of family members especially women, in a conservative family of Mathura in pre and post-Independence India, affected by ideological and spatial shifts in all manners of living. While depicting the labouring selves of her women characters who learn to evince feminist principles and strive to establish their identities within overwhelmingly oppressive patriarchal strictures, Mamta Kalia flinches from the sanctification of her women characters. We get to read real-life characters with their virtues and flaws.

The novel begins with the grief of a grandmother who mourns over the birth of a second granddaughter, remembering the pain of birthing three daughters herself and toiling day and night to raise them until they were married off. Readers do not get to know the real name of the grandmother, she remains *dadi* until she participates in meetings of freedom struggle and is called by her own name, Vidyavati. But we are given the name of the patriarch, the grandfather- Lala Nathimal at the very beginning, who owns a grocery store and has gained enormous social respect for his nature. Indu, the daughter-in-law sees her newly born daughter as a burden to make her life worse than it is now. Written in the third person, her quotidian is compared to a prisoner's, working relentlessly and also gratifying all the members of her marital family. In the absence of her husband, Kavi, studying in Agra, she has to grapple with the oddity of his family members and supply care with full devotion. Indu's state evokes the despicable lives of several married women in Indian households where husbands leave the houses for education or job and their wives are supposed to labour for the family. The Gendered division of labour within a bond of marriage rules out women's options to see the world whereas men's work to earn money allows them to travel to places and even get away from familial duties if required. However, a woman's understood essential connection and duty towards home produces work for her even in the absence of the husband through whom she has entered the marital house and developed affinal relations with other members of the family. In all circumstances, a woman is required to provide her services to her marital family and Indu does everything bearing silence but a feeling of grudge persists.

Lala Nathimal and then Kavi as the strict patriarchs of the family set some rules and regulations for all the members to follow which stifles them in the house—the rules were more

about controlling the expenditure of money and women's ways of working and living. According to Nathimal, "Sabhi vanik putron ki bhaati unka ganit bhi yahi tha, paisa kamaane aur kharch karne ka adhikar unka hain, mehnat, bachat aur kifayat ka kartavya unki patni ka hain." (Like all traders and their sons, his maths says this only, to earn money and spend it was his right, to work hard, save and maintain the economy of the house was his wife's duty) (45). By controlling the money of the house, Nathimal controlled everyone's lives in totality. Kavi had a chance to earn his own money so saved himself from his father's control but the women of the house were under his control. Once Vidyavati demands to hire a domestic help for washing utensils when she was pregnant with her second child and her whole body ached but Nathimal rejected to give money for a domestic help, pressurizing Vidyavati to do excess domestic work with her aching body and handling the young child as well.

In the family of five members, Lala Nathimal's contribution through money earned at the grocery store and the contribution of Vidyavati, Bhaggo and Indu through household work is deemed unequal. Food earned by him and cooked by women is laced with the gender politics of the house. Besides the fact that all contribute to the eventual food on the plate, it becomes a reciprocation by women towards his work and this understanding makes him liable for judging the food. Food and a clean cosy house become a reward for a man's work to earn money rather than women's separate labour to produce it for the man. Lala Nathimal feels entitled to receive the best of the taste, he is used to finding faults in the food cooked by his wife and with his constant suggestions about cooking style, he degrades Vidyavati and her work.

A house should be a comfortable place to reside in but becomes a poisonous place from which everyone tries to escape—Kavi flinches from coming back to the house, Vidyavati and Indu try to find chances to go out to the meetings, and once out of the house Indu never visited her in-laws again. Kavi starts resenting returning home from Agra and Delhi due to constant complaints from women at home and try to find happiness in the world he has created beyond Indu's reach. Lala Nathimal is the only person who does not feel suffocated because he is the one who regulates the culture and the quotidian of the house. Everyone emerges into a better self after stepping out of the household—Kavi has already carved a different life for himself, Bhagvati takes up a teaching job and Vidyavati too enjoys her more developed self during meetings. The apparent positive transformation in Vidyavati due to her involvement in handloom meetings reveals a major shortcoming of any domestic setup. It restricts women's ways of thinking and working, consuming their energy for petty issues of the household and on work which is not even counted as valuable.

Distaste and dejection of the family members over the birth of the second girl child, made them brutal towards Indu, leading her to bear the pain of the C-section and the family's scorn together. She is given stale food and scorned for becoming unhelpful in household tasks owing to her post-partum bleeding which makes her impure to enter the sanctified space of the kitchen and her weak body unable to do other household work. Indu has been doing household work and providing care for the family members both at her natal and marital family but when she required care and love, women in the marital family flinched from it. The scenario would have been a little different if she would have born a baby boy. Vidyavati has prepared special laddoos for Indu to recover from weakness after birth, but now that she has birthed a girl, she no longer wishes to give that nutrition to Indu.

The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law has always been a contested space in Indian household, negotiating their positions vis-à-vis men in their lives, they generally fail to connect with and support each other. In the foreign setting of a marital family, where a newly married woman searches for a female companion, she is only offered a strict mother-in-law who is in constant combat over her rights on her son and sharing of household work. Nivedita Menon writes, "women in virilocal household derive their power solely from men—their husbands, and then their sons who eventually become some other woman's husband. Power struggles between women are inbuilt in this kind of structure, and are inevitable. This is not because they are 'women', but because they are put into positions that are pitted against one another" (44). The knotted relations of Indu with her mother-in-law, Vidyavati and Bhagvati, the unmarried sister-in-law, make the marital family a despicable and unloved place for her and to worsen the situation there is no marital bliss expected out of marriage. When Kavi, the husband, returns home with gifts for his wife and daughter, other women in the family display displeasure at the lopsided love. When Indu complains to Kavi about his mother and sister's rude behaviour, rather than talking into the matter, he sheds it off as another bickering essential to women of the house, leaving Indu more helpless.

Vidyavati and other women attribute men with the quality of being ruthless towards their family members. Their dominating attitude, harsh words and strict temperament present them in contrast to the loving nature of women. Nathimal has been brutal to his wife as well as his children. Not only with three daughters, but he has been strict with Kavi as well, forcing them to leave his interest in literature and handle his business as heritage. When other women were agreeing to the ruthlessness of their husbands, Indu points out that women are also

ruthless, giving an example of how in absence of parents, their daughters-in-law do not let their daughters survive in the family with peace.

Vidyavati and the women of her likes did not have any idea about how India has been colonised or why India needs freedom from British authority. Women busy in their houses rarely had the idea of India as a nation and that they are its citizens. Their identity is solely connected to their house both natal and marital. Their nationality takes form when they talk anything about British as the other. The idea of freedom for them is the onset of *sitarajya*, where women will not be dominated by men, they will act on their own. Nobody will question their expenditure, nobody would scold them for small things, and she will be treated equally both inside and outside the house. In one of the conversations during handloom meetings, Nirjala, one of the members, says that perhaps in the new world men would stop oppressing women but the other woman, Mohini says that in the new world, there will be new ways to oppress women. Analysing their situation after six months of freedom, they realise that the freedom of the country did not coincide with the freedom of its women, whose state of life remains “*dhaak ke teen paat*” (without any change) (203). Writing almost after 50 years of the temporal setting of the novel, Mamta Kalia would have known that even freedom or advancement initiated by freedom, could not provide complete freedom to women, no doubt it opened avenues outside the house but the *sitarajya* that Vidyavati dreamt of could not be achieved in totality, however, it has brought better changes in women’s lives then and now.

Through Vidyavati’s contemplation over women’s question and their place within the whole freedom struggle of India, we get keen insight into the building up of feminist consciousness in Indian women within the traditional household. Gandhi’s call to Indian women to produce handloom and use charkha as a part of the swadeshi movement was accepted by women as initiating a struggle for their own independence from the daily drudgery and subordination by men of their own families. Meetings to discuss the growth in the movement gave Vidyavati chances and space to indulge in work which was not for the house or men of the house. Gandhi became a torchbearer for women like Vidyavati, making them dream of a better future. Suma Chitnis writes that “while explaining the concept of *Ahimsa*, [Gandhi] likened the moral power in a nonviolent struggle to the pure and gentle, but firm and tenacious strength which, he emphasized, women continuously display in life.... With all the persuasiveness and charisma at his command, he urged women to step out of their homes and join him” (87). Vidyavati liked to indulge herself in small revolutionary acts like saving up flour from her kitchen to contribute to the food for the revolutionaries and attending meetings

where new ideas were discussed. These group meetings, within her home yet beyond the home, transformed the stern Vidyavati who constantly bickered over Bhagvati and Indu into a sensible group leader who initiated other women into revolutionary thinking and treated Indu with love. She gets to exercise her choice and power to advise on the matters beyond regulation of the household.

Nathimal had constant problems understanding why women like her wife were so much interested to get freedom and what was there to get freedom from. For him, Vidyavati has enjoyed a fulfilling life of being his wife, cooking with pure ghee, and handling the keys of the whole household. Nathimal's sheer blindness to his privileges and Vidyavati's constricted life are challenged by her constant attempts to make him realise that organising the kitchen and feeding people cannot fulfil a woman's aspirations, she deserves and desires more. Vidyavati shows us how the struggle for freedom is not only done by waging wars but also by resisting daily-life subtle oppression as she does her whole life but her pessimism in post-Independence India and Gandhi's death, questions what place women of the country occupied in agendas of the country politicians.

Post-Independence India might have disappointed women strugglers but in the process of organising meetings and hoping for a better future, women gained new consciousness of feminist principles and it united them in revisiting their lives with critical understanding. Vidyavati, Leela and Indu after completing their domestic work, sit down for a moment of leisure and try to decipher the sources of their woes. Besides clearly understanding the constructive nature of patriarchy, they also see their ill-matched marriages as a cause of their despair. In their *baniya* households, marriage is a monetary alliance more than a humane one. Vidyavati's and Leela's marriage to men much older in age than them leaves their relationships fraught with unevenness, they simply become a medium to take up the household tasks and produce children for their husbands. Lala Nathimal marries a much younger girl, Vidyavati, thinking that with her young agile body, she will complete all the household tasks with furtiveness. Unfortunately due to an accident, Vidyavati loses her agility and falls short of Nathimal's expectations. With her aching legs, she had to rear her four children and complete the whole domestic work with the help of her three daughters who instead of playing, had to work as foster mothers to their little brother.

Leela's marriage to twice a widower and a much older man due to no demands of dowry led to a marriage full of wealth but no marital security,. Her husband's interest in religion took him away from the domestic bliss with her. She is left to raise her son and two sons from other

wives of her husband. Indu and Kavi though in love with each other had different life interests which were affected by their upbringing as well. When their parents were proposing their marriage, Kavi was waiting for his muse to bring him lines of poetry and Indu was mending a shirt of her young cousin. With two different lives and opportunities, Kavi and Indu could never become compatible partners for each other, not only when they were living with his parents but also when they lived together in Delhi. Mamta Kalia has kept the mundane world of Indu in sharp contrast to the poetic world of Kavi as a professor of literature. His world of knowledge transcribes emotions into words but he remains oblivious to Indu's emotions and does not even bother to know.

At the beginning of the second part of the novel, we are given the stark contrast between the ideal image of women in pre-independence and post-independence India. From the role of a housewife as the ultimate goal of a woman's life to educated women who handled household as well as the job became a new ideal with new burdens on women. Education which was a far-fetched thing for Vidyavati became a necessity for her granddaughters, Pratibha and Manisha, the third-generation women, to walk along the societal standards. Attaining an education and getting a job was seen as an alternative to the drudgery of household work for pre-Independence women but the passage of time proved that if women had chosen the development of a paid job, they have to bear the double burden of paid work and unpaid work at home. Besides the normalization of a double burden for women, a demeaning hierarchy is set between stay-at-home women and earning women. Women's artistic and intellectual skills took precedence over their caring and domestic skills. With the nullification of the latter, its demand did not end and as an expression of their gender all women whether earning or not, studying or not, have to do caring and domestic work.

Manisha and Pratibha live in a strict environment created by Kavi, attuning them to a discipline of academics. The difference in the lives of both sisters opens up new contestation in the women's question and care ethics essential to women. Both sisters are great at academics, scoring highest in their respective classes, they belong to the new generation of educated women; however, Manisha feels more inclined towards caring for her parents and elder sister, so she agrees to stay with her grandparents knowing that she will have to do a great amount of domestic and care work, more in comparison to work required at Delhi house and remained beside her mother in the hospital for a very long time. Pratibha has excelled at extra-curricular activities as well and has got a *passé* away from home, this relieves her of responsibilities which she should have handled being the eldest sister. But the fact that it is Manisha who becomes a second-hand to her mother and yet derided because of her appearance, hints at the grave

complexity of the supposed oppression of the domestic atmosphere and the care work. Derogation of care work is seen in the context of women in opposition to any man with his paid work, but Indu's discrimination between Manisha and Pratibha highlights that care work is devalued not only because of the attached feminine nature but the self-abnegation required of the carer and the nature of the work in comparison to other works that a human does.

The novel begins with Vidyavati's inhumane behaviour with Indu for birthing a girl, but as we step further into the novel, we understand that Mamta Kalia is trying hard to fathom the origin of women's woes, how it turns them from oppressed to oppressors. The novel traces the trajectory of Vidyavati from being a home-bound stern mother-in-law to a woman who fought for the freedom of the country and her freedom. The story of her courage would not be documented in bright colours or remembered because, like her own life hidden under the layerings of domestic bliss, her struggle would also go unnoticed. Women's sexual lives with their husbands, household work for husbands and other family members, and intergenerational affinal relations with members in the house are not distinct categories of action rather they together form the daily life of a woman in her house constituting joys and woes of their life. However oppressive women's lives are in patriarchal household, they find ways of attaining joys. The novel's title emerges from one of such joyful activity where all women sit together to listen Vidyavati narrating a story and all children around them are playing imitating a railway engine, they sing a song about joys and woes of life and women start reminisce about their own joys and woes within their homes.

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