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Predicament of Women in Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter*

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Abstract:

The present paper “Predicament of Women in Shani Mootoo’s *Valmiki’s Daughter*” will try to understand the different standpoints of feminism in Indian diaspora. Shani Mootoo is very much vocal to women issues and their predicament in diasporic society. She has given very strong voice to her women characters to challenge the long rooted inequalities and marginalisation of women. In Indian diaspora, many Hindu families follow their culture and traditions but sometime it affect the women who have modern views. Mootoo’s character Vasti in *Valmiki’s Daughter* never follow traditional path like her sister. She also shows her feminist attitude to her family. Thus, predicament and marginalisation of women and their strong voices to fight against unjust activities will be critically discussed in this paper

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, Women Predicament, Marginalisation, Oppression, Feminism.

Introduction

South Asian diasporic writer Shani Mootoo was born in Dublin 1958, Ireland, spent most of the early time in Trinidad and later move to Canada, settled there, and started her career as visual artist and also enjoying a gifted career as a writer. Most of the fictional work of Mootoo has portrayed the lives immigrants and especially women immigrants in Caribbean Island and Canada who have been oppressed by the cultural and traditional norms in the society. Shani Mootoo also went through such kind of oppression and abuse in her life. The central themes of the works of Mootoo are gender, race, culture and sexual orientations among the migrant communities. She has individually double and by community triple, diasporic experiences that clearly visible in her writing. Her *Out on Main Street* is first collection of short stories published in 1993 from where Mootoo started he literary career. After three years, her

first novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* came out in 1996 and nominated for the 1997 Giller Prize that brought her fame in the writing world. Later, she published her second novel *He Drown She in the Sea* published in 2005 and long-listed for International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2007 and her *Valmiki's Daughter* 2008 and *Moving Forward Sideways like a Crab* long-listed and short-listed for the Giller Prize respectively. Except of these production, Shani Mootoo is also engaged herself to video writing, directing and filming in her life.

Indian Diaspora is a largest diaspora with differences/diversities prevalently found in every corner of the world. "The Indian Diaspora constitutes and integral part of the socio-economic, political and cultural life in the Caribbean region. Having stemmed from ugly policies and ambitious designs of British colonialism, Indians in the Caribbean have shared the suffering in a variety of ways since the beginning of their arrival on the islands" (Vertovec, 1992). There were also many immigrants left Caribbean region for the Canada due to various biased activities of the local citizens toward South Asians and even among (SA) themselves. The double diaspora experiences of immigrants are quite visible among South Asians of Caribbean. The Indo-Caribbean-Canadian writer Shani Mootoo's novel *Valmiki's Daughter* is largely focus on various issues of Indian immigrants in Caribbean and Canada. The lives of immigrants are haunted by the memory of past and their current situations in diasporic space.

Difference based inequalities such as gender, cultural, ethnic, caste or race and even nationals of the particular country are big issues in Indian diaspora from the beginning of migration and settlement from country of origin to country of residence. "Between 1838 and 1917 people from India settled as indentured workers, either in Guyana where they today form a majority of the population, or in Trinidad where they are close to majority. Through characters who are mainly descendents of Indian indentured workers in Trinidad, Mootoo's fiction probes the Indian quest for fresh Indo-Trinidadian or Indo-Caribbean Identities in terms of race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality" (Birbalsingh, 182). Shani Mootoo as member of Indian diaspora in Caribbean and Canada has focused on issues faced by Indian immigrants and particularly women in new land through her novels and shown that the history of marginalisation, oppression, exploitation of women in diasporic space and racial hatred and their current scenario as an secondary migrants.

She has also examined the double diaspora experiences of Indian immigrants from India to Caribbean and Caribbean to Canada in her novel. "Apart from the caste and religious differences, there was also a consistent major disparity between the number of men and women

contracted as indentured labourers. The scarcity of Indian women in the British Caribbean was to have a profound impact on the indentured immigrant Indian community and on the status and role of women in Indian–Caribbean society” (Ramnarine quoted in Hangloo, 2012). This sort of hierarchical practices based on difference are still persists in contemporary world of Caribbean.

Gendered sexuality and Marginalisation in Valmiki’s Daughter

Shani Mootoo in *Valmiki’s Daughter* paid more attention on gender in Indian Diaspora in Trinidad and Tobago, Caribbean. She has dealt with the issues of marginalisation of women due to certain difference underlined by the social norms. Males are privileged than females in Indo-Caribbean communities. And females are bound to many restrictions such as young girls treated more strictly than young boys in the preparation of to take charge of domestic work. Thus, they are not allowed to wend outside without permission of parents. Kate Young in her paper “Notes on the Social Relationship of Gender” pointed out the real condition of Caribbean society. “The concept of the social relations of gender and its use as an analytical tool does not escape this tension between structure and individual agency. At one level it does suggest that men and women are both ‘produced socially’ (that is independent of their own wills); that the relations between them are socially constructed, reinforced and sanctioned: and that men’s greater social agency is derived not from their individual but from their social attributes” (Young 95). There is long history of women marginalisation among Indo-Caribbean communities. They have been kept away from basic rights since indenture and many of women face sexual, physical violence in private and public spheres.

But thanks to feminism that has given voice to female to raise their own problems and fight against unjust activities in the society. The Indo-Caribbean feminism has emerged from the various circumstances in which process of displacement and dislocation, violence relationship between genders are important to mentions. These feminists’ challenges the misconception that women are secondary to men and less contributed to society. Because history itself shows that women have equally contributed to society’s upliftment. Therefore, Shani Mootoo also raised such issues in her novel provide strong voice to her characters. But Characters like Devika also significant to note the cultural baggage of country of origin. As Frank Birbalsingh pointed out, “Devika blindly, almost superstitiously, holds on to archaic beliefs and practices but those that have been transmuted by a long (century and half) period of separation from the subcontinent, and further adaptation in the diasporic context”

(Birbalsingh, 193). Thus, she at the same time involved in modern society and never gave up traditional values of home country. So, the Devika follow traditional modernity in diasporic milieu. However, Shani Mootoo has given more importance to her two protagonists Valmiki and Viveka who lived under the suppression of family and society.

Valmiki and his elder daughter Viveka are two central protagonists of the novel who lived double life and its challenging task about the societal formation of gender and difference and its insights among the Indo-Caribbean. Valmiki as men was able to protect himself but Viveka as woman protagonist who face many difficulties for her boldness and will to freedom in society. Whatever opinion she used to put front of her family members received negative comments especially from her mother Devika and young sister Vasti. But in initial stage her father support her opinion. "As you yourself have said, Dad, strong individuals make for a strong nation, a strong country within and without...Devika bit her lower lip. She pushed her plate up the table. Valmiki couldn't help himself. He had to smile. His daughter was bold. Bolder than he was." (Mootoo, 47). There are some expectations of Indo-Trinidadian from their children to maintain their social status and follow culture and tradition of country of origin. They were not happy or felt proud of their daughter due to her strong feminist ideas.

Viveka has faced many restrictions from her family and especially from her mother who tries to put authoritarian burden on her. Even, when Viveka shows interest to join sports club with Helen, she denied with inappropriate reasons. "Looked, I don't to hear about Helen. Helen is not even Indian. At least, not *properly* Indian...Most of those foreign whites who leaves their countries and come here are not from our class. They come here because they can't do better for themselves in their own countries. They come behaving as they are superior, lording it over us. They have no social graces whatsoever, and people like you and your father fall for all of their nonsense" (Mootoo, 47). There is need to notice that, what Helen's mix racial identity and social graces to do with joining sports club. Her parents always worried about her safety because for them she has no experienced of world. But for the she only shows resistance in family due to "so-called progressive university-nonsense she came home with, "ism": sexism, feminism, paternalism, Marxism, racism, anti-racism, activism" (Mootoo, 49) in their view. But they forget that all these isms has provided ideas of freedom and social justice.

Shani Mootoo's ideas of depiction of the character Viveka is to show strong will and boldness within the women and gender equality because male always considered to be strong

than female. So, through Viveka, Mootoo wipe away the weakness of women that society have given to them. Her father Valmiki also confused about her daughter. “He was as infuriated as he was proud that he had fathered a girl more strong-willed than he ever had been” (Mootoo, 66). So, strong and boldness of women never accepted in society and Indo-Caribbean too not exception for it because they only want to see women involved in domestic work. Viveka gave many examples of strong women who work in plantation, outside the streets to defend her in family.

She even cannot allowed to choose educational activates and degrees for herself. When Valmiki suggest Devika that their daughter should practice law but she denied and say “I don’t want my daughters practising law. Standing up like that in front of a bunch of men, making spectacles of themselves” (Mootoo, 100). So, the life of Viveka in family was full of burden and barriers. Shani Mootoo through Viveka provides the circumstances of South Asian women and their predicament in diaspora. Many women in Indian household come across such situations due to patriarchal mindset that never allow women to do what they wish in their life.

Anick a French woman in Indian family also face many difficulties to settle in her own family due to various rules and regulations. Even her modern husband Nayan who had his education from Canada never came to support her own wife. “He say is dangerous. His father don’t agree for me to go there. He don’t want the workers see me...The doors and windows in your own house --- in your own house !---- always lock, you cannot go outside in your own yard, you cannot even go for a drive”(Mootoo, 177). There are so many restrictions for Anick due to her whiteness and frankness in nature. Her husband Nayan always gives her company when she decided to go outside not in support but in his jealousy to protect her from other people. She has always given reason that, this country is not safe for white women but matter of fact is different because in patriarchal society women should keep under the pressure of men in family. Shani has depicted the character of Nayan to show the misogynist view of men towards women. He was full of negative perspective in his mind about women and even about his wife Anick. Many times, he insulted her front of their friends and when Viveka visited to their house he expose Anick digging earlier affairs that he knew before their marriage. So, the gender in Shani Mootoo’s novel equally represents the male and female but the predicament of women is fully different than men. But, Shani also provided strong voice to them to challenge and resist the patriarchal mindset of male dominated society in her novel.

Sexuality and Queering the Diaspora in Valmiki's Daughter

Shani Mootoo in her novel *Valmiki's Daughter* draws attention on queer activities among the Indo-Caribbean people through her two major characters of Indian origin and two from Afro-Caribbean and France respectively in the novel. She is more concern about sexuality and queerness and its vital role to make formation of identity and difference in Indo-Caribbean communities in diaspora. There are two queer couple portrayed in the novel in which first are males Saul and Valmiki and second are females Anick and Viveka who shared same sex relationship. They are also in interracial and intercultural as Valmiki and his daughter Viveka are Hindu Indo-Caribbean and their relationship with Saul a man who belongs to an Afro-Caribbean origin and Anick, is a white woman from France. But due to the family members and friends pressure they in the end of novel end up their homosexual desire and practice heterosexuality. Shani Mootoo is very much aware of the social constraints for such relationship in any society and Caribbean is not exception for it.

In interview with Mariam Pirbhai, Shani Mootoo shows her hopes from society for queer people and that is her product of *Valmiki's Daughter*. "I felt angry with Trinidad for not taking care of its citizens who lived alternatives lifestyles. I was angry with Trinidad as a country of laws, rules, norms, expectations, and with Trinidadians. Of course there were little safe corners that queer people could exist in, but wants to live in a corner? And there were people who didn't discriminate, but these people were a tiny minority. I decided that the time for protecting, courting, cajoling, was long past. I wanted people to see their neighbourhoods, to see their city, and to see themselves (Pirbhai, 230). *Valmiki's Daughter* is about to show Mootoo's protest against the people who do not respect the queer people in society.

Dr. Valmiki was a very high profile person among the Indo-Caribbean communities and physician by profession who had much relationship with men. But later he married to Devika and became father of two daughters. Devika was familiar with his queer activities and thus took charge as an authoritarian of the family and Valmiki willing or not willing accept his wife's authority over him. Devika was very orthodox kind of woman portrayed by Shani Mootoo in the novel. Even she did not want to lose her family's class level and it also sometime; affected in Valmiki to keep relationship of same sexual desire and have limited space for him. "From the perspective of Valmiki, his lower-class lover, Saul, has a much easier time having sexual relationships with other men than Valmiki. Saul's hunting friends and his wife know

and accept Valmiki and Saul's relationship, while Valmiki goes through the motions of affairs with women to mask his true nature from the judgemental eyes of the Trinidadian elite...While a person of Devika's class would lose social standing if she left her husband because of his homosexuality, someone like Saul's wife could lose life and livelihood" (Stookey, 2). Saul's wife accepts his queerness but Devika class-consciousness and orthodox mindset never accepts Valmiki's queer activities. So, Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter* endow with characters who stay attached with family and community but at the same time involve in sexualities and queer activities.

Like her father Valmiki, Viveka too involved in same sex relationship that never accepted by the society. "Viveka's burgeoning queer sexuality and gender expression are repeatedly prohibited through the evocation of an essential female Indian and Hindu Identity" (McCormack, 210). But Shani Mootoo, regardless of culture and traditions strongly depicted the character Viveka who desire to keep sexual relationship with Nayan's wife Anick, a white woman from France. She attached with her in different ways and always find ways to meet her who is living with her husband far away from the her first home due to family burdens. Even then, they have invited each other to their homes and expressed their love very frankly without thinking of families.

Once, Viveka visited Anick's home and Nayan went out for party they found space and have sexual intercourse and bound strong lesbian relationship with each other. Even, they also plan to elope from Trinidad and settle in the any country where people like them respected. But unconditioned love and support of Viveka's family deprived her very much and her queerness added more challenge to her family. Thus, she was unable to express her relationship with Anick to her family members. Viveka's struggle and inability to express herself is not very much different that the writer of the novel Shani Mootoo who has also confronted such problems in her life. Viveka maintain to protest for her rights to the family throughout the novel that produced dilemma for her parents. "How dare she think only of herself. Had she no good sense after all? No sense of loyalty-if not loyalty, then responsibility-to her family, to society?" (Mootoo, 343). Viveka never thought about society and culture but more affectionate for her desire and freedom.

Viveka struggled a lot to meet Anick due to pressure of her family and when she plan to visit Anick's home her mother denied "How many times do I have to say it? As long as you live in my house, you are my child and will live by my rules. I am not a fool, you know. I don't

know why you and your father get so bamboozled by whiteness" (299). Devika's behaviour with Viveka shows that she knew everything about their affair and never allows her daughter to spoil her identity due to foreign married woman. Viveka love very much Anick but later pregent by her husband Nayan that disturbed Viveka and later she decided to marry with Trevor, a man who love Viveka and familiar with her affair with Anick. In the end of the novel, they settled in Canada. So, both of the characters of Shani Mootoo due to the pressure of family, community and own on tradition give up their queer sexuality and follow heterosexual relation in remaining life. So, the protagonists of the novel very much influenced with western culture and Indian culture. Thus, it can be called cultural geography of the novel as set in Caribbean. Valmiki and Viveka faced dilemma of two culture because their sexual lifestyle was fully depend on their Western influences and their traditional and cultural origin force them to gave up it.

Conclusion

To reiterate, the novel of Shani Mootoo can be understood in different standpoints; because, she has touched almost all the aspect of Caribbean society and especially Indo-Caribbean communities. The issues of Indian diaspora such as difference in caste, class, race, gender, queer primarily given importance in the novel. Even, marginalisation of women and their struggle for justice have been very broadly discussed in the novel.

Valmiki's Daughter is another novel of Shani Mootoo set in real Trinidad, Caribbean and partly in Canada. In this novel, she mostly dealt with class, caste, sexuality, and gender among the Indo-Caribbean communities. Most part of the novel revolved around two wealthy upper-class families Valmiki and Prakash respectively. Her two central protagonists Valmiki and his daughter in homosexuality with Saul and Anick respectively but later follow heterosexuality due to presser of family and society. Mootoo through her two characters attempted to convey the message that people who follow same sex relationship should have same place and rights as straightforward and heterosexual people.

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