

Dimensions of Oppression and Literary Representation in selected works of Tehmina Durrani, Taslima Nasrin and Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract:

The works of Tehmina Durrani, Taslima Nasrin and Shashi Deshpande project issues related to women and their welfare in the South Asian cultural context. All the three novelists share a cultural legacy keeping in view the colonial rule which had resulted in the Nationalist Movement culminating in the Independence of India. Women under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, an ardent champion of equality of sexes, had played a crucial role in the freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi believed that educated and empowered women could play a progressive role in the development of the country. Gandhi's vision had secured equal rights and opportunities for women in Independent India. Still constitutional provisions are not enough to guarantee real freedom and equality for women of a country. Even today women face harassment, exploitation and subjugation in a society where male dominance is a norm and where women have internalized these values. The works of Tehmina Durrani, Taslima Nasrin and Shashi Deshpande focus on all the women centered issues which spring from patriarchy. Similarity of tone and tenor is there among the three above mentioned robust supporters of women's rights in South Asia given their shared legacy of pre-partition India. The different cultural context that the three women novelists experience reflects divergences of issues, concerns and resistance particular to their locale.

Keywords: Exploitation, Indoctrination, Dehumanization, Subjugation, Internalization.

I

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence* reflect the position of women in Indian homes. The unchallenged authority of the husband, preference for male children, exclusive roles of men and women, chastity and purity supposedly associated with women resonate her novels. Indian values ingrained in the psyche of women become a source of pain, suffering and disillusionment of Deshpande's characters. Both Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Urmi in *The Binding Vine* find themselves ensnared in the circumstances that are not of their own making. The Indian values of commitment to children and obedience to the husband dominate the currents and under currents of both *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence*. Both Jaya and Urmi find it difficult to come to terms with their socio-cultural realities. Urmi's loss of her daughter shatters her and

provides her a deeper understanding of the suffering humanity. She cannot take her mind away from her dead child even for a second. She tries to fight the loss but feels that forgetting her daughter would amount to betrayal. She finds life futile without her daughter, Anu. Anu's memory remains in her heart. That's why she rejects the idea of having a framed photograph of Anu on the wall. "I don't need a picture to remember her, I can remember every bit of her, every moment of her life. How can you imagine I need a picture?" (*The Binding Vine* 68). Urmi's attachment to her dead daughter is a source of her suffering. She is torn between her memories of Anu and her duty towards her son Kartik who feels neglected at the hands of her mother. Urmi herself is aware of her dilemma which borders on insanity. She reflects, "But it is Kartik's face I can see and Inni's blanched with terror. I am a tyrant, I

am turning into a tyrant, they're frightened of me. Kartik frightened of me? The thought is unbearable...(69).

Similarly Jaya is fully conscious of her husband Mohan's expectation of her when faced with a situation arising out of Mohan's alleged financial fraud in his office. Like an obedient Indian wife, she is choiceless. Optionlessness stares her in the face as she reflects,

No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction...(That Long Silence 12)

Adele King remarks, "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is. (King 97). Jaya even sacrifices her writing career for fear of annoying her husband. She turns to writing under a pseudonym in order to conceal her identity. She is torn between the demands of her husband and her creative urge to write.

Some of the core issues and concerns of Indian feminists like denial of freedom to women to pursue a career, their persecution, maltreatment, molestation and even rape find an echo in both the *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence*. The tremors that the rape of a young girl creates for the families is a case in point. The mother of a rape victim Shakuntala is shell shocked and responds in a typical Indian manner when she comes to know of the dehumanization of her daughter's body. She says, "No, no, no. Tell him tai, it's not true, don't tell anyone. I'll never be able to hold up my head again, who will marry the girl, we're decent people. Doctor, she turns to him, don't tell the police" (*The Binding Vine* 53) The novelist has analyzed her characters with convincing reality. Shakuntala is in a trauma and she blames her daughter Kalpana for the rape. Even the police officer behaves in a very irresponsible manner and blames the girl for the rape. Here, Urmi emerges as the crusader for the cause of Kalpana. She raises her voice, takes the matter to the press, gets the case reinvestigated which leads to the arrest of the rapist who is none other than the husband of Shakuntala's sister, Sullu. The women in both the novels are exploited, dehumanized and subjugated in a highly conservative society. The novelist through the character of Mira, Urmi's late mother-in-law touches on the subject of marital rape. In *The Dark*

Holds No Terrors, she had touched upon this topic where Sarita experiences the trauma of nightly sexual assaults by her frustrated husband, an under paid lecturer. In *The Binding Vine*, too, Mira has a strong aversion for physical intimacy with her husband but still she has to bear with it. Mira's poems reveal her inner self. Urmi goes through the poems in Mira's diary and gets a peep into her troubled marriage. The poems and entries in the diary bear proof to the forced sexual activity Mira had to bear in an otherwise incompatible marriage. The diary provides a clue to her molestation in her marriage. The novelist suggests that forced violation of a woman's body even in marriage can be as traumatic as rape. The issue of forced sex is again raised in one of her stories *Intrusion* where the wife has to put up with the trauma arising out of forced sex by her husband. The theme of forced sex runs through Shashi Deshpande's novels and stories and reflects the Indian reality where a woman is expected to please her husband like a prostitute.

Loss of a woman's identity, change of name of a woman after marriage and forced sex - all such women centred issues find its echoes in *That Long Silence*. Jaya, too like Mira does not protest the change of her name to Suhasini after her marriage just to keep her husband, Mohan happy. Shashi Deshpande through the character of Jaya lays bare the psychological makeup of middle class Indian women who erase their real selves in order to find security in marriage. Her authentic, inner self remains inarticulated. Deshpande presents women who realize that their feelings, emotions, expectations and aspirations hardly mean anything in an oppressive patriarchal setup. When Ramu Kaka shows Jaya the family tree wherein boys of the family find mention but her name is missing, she feels snubbed when told that she does not belong here. She is overwhelmed with such gross gender discrimination. In both *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence*, Deshpande has woven the tragic tale of women like Jaya, Urmi, Shakuntal, Kalpana, Mira and Sullu into the texture of these novels. The manifestations of patriarchy are responsible for the brutalization and dehumanization of all these women. Regarding her unique feminism Shashi Deshpande says, "The women in my books are people who come to realize what it is to be a woman in the process of their own lives and the situations they face not through books and theories. I think feminism is an

entirely personalized perception. It is when you start questioning preconceived notions about your roles.” (Deshpande)

II

The same patriarchal pulls and pushes dominate the works of Tehmina Durrani. *My Feudal Lord* and *Blasphemy* provide a glimpse of the subjugation, brutalization and dehumanization of women in a Muslim society. Both the novels focus on the miserable condition of women in the Muslim Society of Pakistan. Both Tehmina and Heer had to experience untold atrocities in their homes dominated by tyrannical husbands. Right from their childhood, they had been mentally prepared to tolerate the fury of a feudal society where husbands call the shots. Tehmina had been instructed right from her childhood not to mix up with outsiders and even stand with male servants in the kitchen. Both the women, Heer and Tehmina had been told about the bliss associated with the institution of marriage. Heer wanted to complete her education before getting married but her ambition was sacrificed at the altar of the institution of marriage. The novelist has provided a graphic account of the atrocities committed on both Tehmina and Heer. Tehmina was made to walk naked in her bed room when her husband Mustafa Khar came to know that she had visited a male gynecologist. Mustafa Khar, on the contrary, turned out to be such a villain that he started to seduce Adila, Tehmina’s sister. Despite facing such treatment at the hands of her husband, she found no support from society or even her parents. Perhaps it was a practice for girls to put up with such psychotic husbands. Even Tehmina’s father told her that since it was her second marriage, she could only leave Mustafa’s house in a coffin. When she decided to rebel and divorce Mustafa, she had to pay an extremely high price. She had to sign away all financial supports, lost the custody of her four children and found herself alienated from family and friends.

The situation that Heer confronts is worse as compared to that of Tehmina. Heer is reminded of her own mother’s paranoia who had told her, “A woman’s position always depended on a man, whether she was rich or poor did not matter. She also went from father to husband to son, and I was at the second stage of this journey (*Blasphemy* 46) She had to undergo all sorts of suffering in Pir Sain’s Haveli where every other devilish activity went on in the name of Allah and Islam. Violence

against women, polygamy, rape, forced sex, molestation of children and even incest can be heard in both the novels. Heer’s husband Pir Sain controls her body, mind and soul to such an extent that she finds it unbearable. Burdened with domestic responsibilities at the age of 15, she gets a beating at the hands of Pir Sain at the slightest pretext. The novelist through the character of Pir Sain presents the darker side of the so called religious and spiritual gurus who exploit the weak and the hapless in the name of Allah and Islam. In the Haveli, it is not only Heer who is exploited in varied ways. Countless girls and women have to fall prey to Pir Sain’s lust and sexual perversions. His perverted sexuality reaches its morbid height when his cruel eyes go to his own little daughter, Guppi, for sexual gratification. Heer is forced to play the role of Pir Sain’s accomplice in arranging girls for him in order to save her own girl. Heer is torn between conflicting demands of morality and her daughter’s safety and security. What Heer and Tehmina encounter is even more than Polygamy as Pir Sain sleeps with a new girl every night and Mustafa is guilty of having sexual relations with Adila, Tehmina’s younger sister. Finally Tehmina revolts and tells Mustafa in full public view, “Your marriage, according to the Koran was over years ago when you slept with my sister. I have been living with you in sin. The contract stood null and void long ago. (*My Feudal Lord* 362). But Heer is not so fortunate as Tehmina and Pir Sain goes on beating and thrashing her in innovative ways. She is even forced to prostitute for Pir’s friends and the intercourse is even filmed. After years of bearing pain and agony, she succeeds in bringing about Pir Sain’s death.

III

Taslima Nasrin’s *Lajja* depicts the persecution of a Hindu family in Bangladesh after the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The novel provides a graphic account of the persecution, harassment and physical torture of Hindu women in Bangladesh. Fanatics used to abduct, rape and kill Hindu women in the streets of Dhaka and other cities of Bangladesh. The novel is an incisive analysis of the patriarchal mindset of society where women are expected to fit in the Procrustean bed of repressive and painful conventions and traditions. Women like Kironmoyee, Maya and Shamima Begum are forced to toe this line of thinking. Women belonging to the minority Hindu community have

to suffer dual marginalization on religious grounds as well as on gender grounds. Nasrin shows how the patriarchal setup challenges individuality and erases self respect of women. An important feminist issue that has been highlighted in *Lajja* is the treatment of women in a society that treats them like commodities. Women are not considered creative, rational and intelligent: rather, they are marginalized as commodities. Kironmoyee is expected to be gentle, polite and an understanding mother. She is supposed to accept with humble resignation issues like her husband's infertility, physical ordeals and extreme hunger. "Kironmoyee did not eat herself but kept Maya's share of food for her" (*Lajja* 100) summarizes her complete indoctrination. A woman is expected to make all kinds of sacrifices for the family. Kironmoyee leads the insufferable life which Nasrin speaks of and prefers death over it. Her repression of her inner cravings turns into deprivation and become a way of her life. But Kironmoyee did experience a desire deep inside her. The following words bear testimony to it:

When Sudhamoy's friends came to visit and they sat around talking, their shadows would sometimes fall on Kironmoyee's lap, and almost involuntarily she would wish that these shadows were real. And how wonderful it would be she would think, if a shadow made of flesh and blood could rest its head on her lap (*Lajja* 114).

A critic rightly remarks that she "has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined, in short as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles"(Tyson 85). Kironmoyee is presented as a polite, submissive and self-effacing woman out to please her husband, son and daughter. She accepts with resignation her plight and compromises with the communal environment of the country by assuming a Muslim name. In such a milieu only Muslims are considered human beings and Hindus have to conceal their identity to avoid being harmed at the hands of Muslim fanatics. These fanatics raped, defiled and desecrated the bodies of minority Hindu women to avenge the demolition of Babri Masjid. The abduction of Maya at the tender age of 6 is a testimony to this madness displayed by Muslim fanatics. Vengeance dehumanizes humanity which badly hits women. It is a woman's body that is brutalized, be it Maya or Shamima.

Nasrin criticizes the women rulers of Bangladesh like Sheikh Hasina and Khalida Zia for unleashing violence against women by siding with the Muslim fanatics. She makes an important observation that women at the helm of affairs behave like men and harm less privileged women. They behave so for fear of disturbing the power structures that support them to maintain their positions. Nasrin analyses Hasina's compulsions in supporting fundamentalism in the following words:

Hasina is a woman. Everybody will now argue that she is a woman. True, but she is a representative of men. She is an accomplice of fundamentalism, an accomplice of religion. An accomplice of patriarchy. There is not a single 'Man' like Hasina in Bangladesh....(*No Country for Women* 129)

Nasrin speaks of great moments of women's liberation movements in India but the national leaders did not come up to the expectations. Rather, they surrendered to the communal forces. She perceives communalism as the main hurdle in securing equality for women in the following words:

In India, there had been a great possibility of women's liberation movement. But it was crushed in the hands of national leaders. This gave a golden opportunity to the uneducated and impatient Islamic men, who deprived their women counterparts of the basic human rights, security and justice which had been recognized by Indian democracy. The Shah Bano case was a striking example of how the communal state power was giving indulgence to this... Even the secular people of India are scared to support the demands of reforming or abolishing Muslim Personal Law. (8)

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate had rightly diagnosed the malaise by observing, " One of the most brutal features of gender inequality takes the form of physical violence against women.... (*The Argumentative Indian* 236). All the three above mentioned writers have boldly reflected through their works the pathetic and miserable condition of women in South Asia despite all the constitutional guarantees.

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