
New Woman in Vaidehi's 'Soliloquies of Saugandhi'

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Present paper is divided into three parts. First part of the paper reviews role of Indian mythology and patriarchal society in shaping the stereotype image of Indian woman. Second part of the paper explains awareness of identity in Indian woman and third part analyses Vaidehi's short story 'Soliloquies of Saugandhi' in the light of the image of Indian Women.

Though ancient Indian society was matriarchal in its structure, the role of man as protector of woman and provider of food brought him the ruling sceptre in the family and society and thus matriarchal nature of the family and society transformed into patriarchal. Moreover the men formed a twofold trap to subjugate women forever. On one hand the religion and culture fabricated and glorified deification of woman through myths portraying woman as goddess and on the other hand he also projected threat for woman that if she demands her natural desires of body and mind, she would prove herself not an ideal woman but an immoral whore. If she is married and performing all the responsibilities happily, she is ideal woman. A slogan was and even is permanently imbibed on her mind that she is a momentary wife but a mother forever. Since ancient times she had been compelled to follow the paragons of ideal womanhood-Seeta, Savitri, Draupadi etc. She was also made aware of the consequences in case she is left by her husband. Further the ancient sage Manu imposed a lifelong formula over woman to live her life. He expected woman to spend her childhood under the rule of her father, her young age under the rule of her husband and old age under the rule of her son. Moreover he did not allow her freedom as an individual. All these opinions and views helped in shaping the stereotyped images of Indian woman, as obedient daughter, sister, docile wife and loving, caring and sacrificing mother. She would born, live and die as a network of relationships. In this regard Mary Fergusson states 'One peculiarity of images of women throughout history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes. Another way of putting this would be to say that in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, mistress, sex object- their roles in relationships to men.' (Fergusson, 1973, p. 4-5) Thinking, dreaming, desiring, feeling and above all opening up was not allowed to her. She was deprived of her financial, familial and individual rights. She was and even is treated as machine meant for working hard in the family and producing children. Since beginning she has been suffering from a sort of double consciousness i.e. looking at her from the viewpoint of others. The initial oppression she internalized passively and then learnt to suppress her desires and demands as well as of her own species. They internalized this oppression so much so that ironically and paradoxically enough, the elder women in the family became instrumental in implementing patriarchal rules on younger women. During pre-independence period, treatment given to widows, sati practice and familial and social exploitation of women darkened the possibility of flying in the sky of freedom.

Silver lining to the dark cloud appeared during British rule in India when British education system offered equal opportunity to all irrespective of one's caste, creed, class and gender, accompanied by the reformative zeal of the male reformist like Raja Rammohan Roy, IshwarchandraVidyasagar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and Justice Mahadev Ranade etc. Exposure to education inspired women to literate themselves and also articulate their literary feelings. The need of writing for freedom by men during the period of freedom struggle in India encouraged women to articulate their creative urge through literature. Bhatt also reinforces the view in his introduction to 'The Image of Woman in Indian Literature' that 'There was an attempt at resurrection of high condition of woman in our society (and the process is still going on) after the introduction of western education, reformist movements, promotion of women's institutions, the freedom movements and so on. With India acquiring an identity of her own, doors were thrown open for women too, to acquire their own identities.'(p. XI)

Like phases of women writing in English as divided as female, feminine and feminist, Phases of writing by India women can be divided as female and feminine, feminist is yet to be achieved.

The initial phase of women's writing in India, between 1880 to 1920 records traditional images of women. The women writers like men, portrayed the women characters as ideal wives, daughters, sisters mothers etc. They started articulating as women but reflected over their role from the viewpoint of men or patriarchal society. That is why I categorize this phase as female writing. Writers like Kashibai Kanitkar, Lalitamba, Subhdrakumari Chauhan, Mahadevi Verma etc. contributed their writing during this phase.

But the real awakening seems to come with Tarabai Shinde's book 'StriPurush Tulana' (1888) (Comparison between Men and Women). Tarabai Shinde, a Marathi woman writer for the first time openly criticized the discriminatory treatment given to women in the name of cultural and religion. At the same time, she whipped the licentious behaviour of men often covered with the garb of religious, cultural rights exploited by Indian men. This writing by Tarabai Shinde truly heralded the beginning of feminist writing in India. Other women writers from different regions emphatically articulated injustice done to them since ages. It is noteworthy that the partial credit of the opening up of women goes to male reformists.

Commenting on the status of women's literature some critics state that- 'Women's literature of the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century breaks totally out of these pro-grammatic molds. Landscapes and figures neither imagined nor missed in the earlier years more onto the page. Stories have new shapes and are told from new points of view. The shift is gradual, initially uncertain and tentative, but clearly discernible all the same. What emerged was a many-faceted and often contradictory phenomenon not easily held down in a single formulation or an inert sense of period. Obviously the spread of women's education had a great deal to do with it.'(Tharu and others, 1991, p. 174)

The phase between 1920 and 1960 did not record much change but after 1960 women's writing occupied significant position in the main stream of Indian writing. Though not radical the women writers of this period began to look at themselves, not as paragon of ideal womanhood, not with double consciousness but as a human being. Writers like Vibhavari Shirurkar, Mannu Bhandari, Amruta Pritam, Krishana Sobati, Dhiruben Patel, Aashapura Devi, Mahashweta Devi, Chitra Mudgal started discussions about themselves as women, biologically and psychologically. They also showed awareness towards their physical needs and wanted to shed out the imposed image of a carrier of morality and chastity at the cost of their natural desires of body. This attitude of women writers gradually brought their female characters out of their stereotypes and presented them as human beings. This shifting helped in transforming the woman characters from traditionally bonded, marginalized woman into a new woman desirous of breaking the barricades of character, morality as well as patriarchal rules and talking about their desires. Kannada short story writer Vaidehi fingers at this initiation into revolt by her young protagonist in her short story, *'Soliloquies of Saugandhi'*. Saugandhi, unlike her predecessors, equipped with education and job, is still imprisoned by the imposition of stereotype image of an ideal daughter who is obedient to her parents and the ambassador of the name and fame of her family. She is educated but has no right to think for herself. Vaidehi (Janki Shrinivas Murthy) is a Kannada short story writer who was born on threshold of Indian independence i.e. in 1945. She was born in a big, traditional Brahmin family. As a story writer she has her own identity. In 2009, she was felicitated by 'Sahitya Academy Award.' She has to her credit seven short story collections. She rightly captures the world of a woman's micro feelings. She portrays the efforts of women to come out of the mess of traditional values in which they are nose deep caught since ages.

'Soliloquies of Saugandhi' originally written in Kannada, one of the regional languages in India, is translated into English by D. A. Shankar and is published in *'Contemporary Indian Short Stories – Series IV.'*

Saugandhi is a young protagonist of the story who is educated and a working girl. She is born and brought up in a typical middle class Indian family which is ruled by the totalitarian father. Saugandhi, to meet the demands of marriage market in India, has been educated and allowed to do the job by her parents. They pretend to be very open and modern in allowing education and job to their daughter but have already robbed her freedom of thinking for herself and taking her own decisions. Saugandhi is so eager to live her life her own way and enjoy the natural desires that rule her young body and mind. But her parents again admire her obedience, moral nature and character to remind her that she has to confine herself to the paragon of ideal woman. She is like a bonsai in their hands that shape her according to their wish but at the same time not allow her the natural growth. Saugandhi craves for freedom. She is not permitted to go astray but she is willing to have her man. Presently her life is ruled by her father. But soon she gets an opportunity to have her free will in the form her job transfer. Somehow her parents grant her permission to stay alone, but they take proper care of keeping her in the hands of a Landlady who acts as her guardian, like all middle class parents they succeed in colouring their helplessness, their anxiety as parents of a grown up daughter who need to be protected from the bad eyes of the society, to the Landlady. The father tells the Landlady

‘Now look at the girl. I ask you what is lacking in? So good at every kind of work. May be the auspicious moment eluded us. In fact I told her: “Fall in love with one of our caste-men. It is all right so long as he has a decent job. I shall not come in the way.”’ (p. 111). The land lady who works as the agent of patriarchy takes the responsibility of looking after Saugandhi because, ‘poor thing, a single girl was coming to stay there.’ (p. 111).

Saugandhi again experiences the darkness that hovers over her dream of living her own life. With the transfer in job she thinks, ‘She was now the bird that had escaped from its golden cage in a palace that was beyond the seven hills in an impregnable fort’ (p. 113). But with the precaution taken by her parents her dream is spoiled. She asks to herself, ‘How difficult is it to ask them, the world, to leave me to myself?’ (p. 114). She likes the Landlady but feels, ‘...the lady has a heart of gold. But no one seems to be aware of the subtle way in which she depriving me of my freedom.’ (p. 114). Saugandhi wants to start her journey in search of her true self, alone. If this does not happen, she is afraid, ‘...I must get away from everybody. It is only then can I see myself as I am. Or I shall get drowned in the noise they make and lose my identity.’ (p. 115)

Her mother, who is also an agent of patriarchal society, imposes on her the age old suppression as well as criticism on Saugandhi’s inability to attract a man. She says, ‘Some girls ensnare boys with their eyes. That is what they do and get married. Saugandhi, who does not know this art, has remained single.’ (p. 116). This criticism takes Saugandhi to double consciousness and she asks herself, ‘Why is it that I have not been able to love anyone? Nobody loves me? Why?’ (p. 116) The surprising element in Saugandhi’s character is that on one hand she wants to have her life and her man in her own way; on the other hand her guilt conscious tortures her that she is doing too much. ‘This is too much. This is the way of unforgivable sin.’ (p. 119)

What Saugandhi thinks and feels about this whole affair is communicated to us through her soliloquies. The protagonist being educated and earning does not enter into a dialogue with her oppressors but prefers to withdraw into herself by speaking to herself i. e. soliloquies. Her soliloquies display a confused kaleidoscope of her contrasting emotions-criticism of her parents, her reflections over her desires, her psyche, and her guilt consciousness for being blunt in thinking immorally. Though her silence and inability to act according to her desires categorize her as traditional, suppressed and silent girl, her very need of thinking and expressing her opinions and thoughts through her soliloquies beckon at a new woman who is trying to come out of her cocoon. Saugandhi represents the image of a new woman because she dares to think about those desires that were forbidden fruit to woman. Her longing for man, her desires to indulge into physical pleasures are symbolic to the change that is occurring in Indian women. She speaks, ‘...let me have my dreams at least. In my dreams, the milkman too gets in. And you know, indecently. Then that conductor, I saw the other day and that man who did not sit next to me... and then this man and that ...The nature of dreams is strange. This man’s body, that man’s eyebrows and somebody else’s eyes...It is wonderful that dreams would where a coming together in any way is imaginable.’ (p. 118).

At last she gets a chance to live alone because her landlady is going out of station and she will not go to stay with her parents because she cannot get leave. On the holiday she is alone in her room. She feels, 'Today is the holiday. Won't something happen anything? And tonight? She felt a flood of sweet sentiment coursing through her whole body' (p. 121)

She is waiting for some happening and a knocking on her door and someone knocks on the door. She opens the door in an excitement but to her dismay she finds her parents on the door. The story ends on a pathetic note, 'The road in front of her house lay inert and dead as if poisoned with poison of spreading darkness' (p. 122)

Freedom, feminist practices, financial freedoms are still the luxuries enjoyed by handful of upper class women in India. Majority of middle class women are still being victimized by marginalization and deprivation of right to live like a human being is the fact. Saugandhi does stand for the image of new woman who dares to think, not like traditional woman but like individual. Though the story ends on some sort of pessimistic note, it speaks out the hope of culminating the soliloquies into a dialogue and if needed, resistance. In this regards Anita Ghosh very aptly sums up, 'Vaidehi's protagonist Saugandhi subverts patriarchal control by opting for an independent existence that is self-chosen exile and is symbolic of leading an unmasked, free existence. This story explores the meanings of a security and contentment that such an exile may provide. The patriarchal home in their context is the site of sexism and other damaging social practices. Exile, therefore becomes a crucial metaphor in her consideration of her true identities through which they intend to interrogate and dislodge the patriarchal codes of womanly existence. A self chosen exile, thus, signifies the desire to feel at home, to escape into solitude, gain insight into her true 'selves' that enable her to liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchal expectations. Vaidehi's vision of empowerment and fulfilment of the needs of the female protagonists which is being at home with themselves.' (Ghosh, 2005, p. 30-31).

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