

Transgressing the contours of domesticity

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Abstract

Tracing the history of women, it becomes evident that all through the age-old practices, women have been expected of erasing their own identity in an environment where the male patriarch is the sole authority of the society. The society have targeted woman and made her understand that her ordeals are her destiny. Among a plethora of feminist writers, Yashpal has marked a niche in the literary world by unveiling the dreadful representation of women in the Indian society through his writings. His writings give an idea about his anxiety for the prejudices she faces in the Indian society. This paper proposes to highlight the retaliation of the female characters against gender discrimination by seeking an equal space and status for themselves. They break away from the conventional social norms, refuse to abide by the suffocating rules laid down by the traditionalist social order. His characters are customary born and brought up in a conventional milieu. Their consciousness to uphold the honour of the family does not stop them to unshackle themselves from the prejudiced value structure and annihilated cultural representation of gender in the pursuit of liberty and self-identity. The literary words of Yashpal voice the stubbornness of the women to not yield to the social norms and smash them completely. The paper elucidates how strongly they struggle to break away from subjugation and life of dilapidation.

Keywords- Retaliation, Stubbornness, Traditionalist, Subjugation, Annihilated

O Lord; why you have not given women
the right to conquer her destiny? Why does
she have to wait head bowed, by the roadside,
waiting with tired patience; hoping for a miracle
in the morrow?

-Rabindranath Tagore

The projection of feminine consciousness and sensibility has gained a great momentum in recent years. The paradoxical status of women in modern India stimulates many to voice against the unprecedented levels of violence and gender discrimination afflicted on her by the society as a whole and her family members at a personal level. Violence against women is usually not treated as a 'real crime', may be because it has become an indispensable part of Hindu social customs and traditions.

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History has unveiled the truth that from the very beginning women have suffered degradation at the hands of men. As a result, due to the lack of severe consequences, this social problem is breeding unabated. The in human crimes and unimaginable cases against women in the society has reflected women as a weaker and fragile sex. They face violence not only inside the house but outside too. Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar write in *Women in Indian Society*, “The depiction of reality of women’s status is a combination of advancement and a few steps backward. As we look back, we find women carving space for themselves with innovative initiatives and shaping history with their questioning and determined struggles. Thus, the journey of the Indian women is a tale of resilience and courage. (xvii)

To understand her predicament, the mapping out of the origin of Indian women from dim of past to the present is pertinent. About early period, it is said that women in ancient India enjoyed equivalent status with men. The rig Vedic period extended a liberal social atmosphere to women belonging to their period. Vedic period was followed by the period of the great epics. The two great epics of the time, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, gripped the minds of Hindus so much that they wished their daughters to follow in the footsteps of Sita and Draupati, who never questioned the will, demands and intentions of their husbands but mutely bent to their will. Draupati exhibited a greater sense of independence and boldness, yet she became a victim of a recreation like Sharon or ‘Chausar’. On this pretext, we cannot forget Gandhari’s self-imposed blindness as a mark of respect to her blind husband. This has to some extent paved the way for the growth of social discrimination. But it was due to coercion.

Gradually, the status of women deteriorated with time and circumstances. She is a source of bliss in many forms, sometimes as mother; sometimes as daughter; sometimes as wife and sometimes as a partner in spiritual deeds, on the other, sometimes, she is a source of sorrow because she makes her mother weep at the time of her birth. Society believes that when she attains the flimsy stage of youth, she brings tears in her parents’ eyes by becoming the cause of humiliation and disgrace to the name of entire family. At the time of the marriage, she makes everyone weep by leaving her parents’ house. As Dr. A. S. Altekar says in *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation*, “To become a daughter’s parent thus became a source of endless worry and misery...” (5).

The prevailing system of doting on sons than the daughters bothered the thinking of many intellectuals and social thinkers. They realised, this thinking needs to be offset because they could foresee the destruction of the society at its threshold. So lot many male writers have explored and articulated the unheard cries and unfelt pain of Indian women. Many writers enclosed the social tribulations in their works and hence joined the race to expose them. Rabindranath Tagore’s *Choker Bali* and *Ghare Bhaire*), Kamini Roy’s *Nirmalaya*, Ismat Chughtai’s *Lihaaf* or *The Quilt*, Chitra Banerjee’s *Diva Karuni*, Lalitambika Antharajanam’s *Aganisakshi* are some of the prominent works on the theme of the status of women in Indian society. When Prem Chand came on the literary scene, the condition of women in the society was deplorable. So he wrote a lot to stir the consciousness of the readers towards gender discrimination. He brought out inequality between the two genders from

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time to time. In his novel, *Pratigya* he objects such disparity and says, “Women’s place is right in the feet of men. Even if man is a thief or a cheat or an adulterous or a drunker, women’s religion is to wash his feet and drink that water” (93). Prasad’s sympathy for women places him amongst the best writers of his age. His respect and sympathy becomes vivid in the following lines, he says, “Women you are only a mark of reverence and so should be given a very high place. You are also a source of divinity...” (27).

Out of these writers, Yashpal’s name has also come up as a feminist. Though not a woman yet a feminist, he makes us conscious of the wretchedness of women and the unfairness done to them by their counterparts in the patriarchal society. Yashpal has given a new dimension to the theme of woman’s status in society. Thus, refutes the ill-conceived myth that only female writers can burrow into the female psyche and go beyond the skin and flesh to explore the predicament of women. His works mark a distinction as his female characters are not ready to submit to the oppressiveness of society.

In his works, women are casted as the victims of patriarchal mind set and the archetypal Indian society. The deep-rooted Patriarchy makes the society neutral to their encumbrances which they are supposed to bear in the ‘come what may situations’. He has shown social commitment in highlighting the misery of the marginalised section, aggravated under the credence of male chauvinism, yet is depicted as heroic and dynamic figures. His determination to mirror the woes of women fairly has again proved the verdict of many feminists wrong that the male authors who proclaim to portray the vices of women or the outbreak of their emotions fail to project their real. The state of the female characters of his works which he painted fifty years back from the present time are basic and permanent to human beings and so appropriate in the present time. The social problems as the theme of Yashpal’s writings range from women’s economic dependence, illiteracy as a curse, ignorance, poverty, subjugation to male powers, insensitive customs and traditions, social norms, duplicity of society and human beings, etc. He accentuates that, “In the changing circumstances, to achieve parity with men in society, women have to protest against the current social system. If women will not take such an initiative, then they will never gain their individuality and self-respect” (133-134). The paper attempts to show Yashpal’s sincere commitment towards the emancipation of women. The female characters of Yashpal’s novels are subjected to the extreme brutalities and inhuman treatment, yet each circumstance makes them more determined to break themselves free from the social norms by opposing them silently and choosing their own life.

Yashpal’s *Dada Comrade* has two female protagonists, Shaal and Yashodha. Yashodha is shown as a homely lady for whom looking after family is the only means of satisfaction. As the story moves forward her persona undergoes transformation. She becomes more independent in her thinking as well as her actions. She joins the group of revolutionaries without informing her husband. The incident of providing shelter to a prisoner also shows her silent protest against the wishes of her husband. The transformation in her character is even noticed by her husband. When he asks about her association with Harish, she does not like it and says to herself, “...After all, what have I done? Only that, I did not tell him about the subject of discussion with him...He is working for Congress

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for past eight years but never asked him that why and what he does there...Only because I am a woman... (Translation mine, 85)

Shaal is shown as an independent girl from the very beginning of the story. Her association with a number of men in her life bestows upon her the tag of 'characterless'. Later in the story, Shaal comes closer to Harish and gets pregnant by him. Being a freedom fighter, he is rewarded with the death penalty. Hence, Shaal decides to give birth to the baby for which she faces a lot of humiliation. Her father tells her that to have Shaal as a daughter, he must have committed sin in his previous life, but he expresses his desire to keep his honour intact and so requests Shaal to leave the town as well as his house for ever. Shaal leaves her father's house but tells her father that, "Father my ways and the practices have always been different from the conventional path and traditional practices. I will always remain indebted to you for the life you gave me in the form of the independence you gave me...I am not ashamed of any act of mine nor am I regretting any ..." (Translation mine, 134).

His other novels too work on the same lines and challenge the patriarchal system. Manifold setbacks and social malpractices have proved detrimental in their lives. They face the extreme anguish which sometimes shatters them into fragments. They reconcile with the situation then again splinter, the process of questioning the society and then answering, tolerance for the conventional bonds, breaking free from them, suppressing their desires, sobbing, protesting, hostility for the society and choosing their own way and also preferring no change in the self are the peculiar features of his female characters.

Manushya ka Roop is also a projection of the same social interference in the life of the women due to which they have to endure the agonising misfortunes of life. In *Manushya ka Roop*, Yashpal has raised his voice for the women-oriented problems. In the story, the factors such as domestic violence, marriage, widowhood, poverty, sexuality, etc. are the prime concerns. Soma, the protagonist of the story faces various problems such as family violence, jealousy and malice and family differences. Being a widow, she is afflicted by various tortures by her mother-in-law and her sisters-in-law. She is treated just like an animal; whose task is to take care of the household affairs from day till night. Yashpal has described widowhood as a curse in Indian society and by portraying Soma he describes how a widow is looked down upon and bears the accusations of being ill-omen by the evil society. Soma wants to run away from such a dreadful life. She meets Dhan Singh and elopes with him and breaks the first social code of conduct. Unfortunately, the two gets arrested by the police. Dhan Singh gets an imprisonment of six months and Soma undergoes the pain of sexual harassment by the police. She is treated as a toy to satisfy their sexual urge. The selfish intentions of the men hurt her emotionally and physically. But each scratch on her body makes her more determined and strong.

In the course of the story, she becomes a famous celebrity, an independent woman. She breaks her ties with all the relations of her previous life. She starts her life fresh and does not let the past life chase her present. She identifies herself and sets a new path of her life, a life free from the patriarchal whims.

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In *Jhoota Sach*, Tara, Urmila, Banti, Kanak, etc. break themselves free from the unnecessary burden of social norms, the sore relationships, they prefer liberty to the tongue-tied situations. Initially, they suffer from the patriarchal norms but soon they decide to disintegrate the agonising zone. They love their freedom which they are not ready to compromise at any cost. Yashpal's female characters are quite bold and patient, they give chance to the other persons to play their inning and then answer them in such a way that the others are left just awe-struck. They have their own style of doing things, hardly get influenced by any one, do not let any relation to weigh upon them for a very long time, etc.

Tara's finds herself being caught in the dilemma of preference between family and studies, independence and self-expression on the other side. She also struggles hard with patriarchy and traditions. Besides fulfilling all the traditional family roles of a daughter, sister and later a wife she finds herself lost in the way of becoming a complete human being. Tara represents a large number of Indian women, who bear social and family oppression in day to day life. Simon de Beauvoir once said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (496).

Tara hails from such a conventional family where girls and boys are not placed at an equal footage. She is treated like a woman and is reminded of her gender at every stage of life. Tara faces defeat far and wide. Tara is always considered a liability which they wanted to wave off as soon as possible by marrying her. Her longing to study fails to get its due share of attention may be because education is only male's prerogative. Rameshwari Pandya writes in *Women in India Issues, Perspectives and Solutions* that, "Gender inequality emerged as a major issue. Responses revealed that parents have to think more for their daughters, they have more restrictions for daughters/ girls. Since they have to settle in other family, less money should be spent on them. The responses also revealed that as girls reach their puberty, parents' tension increases. At the same time women mentioned that boys will be given food first. In association to this mothers took the ownership to bridge the gender gap and specified the efforts they are employing in their individual home environment. Societal pressures compel the gender discrimination. (133). Unfortunately, Tara's capability is never provided a suitable outlet. Meera Kosambi writes in *The Life of the Late Dr. Mrs. Anandbai Joshee-Feminist Vision or Treason against Men?* "What use is education to women? It is enough if they are able to read simply holy books. Are they going to seek employment that they should study English? She is the wife of a poor and simple man; how will she manage your household if you allow her so much freedom? What use are freedoms and education to women? Their education consists in taking proper care of whatever we bring home. If women get an education, what will men do? And who will do the house work?"(64)

Yashpal's here highlights the fact that our society always believes in demarcating the works which woman is suitable for or not suitable for. Tara's parents are no different they would always repeat the common refrain spoken for the Indian women, 'As a girl/woman of the house you should...or you should not'. It seems woman is a community drop box for instructive proposals and advices. One can evaluate the rigidity in their perception from this, "You want a girl who has a BA degree? Will the girl who is BA produce babies that are already educated?" (94).

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Tara is ultimately married off to Somraj, who turns out to be a devil. On the very first night, he hits her and accuses her of having incestuous affair with lots of men. Simon De Beauvoir writes, “It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates woman” (496). Yashpal brings to fore the various factors which can hurt male pride. Firstly, because she is more educated than him, secondly, she does not evolve as the duty-bound wife as she is expected to be. He gets hurt the most when she refuses to surrender to him. When his attempts to subdue her fails, then he decides to take revenge on her slowly because he knows that, “Where could she run away to escape from him?” (356). Chandra says in *Radical Feminism and Women’s writing*, “The institution of marriage becomes an instrument of exploitation in feminism which regards it as a subtle expression of patriarchal control and the most powerful weapon for female subjugation”(53).

After this she loses her faith in relationships and so erases few names, which had some existence in her life at some point of time, from the petite catalogue of her relationships. After such harsh experiences, Tara not only changes her life but transforms her attitude too. She grows from the experience and learns more about herself and her life. Tara becomes a strong person; she discovers herself and becomes highly articulate, resolute, courageous and clear-headed.

Just as Tara, other female characters also discard the social ethnicity and strongly decide to lead their lives as free spirit. His female characters are trapped due to the overcasting of dreadful circumstances of the time. All of them redefine themselves away from their home town. Homelessness gives them a new identity and a real sense of freedom.

Society binds a woman in different relations such as that of a daughter, a wife, a mother, etc. Yashpal throws light on these relations with an intention to accentuate that the relations are nothing but hindrances in her life. The feminist yearning for equality, identity and liberation manages to acquire a suitable place in Yashpal’s writings. His characters are such because he dreams of a society where women characters should consolidate themselves and exercise their will. Identical to his aim, his female characters usually exercise free will and free choice. They free themselves of the fetters of cultural stereotyping. The quest for freedom, personality and individuality are very dear to the female characters. But human frailties like selfishness, rigid social taboos and double standards jeopardise human relations and an ideal atmosphere in which freedom is possible. He allows his female characters to grow into selfhood and independence and her ability to take major decisions. They shift from the periphery, where she is an object to be moulded according to the male and societal requirements, into the world where her own aspirations shape the plot of life.

In fact, most stories of Yashpal shows that though the stubborn and hard headed customs and conventions are responsible for this predicament of women, yet they survive them and counter them in their own style. In the worst condition of living, the issue of women’s identity becomes of utmost importance to them. But happily, their journey towards self-realisation ends with the victory for liberation. His works highlight Yashpal’s apprehension for the deterioration of India due to the observance of age old customs, traditions, blind faiths and caste system. Women’s exploitation is seen as a side-effect of cultural conservatism. If we peep deep down the history we will see that women have been silenced by patriarchy and have led a passive life. But Yashpal is not afraid of

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expressing his resentment towards the ills done to them in the name of tradition. His female characters refuse to accept a passive role. They have daringly broken the superimposed boundaries and thrown away all the layers of oppression, though after experiencing a lot of affliction. The freedom to choose their life and to find a place in it makes Yashpal different from others, as many just highlight only the problem but do not deliberate on the solution. It seems that Yashpal is an ultimate panacea to the women-oriented problems.

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