

The Image of Woman in Hindi Fiction: An Outline of Krishna Sobti's Select Novels in Translation

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DOI: 10.53032/TCL.2021.5.6.14

Abstract

Krishna Sobti's all novels are unique. Each has different characters with different set of issues. She is a class in herself when it comes to portrayal of women characters. Woman, undoubtedly is an architect of herself, her individuality as an imaginative being. Her discourse in the novels of Sobti has been balancing. Most of the times, Sobti woman is a strong rebellion of her silence. Her discourse and attitudes are a challenge not only to marginalised position but also their repressed individuality and suppressed desires. Wherever and whenever they raise their voice, their discourse obtains unique identity and recognition. This paper talks about the image of woman in Hindi fiction in general and in the novels of Krishna Sobti in particular. Her three translated novels, *to Hell with You Mitro* (2007), *Sunflower of the Dark* (2008), and *Memory's Daughter* (2007) have discussed. Sobti presents panoramic image of woman in her novel which have been unmatched hitherto. Her women characters are rebellious, submissive, timid, outspoken, sexually passionate, courtesan, widows, single parent, rape victims, so called Sati-Savitri, stereotype, archetype and many other kinds. She proves herself as the representative fiction writer of Hindi literature.

Keywords– Image of Woman, Hindi Fiction, Translation, Vernacular

Introduction

The 'Image' basically carries two inherent meanings: "one, as the character of a thing or person as received by the public; two, a mental representation, idea or conception. The application of this term can be either literal or figurative, but, when conjoined with literature, it can be both" (Rao xxv). The above two meanings of the word 'image' in the specific context of women have been formed by patriarchy power setup, language used by made and used by men, stereotype and archetype conception of women as domestic entity, her economic and social status as a mother, daughter and wives made for home and their male-counterparts. The image of women in literature means, as Yamuna Raja Rao observes, to

look at two points of views; first, the public view of women that is represented in literature and, second, the artist's or writers' personal understanding of women as an individual and also as an integral member of society. Subsequently, the common image of women in literature broadly identifies the real status ascribed to women in a hegemonic society as mother, daughter, wife, sister, in that order in a conventional familial setup. And outside the familial settings, she is the widow, the prostitute, the courtesan, the mistress, the companion etc (xxv). But in present time, she has been accepted an independent individual, an intellectual, a professional, a working-woman, a politician, an activist, etc.

The image of women and the representation of women's issues in vernacular literature both come out of the existing world. "It also exists" says, Dr. Yashoda Bhat, "in the mind and imagination of the writer" (ix). It is more significant, as Bhat further tells that:

A study of this kind, therefore, serves a double purpose—it shows which way the writer's sensibility works and whether over the ages there has been a change in it. It also serves as a mirror to the society in which we exist. As a step in the radiating self-awareness, self-observation and self-appraisal for woman in general and as a meaningful comment on the creative effort of writers, the insights revealed here are of immense value. (ix)

"One peculiarity of the images of women" states, Mary Anne Ferguson, "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 primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object—their roles in relationship to men" (4-5). Status and roles, besides these i.e., women as a leader, as a powerful independent individual, an activist, as a governing authority or as an independent decision maker are rarely reflected. And, wherever there are such types of representations, either they are termed as exceptions or extraordinary, instead as normal or average capable human like men. The individual selves of women have partial recognition and self-obliteration and annihilation are their normal way of living. Women, all across the India, have too accepted this and lived and adjusted with it for generations as being a part of that setting.

Predominantly, in the ancient history and ancient literature of India, "women have been deified, glorified and also regarded as myths" says Dr. Yashoda Bhat. She further informs, "However, in reality, most of the times, the contradictory state of affairs also existed. There was and perhaps it is there even today, a duality in the projection of the image of Women in Literature" (x). Stressing the realistic representativeness of women in contemporary literature, it is generally observed that:

There are deified, archetypal images and there are also debased and degraded images, Literature also portrays a few insurgent minorities who protest against the existing bill...Along with conventional types, there are also protesting women characters in India Literature. (Bhatx)

The new women began to emerge after the commencement of the education in post-Independence India. This laid a unique sense of individuality in the Indian women, and made them conscious for their rights as well as choice.

The fast changing socio-political and economic conditions along with education gave opportunities to the women to become socially and economically independent. Convention moral codes and setups encountered the direct conflict with strongly expanding feminist trends. In reality, a new body of paradigm and pattern affiliated to women's life emerged and came predominantly into function. The subdued voices of numerous vernacular women writers and their writings have not yet traversed state borderlines let alone national boundaries. These voices have been twice marginalized. First, being women, their writings repeatedly fall prey to the politics of canon construction. Historical environments and ideologies have mostly been tough to women's literary creations. Statistics, literary histories and politics habitually overlooked to mention their contribution. In this regard, Michelle Perrot has accurately said that 'In the theatre of memory, women have feeble representation.' Second, their voices are not usually heard because they belong to the category of vernacular writers (Chaudhry 98-99).

There has been kaleidoscopic representation of image of women in Hindi literature that has been changing throughout its literary history. She presents how patriarchal system controls and creates images of women and conception, perceptions and misconceptions related to women and their issues. There are a lot of treasures fathomed within the oeuvre of Krishna Sobti, it just needs to be explored, debate and deconstruct. Fiction, being the most prolific and genre of literature today, is more concerned with woman and other social issues. In the last five or six decades, there have been important changes in the themes and subject matters, characterisation, raising and resolving the women issues and their predicaments in Hindi literature, and more specifically in fiction. However, most of the Hindi writers with all their captivation with modernity haven't completely successful in cutting off themselves from traditional and conventional approach. They see woman fundamentally performing the role of an ideal mother, faithful wife and obediently sister. A great number of women themselves assign highest value and self-esteem to their social code and conducts and to their biological roles. Marriage and motherhood are generally perceived as the completion of womanhood and of one's personality and fulfilment of one's relationship.

Dr. Aruna Sitiesh, in her essay “The Image of Woman in Hindi Novel” observes, “Acutely conscious of the imperative need to review and even discard many of our social and moral codes, the majority of our writers have, attempted to seek the solution within the existing framework” (49). Various factors including rapid social-cultural, economic and political changes brought the economic independence and opportunity to achieve and aspire through education that resulted in the rise of the New Woman. This New Woman is confidently assertive, giving utmost importance to self-respect, cherishing her individual independence and even more articulate. This woman, as represented by the contemporary Hindi writers, is no longer to be the victim of social and familial suppression; she does not succumb to patriarchal pressure and norms against her will; she freely articulates and expresses her desires and longings. Although this independent woman has now common in urban and semi-urban context, the rural women are also no longer ignorant about this urban phenomenon.

Munshi Premchand as a socially concerned writer, has passionately explored his contemporary social conditions, particularly issues related to peasants, farmers, labourers, women, caste, class, animal etc. He has depicted the miserable condition of suffering people. Therefore, his concern with women and their problems are prime issues of his writings. The plight of widows in *Vardan* (1902) and *Pratigya* (1929) of prostitutes in *Seva Sadan* (1918), free love and human sensibilities in *Rangabhoomi* (1924), *Karmabhoomi* (1932), and *Godan* (1936), and transitions in traditional family system in *Premashram* (1918). He hasn't questioned the traditional norms of the familial system, but uncovered its values that turn out to be outdated with the course of social and economic changes. The soaring materialism and economic crisis transformed the general outlook and thoughts of the society. The old widows have been abandoned as being burden, old mothers and fathers have lost their authority but not their inherited prejudices, the familial themes are represented in contemporary Hindi fiction in all its possible articulateness. It has become a tendency to neglect the ageing parents and treat (mistreat and ill-treat) them as mere a liability. The mother is welcome only when she can be a good alternative for a maid. She is expected to follow the dictates and obey the sons and daughters-in-law quietly. The relationship between children and parents are being reread and rewritten in the consistently changing scenarios. “Constraints of space, financial strain and tendency to see the old parents as intruders into their privacy seem to have brought about further filial disregard” (Sitiesh 53-4).

The image of divorced woman, single or widowed mothers are at a great extent highlighted in the works like Mannu Bhandari's *Apka Banti* (1970) and Suryabala's *Yaminikatha* (1991). Transforming social values have steered to catalytic changes in personal, interpersonal and social balances. The image of woman protecting her inhibitions and developed a new frankness about her sexual desire and individual self. Rape issues,

economical exploitations, equal pay, work exploitations are some of the burning issues in which women are being represented in contemporary Hindi Literature. Therefore, as observed by Dr. Aruna Sitiesh, it can be seen that:

These changing concepts of morality have not only revolutionized our attitudes to the prostitutes who are now seen as victim of socio-economic forces rather than as fallen women but also affected the marital relations. It is no longer imperative to marry the man you love or to love the man you marry. Pre-marital and extra-marital relations are a cause for anxiety but not for surprise or outright condemnation. Attempts are made to explain, even justify them in the context of larger socio-economic power structures. (59)

Krishna Sobti is a distinguished Hindi novelist, short story writer and essayist. She is considered as 'the Grand Dame of Hindi literature'. She was born on 18 February 1925 in Gujarat which is now in West Pakistan. She is famous for her lively language and controlled expression in Hindi literature. She has given a new freshness to Hindi language and Hindi literature. Her women characters have a powerful place that "opened new vistas in Hindi Literature." She received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1980 for her novel *Zindaginama* and was awarded Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 1996. She received the prestigious Jnanpith Award for her unmatched contribution to Indian literature in 2017. She died recently on 25 January 2019, in the age of 94. Today, she has become an inspiration of a loyal devotee who has given her entire life for the betterment of the nation and its people. She has found leading the way whenever there needed to raise strong voice against the elements who tried to damage or harm the secularity and integrity of the country's core democratic values.

Sobti's most controversial and highly acclaimed novel is *to Hell with You Mitro* (2007). This novel has kaleidoscopic image of woman. It has quite contrasting images of women in it. The novel has its setting in rural Punjab; basically, is a story of a joint family of Gurudas and Dhanvanti, along with their three sons and daughters-in-law. Banwarilal is the eldest son and his wife is Suhagvanti, Sardarilal is the middle one whose wife is Sumitravanti or Mitro and the youngest one Gulzarilal whose wife is Phoolavanti. Gurudas has one daughter named Janko. There are two other families as well in the novel; family of Mitro's mother and another is Phoolavanti's mother. Mitro is the gist of the story. The whole narrative revolves around this particular character of Mitro. As it has been said of her most debatable characters, *Mitro*, "When she's good, she is better than the best. When she's bad, she's worse than the worst. If in a good mood Mitro is your friend and all her belongings are at your feet. At other times, she becomes so estranged that she spits on her husband" (11). The novel shows how Mitro fights openly to satisfy her sexuality in such a family where women are not supposed to open their mouth in front of the males of the house. In such family, she not only accepts her sexuality but uses it as a weapon within the family conflicts.

Woman facing domestic violence on the name of fidelity and chastity quite important issue of this novel. At the beginning of the novel, Gurudas, Mitro's father-in-law being fed up with this daily's beating and thrashing and irritatingly says, "The same damned beating and thrashing day in day out! These two make life such hell! Sardarilal needs the slightest excuse to break into blows. And he has a she-wolf to match" (Sobti 10).

to Hell with You Mitro presents a diverse range of image of women in of a middle class patriarchal Hindu family. One side there is Mitro, the woman who confronts all his family members for what she thinks is right for her. She openly articulates her sexual desire in front of her father-in-law and others. She has been portrayed as an unapologetic, bold and asserting woman. The inherent discourse of the text is that "first and foremost", like most of the married women, as Narasimhan states:

Mitro loves her husband, Sardarilal, no matter his physical deficiency. Loving the husband is a concept alien to Indian notions and ideals of gender relations. The husband is to be worshipped by the wife, to be exalted, paid homage to as a being higher than her, entitled to standing by divine ordinance. (179)

Though, Mitro destroys the boundary of the belief that in a respectable middle-class family, "women should live a subdued and sheltered life uncomplainingly and enact the faithful and chaste wives to their dominating husbands" (Singh 330). On the other hand, there are characters like Suhagvanti, Phoolavanti, Dhanvanti, Balo and others who are stereotypical women who cannot question their male counterparts and their decisions. Suhagvanti, Mitro elder sister-in-law presents an image of an ideal, Sati-Savitri daughter-in-law and of a chaste wife. She cannot talk about sex, sexuality or her own body or bodily comfort in front of anybody because, for her, talking of these is like committing sin. Phoolvanti is the younger daughter-in-law of Gurudas's family. She is a typical woman who does not like to work; hence, she finds various ways avoids the household works. She is a woman who only cares about jewellery and money. Dhanvanti is the mother-in-law of Mitro. She is also very much like the old version of Suhagvanti. She also loves her husband and sons with all devotion to them. Balo, the mother of Mitro is the second most important and interesting woman character. She is a courtesan. She has many relationships across the town. She presents the image of an old, aging woman who has nobody in her old age to fulfil her loneliness. There are numerous discourses, having inherent meanings within its narrative and representation which is needed to analyse. *To Hell with You Mitro*, as Narasimhan observes, "is unicultural in an un-stated, unselfconscious and culture specific way few – possibly none – Indian language fiction of today is. No over or undertones of English, or west-inspired modes of thought hum in its vocal properties" (304).

Like *to Hell with You Mitro*, Sobti's *Sunflower of the Dark* (2008), the translation of *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke* (1972), presents the image of a new woman, though not completely liberated from the traditional ideological constraints. The novel exhibits the shifting image of a woman in the changing time and space ideology. Ratti, a modern educated woman, is the protagonist of the novel who despite of being sexually exploited doesn't lose her individuality and character. Though, she is a rape victim, Sobti bars Ratti from traditional image of a sexually exploited woman and does not let guilty conscience touch her psyche. Ratti articulates her rights in a patriarchal society with sheer audacity. She does not feel herself as a weak or miserable woman. She relentlessly fights for justice having a strong self-belief and determination. As she herself admits while talking to her lover Diwakar, "I've become valuable in my own eyes, Diwakar" (Sobti 91). Same as in *to Hell with You Mitro*, the radical thrust of *Sunflower of the Dark* is also unexpectedly restricted to expediate a settlement and escape confrontation between a sexually exploited female and manipulative patriarchal power-structure. "The sexually frigid Ratti stands in contrast with the sexually desiring Mitro and her various encounters with men are symbolic of both her sexual impotence and her definite bitterness and desire to settle scores with exploitative male" (Singh 334). The novel also turns to be an ideological text of woman freedom in which "sexual privileges male over female can be altered by the premeditated practice of self-controlled sexuality.

The novel *Sunflowers of the Dark* (2008) offers an astonishing understanding of the unfathomable, obscure and concealed niches of a female psyche who stays inexplicable for every male psyche and physic who comes in touch with her. The conservative mindset and patriarchal ideology more worsen the circumstance for her by considering her accountable for her rape. This accident mutilates her affairs with men folk later as an adult woman and ruins her efforts to apprehend her womanhood. As Chandra Nisha Singh in her book *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing* observes:

Ratti, for personal vendetta, entices men with her sensuous charms only to discard them ruthlessly at the height of sexual passion. Ratti is not conventional pleasure-giving sex object or a sexually passive stereotype, and when she falls in love and is suddenly relieved of the psychodynamic hold of her sexual frigidity, she is transformed into a sexually desiring woman... A self-sacrificing and sentimental Ratti decides to withdraw from her married lover's life to avoid fornication, to preserve social norms and to live within the prescribed paradigms. Ratti and Mitro are conceived as guardians of a male-specific and a predominantly male-prescribed frame of social values of sexual fidelity, chastity and self-control, by a female writer who halfway through her narratives starts internalizing the prevailing male views of the image of woman. (334)

There occur many instances where Ratti is inept to conclude her relationship with other male counterparts. She, lastly accomplishes her relationship and self-realization through Diwakar, her lover who recognises and comprehends her truly and heartens her to live a fresh, natural life. The two unique images of Ratti and Mitro, the sexually desiring protagonist and the raped and sexually exploited rebellious women are “subverted to accommodate the writer’s” inherent beliefs. However, the images of both protagonists are quite “significant stereotypes”; Mitro as “the new sexual predator” and Ratti “as a neurotic and rebel, two revised reinterpretations of the bitch-seductress stereotype and the image of the liberated woman” (Singh 334).

Memory’s Daughter (2007) which is an English translation of *Daar Se Bichchudi* (1958) is a moving story of a woman named Pasho who is basically habituated by and restrained in customs and traditions. Krishna Sobti has created the image of a toiling woman who has to experience subsequence to her choice to out step the threshold of her tradition-bound family. Sobti’s artistic genius touches the higher aesthetics in representing the affectionate feelings of the Pasho, the central woman character accompanied by her shifting circumstances throughout the novel. In the text, the woman Pasho exhibits the predisposition of every rural girl, bereft of education, to agree to take the patriarchal setup of the household as her province. She has portrayed as a complete traditional woman who is totally oblivious of her rights as a fellow human being. She appropriately validates the Sati-Savitri image of woman. The novel also presents the image of Pasho as an orphan woman who dependent on her maternal uncle for accommodation. This is an image of a typical traditional woman who needs a shelter. Without shelter, she is unprotected, helpless and thus a root of disgrace to the whole household and family.

Sobti highlights the narrow-minded societal arrangement where females are best restrained within the patriarchal walls of their father, husband, and in-law’s homes. Pasho has been presented as every woman who normally unable to identify her own wealth and values except the ones i.e., only amounts herself as being capable of breeding and feeding. She is portrayed as a commodity to be used and reused by the male. Still, she shows an urge to live. This strong wish to live is unique trait of her personality that provides vigour to her character. Her physical attractiveness produces a sense of arrogance within her personality, “There was a time when I would walk down Shah Almi, sure and arrogant, a song in my stride. Eyes would rise and fall on me like a tide, attention congeal in my wake” (6). However, in appearance she is a sort of timorous woman, when she admits, “I walk down Shah Almi, flamboyant leather jootis on my feet and bright parandas swinging at the ends of my long plaits, smiling at their murmurs and whistles. There was a time when no gaze or cloth would stay tethered to this body” (6).

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She comes triumphant even after repetitively traded and procured like animals and behaved like a maid-servant. Despite Pasho's image is generally shaped in the stereotypical style; she amazes the readers with her will and determination. Therefore, in spite of being exposed to multiple cruelty, she courageously confronts the tests of her life and conquers all complications. She has also been portrayed as a typical Indian woman who is simply preoccupied with the fancy of having fine jewellery and clothes. This image of a woman obsessed with love jewellery and clothes has been prevalent almost every novel of Krishna Sobti. Even in difficult situations, she just unable to resist the enticement for ornaments. This stereotypical behaviour and obsession for ornaments as aforesaid can be clearly notice in the following passage of the novel where Sobti has just followed a tradition image of a young woman:

... I got up from my sick bed. I had a bath, wore clean clothes, oiled my hair and plaited it. I glanced at the small mirror in a niche in the wall, my pearl white teeth flashing back at me. I smiled. I will never allow a stare of any uncle or aunt to sully this beautiful face, I told myself fiercely. I noticed the scar, still showing red and angry. I pulled a curl from my tight plait and let it fall casually over my forehead. And suddenly I saw dancing before my eyes the gem-studded tika that adorned the foreheads of the Sayalkot Shah women. Fingering my nose pin, I promised myself, A tika like this will adorn my forehead too one day. (12)

Conclusion

Stereotypes, status quo and taboos are being questioned in these regional literatures. Krishna Sobti compels us to rethink over the approach and attitude of conventionality through her strong and vocal characters. Vernacular literature in general and the oeuvre of Krishna Sobti in particular, always have the adaptability and continuously hitting the core problems, not only of vernacular but also of national importance. It has "the consciousness of time and space feature of the novelist's apprehension for reality" (Mukherjee 5). It has diverse range of women characters and each character is experiencing her own set of patriarchal challenges and trying to maintain her individuality. Although she has audacious and daring women characters like Mitro, Balo and Ratti, she has largely depicted traditional, stereotypical, typically rural, husband and father obeying women characters in her novels. Unsteadily hovering on the threshold of conventionality and modernity, she successfully represents a whole generation of early women novelists and short-story writers of India.

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