

Hindi Vidya Prachar Samitis'

Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College of Arts Science & Commerce

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SJ
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Proceeding of State Level Workshop
on
Issues of Single Women

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SINGLE WOMEN: WHY TO BE SINGLED OUT IN SOCIETY AND LITERATURE?

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Abstract

Women have been marginalized not only by their male counterparts but also by other women in society since time immemorial. Therefore, the issues of single women are demanding attention from government, lawmakers, policy makers, sociologists and even artists including creative writers as single women are on the margin of the margin means doubly marginalized. They not only face problems related to their basic needs- food, shelter, clothing but also physical, psychological and financial security due to biased social outlook and scandal mongering not only by neighbours, friends, relatives but also by near and dear ones including colleagues at workplace. The difference between the self-image and social image of a single woman at times leads to aloofness, isolation, frustration, depression and suicidal tendencies if her loneliness is not her strength rather it becomes her weakness or obstacle.

In the light of the above observations, this paper is directed to analyse whether there is a need to single out single women in society and literature because literature is a mirror to society. The male as well as female creative writers have tried to project the lives of single women from various perspectives through varied literary form. The literary texts under study for this paper are- Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's Pather Panchali (Song of the Road), Mahasweta Devi's Rudali, Vijay Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session and Kamala, Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting, Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe.

Introduction

Any adult female human being, who is unmarried, divorced, separated, widowed or stays alone either by choice or due to any other reason can be categorized as a single woman. Single women are on the margin of the margin means doubly marginalized due to patriarchal social system. They face myriad problems related to basic biological, psychological, social and financial needs have been aptly depicted in the works under study.

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's Film/ novel Pather Panchali (Song of the Road) depicts the sufferings of Indir Auntie, an old widowed woman. Sharbojaya, her distant daughter-in-law

dislikes Indir so much that she treats penniless hunchbacked Indir like a beggar. She never serves food or water to Indir though the house in which she resides actually belongs to Indir. She even accuses Indir that Durga has learnt thieving from her because Indir takes things from kitchen without asking Sharbojaya, so does Durga by picking up fruits from the neighbour's orchards as Indir eats those fruits with fondness. She also nags Indir many times for taking chillies or other food items from kitchen. "I have tolerated you for 8 years. My patience has exhausted. You better go elsewhere." Indir finds it difficult to tolerate the nagging at such an old age and leaves the house in anger with her bundle of ragged clothes, mat and other belongings. Durga pulls her aunt's belongings but Sharbojaya asks Durga to leave Indir alone. Indir goes to the house of Raghu, one of her acquaintances. Durga understands that no one cares for the old aunt except her. When she meets her aunt on the way, she brings her back home to see the new born child, Apu. Indir is happy at the birth of child like others but Sharbojaya doesn't like her coming and staying with them again. Her behaviour doesn't change at all though Indir is seen rocking the cradle. Indir finds it difficult to get up as her back is stiff and so requests Harihar to help her to get up. She remarks, "Who cares about an old woman?" and shows Harihar her torn and worn out shawl. She even tries to stitch her torn shawl but cannot thread the needle even. Raju Gifts Indir a new shawl and Sharbojaya quarrels with Indir and accuses her of begging and insulting them. When Indir says that she had demanded it from Harihar, Sharbojaya retorts, "You should be ashamed. Would he (Raju) feed you too? Don't you realize that children often go hungry? If you are staying here, stop begging otherwise you go" and throws Indir's belongings. Indir goes to Raju's house to stay for a few days as she is perturbed with Sharbojaya's behaviour. Durga and Apu go out to search Indir as their mother tells them to find the calf. Indir comes back as she is not well and wants to spend her last days at her old home but Sharbojaya rejects her saying, "The best thing is to leave." Indir requests to allow her to rest for a while and give some water. Sharbojaya eating her food shows Indir her bowl and suggests Indir to help herself. Indir ultimately leaves the house. Later on she is found dead sitting under a tree by Durga and Apu. Durga shakes her body and she falls down. Thus she never gets peace but only rejection till her death. The villagers perform the last rites. Thus Indir becomes an outsider insider or vice-versa in her own house.

In Mahasweta's Rudali Sanichari, a married woman becomes single after her husband's death followed by her son Budhua's death as her daughter-in-law had already left him forever due to poverty and illness. With the grand child in her arms, she cremated Budhua. Haroa, her

grandson grew up, worked for the few months and then ran away with the magic show lot despite Sanichari's thrashing, warning and attempts to stop him from being a strayed. Suddenly she met Bikhni, her childhood playmate and they came to know that now too they were alone at this stage of life. Bikhni had a son after three daughters whom she had brought up with hardship after her husband's death. She married him after taking a loan from the mahajan but he is now staying with his in-laws and refuses to repay the loan to mahajan by selling the cows. The mahajan is claiming their house by way of repayment. Hence she sold her two goats without letting him know and left the house as she felt that he is as good as dead and it's better to beg at station. Sanichari invited Bikhni to her hut. Soon their money got spent and for their livelihood, they started to labour as rudalis i.e., to wail over the corpse of the rich which is generally done by the whores they keep. Sanichari and Bikhni wailed so loudly that the market place randis admitted their defeat. They became businesswomen now. Then Sanichari formed a union of rudalis and Randis and became the president. She was not comfortable with inclusion of randis but Bikhni told that she will get them as they are the women ruined by the malik-mahajans and turned into whores. Slowly they had a good will in the market but old ones were being cured by doctors, vaidis and hakims and they were recovering well. Sanichari was cursing the fate and thinking, "what will become of me" (p.83) but Bikhni was not despaired and said, "Their time had not come, so they didn't die. No one lives beyond their fated time." (p.83) After that Bikhni returned one day with a news that Gambhir Singh is dying and she wanted to go to Ranchi as her nephew-in-law invited her to his daughter's marriage and she would meet her wretched son too without his realization. Six days had passed and Bikhni didn't return, On reaching home, Sanichari came to know that Bikhni had died of asthma when her nephew-in-law came to find out whether his aunt had left any belonging there. Sanichari replied, "No, nothing. You call her aunt, and she died in your house but all these days we didn't even know she had a family of her own, she was roaming the countryside alone, homeless . . ." (p.88) Sanichari felt a devouring fear as Bikhni's death affected her livelihood, her profession. She is devastated now. She is forced to wail to feed herself and she invites the whores to join the professional mourning including her son Budhua's wife. Sanichari becomes an entrepreneur when she goes to kriya ceremony accompanied by at least a hundred whores as rudalis. Thus Sanichari, the widow gradually emerges as better equipped to adapt, survive and manipulate the system and more empowered at the end.

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In Vijay Tendulkar's "Kamala", Kamala a destitute is victim of human trafficking as she is bought from the flesh market in an auction. Her owner JaisinghJadhav, a journalist, treats her as an object and presents her as a show piece in a surprise press conference to gain popularity and promotion in his professional life and also to prove that such incidents happen in modern democratic India. Jaisingh and his friend Jain enjoy discussing the happenings at the press conference and had some fun at poor Kamala's expense. Both friends describe the conference as 'tamasha' and 'drama' and also relish the obscene questions asked by the fellow journalists. Thus Kamala is made laughing stock but Jaisingh doesn't mind it at all. The next day when police want to contact Jaisingh, he understands that they want custody of Kamala and therefore does not attend the phone calls. He decides to keep Kamala in a woman's home or an orphanage. He orders Kamala to accompany him. He has dared to take Kamala to the press conference in the worn out sari only as he wants her to look just as she is at the press conference. He also gets angry when his wife asks about Kamala's whereabouts after she leaves their home.

In "Silence! The Court is in Session" LeelaBenare is a sprightly rebellious and assertive school teacher. She is accused of the crime of infanticide under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. During the so-called mock play, her private life is publicly exposed and it becomes a real trial for Benare. During this mock trial, the male co-actors try to prove that she is a woman of loose character as she has been seen in a compromising situation in professor Damle's hostel room. The learned professor refuses to accept her despite knowing that he has been responsible for her (Benare) carrying a baby out of wedlock as he fears of losing his own reputation. A tense and stunned Benare who has remained mute till then, suddenly asks Samant to stop saying anything. "That's enough. . . . it's all a lie ! A complete lie!" (p. 93) Benare chooses not to answer any question why she remained unmarried to such a mature age. Later Mrs. Kashikar deposes before the court, "That . . . when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They could not care less about responsibility! . . . It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread through our society." (pp. 99-100) and Benare's case is a solid proof of that as she behaves somewhat differently although she is one of us. Mrs. Kashikar as a society has strong objections to Benare's attitude as a free unmarried woman. She further states, "Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out !" (p. 100) She is terminated from job. Thus evidence after evidence is piled up against Benare to prove her

guilty. But Damle, who has also his share of guilt in the situation, is not even held an accused at all and left scot-free. Kashikar asks Benare if she has to say anything in defense before the judgement is made. She recalls her past how she had been violated physically at an immature age by her own maternal uncle and later on as a grown up woman by an intellectual. Benare accuses all men as 'hypocrites' whose only interest is in her body. The judgement pronounced is that she must opt for infanticide. On hearing Kashikar's cruel verdict, Benare cries in intolerable pain, "No! no! no!- I won't let you do it- I won't let it happen-I won't let it happen!"(p. 119) Thus through Kamala and Benare, Tendulkar has tried to show how single women are singled out in society.

Anita Desai's *fasting; Feasting* is about Uma and her widowed Mira Masi, both single. Uma is rejected mostly by the groom's family while her younger sister Aruna is preferred. The family is cheated twice after spending on engagement and dowries in Uma's marriage attempts as the grooms and their families have fixed the ties only for money. In the first, after engagement the boy goes for higher education and doesn't marry; while in the second, her father comes to know long after the marriage that the groom was already married and had a family too. Her father nullifies the marriage legally. No further attempt is made for her marriage as she is considered unlucky. Thus Uma remains throughout only a caretaker imprisoned at parental home without her mistake. She is not allowed to visit her convent school, to talk to her missionary teacher Mrs. O'Henry and to accept her invitation of a coffee party during Christmas. She is not even permitted to go out with her cousin Ramunor to accept a job offer from her family doctor who is also an unmarried and educated woman. Her mother reacts without knowing Uma's wish, "Our daughter does not need to go out to work, Dr. Dutt," she said. "As long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go out to work."(p.146) Shocked Dr. Dutt said, "But she works all the time! At home. Now you must give her a chance to go out to work."(p.146) But papa interrupted, "There is no need."(p.146) Dr. Dutt still insisted, "Shouldn't we ask Uma for her view? Perhaps she would like to go out and work?"(p.146) But the parents were not bothered at all. Mira Masi an ardent worshipper of lord Shiva is always shown visiting the pilgrimage and on her way to the relatives who actually don't entertain her. Uma accompanies her to ashrams and holy rivers, feels that she gets some recognition in the company of her masi. Aruna also doesn't show any concern for her rather dominates her and treats her as a domestic helper. She even doesn't want Uma to go to Bombay to get her eyes tested. Thus Uma is neglected by her blood relations.

In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, Akhilandeswari a forty five year old income tax clerk is a single woman who spends all her youth as the breadwinner of the family after the sudden expiry of her father when she was just 19 years old. She being the eldest and only earning member performs her role as a daughter, sister, aunt and provider even then she is supposed to take the permission of her younger brother if she wants to go out. Her family never cares for her as an individual and a human being whose natural desires and needs are to be identified. "She was always an extension to someone's identity. Chandra's daughter, Narayana's Akka, Priya's aunt, Murty's sister-in-law [...] Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being." (pp. 201-202) After her brothers Narsi and Narayan became financially independent, "Akhila felt the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen: Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again?" (p.77) Her two brothers got married without taking anybody's permission in the family and they hardly think about Akhila. Akhila had a love affair with Hari, a north Indian young man. It was a diminutive love affair though they made physical love several times. Akhila suddenly broke this relationship as he was younger than her and she was also anxious what people and society would think if this love affair would be disclosed? She says, "Hari this is goodbye I will never see you again" (p.153). She mentions her agony like this, "Every time I look at someone watching us, I can see the question in their minds: what is he doing with an older woman? That bothers me very much, Hari. It bothers me very much that we are not suited so she decides to remain single." (p.159). One day she decides to break free from the chains of conservative Brahmin conventions and buys a one way train ticket to the sea side town of Kanyakumari to start a new life alone. She shares a ladies compartment with five different women and questions them her eternal dilemma - whether a woman needs a man to complete her or whether she can stay single and happy? In the space of one night, the women change her life with their stories, while at the same time, reminding her to think for herself. It helped Akhila to realize that she had given the society an unnecessary power of ruling her life.

Karpagam, Akhila's childhood friend, is a widow but wears the kumkum and colorful clothes. It surprises Akhila and she asks her about her family's reaction on this. Karpagam replies, "I don't care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me, didn't we as young girls wear colorful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It isn't a privilege that marriage sanctions. The way I look at it, it is natural for a woman to be feminine. It has nothing to do whether she is married or

not or whether her husband is alive or dead.” (p. 202) Akhila is fascinated and says “Karpagam, are you real or are you some goddess who has come here to lead me out of this.”(p.202). Then she gets back in touch with the gay who she felt in love with, someone who she did not accept for the fear of the society.

Now the question is-

अकेली नारी क्यों लगती हैं समाज को भारी ?

वह अदला नहीं सवला होती हैं,

इसलिए अकेले रहने की हिम्मत करती हैं

और समाज की उपेक्षा की उपेक्षा करती हैं ।

आप उसे समाज का अटूट हिस्सा समझें क्योंकि वह कम नहीं अधिक योगदान देती हैं। (self-composed)

A single woman should not consider her loneliness as her weakness or an obstacle rather should strive to make it her strength, then only she can live a contented life.

किसी विचारक ने कहा है - "कोई तेरे साथ नहीं तो भी गम ना कर, दुनिया में खुद से बढ़कर कोई हमसफर नहीं होता ।" (Anonymous)


To conclude, even single women are made of the same flesh, blood, bone and have same needs; they too are the integral part of society without any discrimination. Hence there is no need to single out single women in society and literature.

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