
CHAPTER II :

WOMAN AND SOCIETY

WOMAN AND SOCIETY

On the global level, a woman has been supposed as a weaker sex in society. She has been described as tender, beautiful creature of the kitchen room. Her main function in the society, no one can deny, is keeping alive the society by perpetuation. She has been treated mainly as a means of re-production. From the ancient time, she has been obeying her biological function of re-production which nature has bestowed upon her, silently and patiently. It is this function by which she should have been given more importance than man in the history of mankind, but exactly the same function has become the main weakness or trap for her. Her endurance, silence have made her weaker forever. While writing about the image of woman in society T.N. Singh in his essay, Feminism And Fiction : Some Reflection writes :

The moot question however, is whether the new endeavour by modern women writers has succeeded in demolishing the traditional image of woman as a mere sex object.¹

Society has not paid any more attention to her. Her world has been limited especially by the world of men. To some extent, she is responsible for this negligence because firstly, she has kept quiet and has not tried to oppose this collectively. Secondly, she has been treated like goddess and symbol of purity

and chastity. Psychologically, she must have been pleased at this very much. Thirdly, she must have been praised much for her physical beauty to which she must have fallen an easy victim. Fourthly, her concentration on her domestic work must not have given her time even to think about her escape from this chain. Hence, traditionally, the image of woman is a means of perpetuation, a symbol of beauty and an appendage on society.

Woman in the early Indo-Anglian novels was portrayed chiefly in the family. She dared not to come out of the family due to various social, moral restrictions forced upon her. Like a frog in the well, her whole world was her family, and especially the kitchen room. 'Total submission', 'Sacrifice' and 'Chastity' had become her watchwords. She, therefore, didn't show any interest in the social and political activities. She behaved as if these fields are not meant for women, and only men can work there. She lacked courage, self confidence and social and political awareness. But it was the freedom movement which brought back her self-confidence. Women from almost all the sections of life, from all the age-groups, from all the castes and classes joined the freedom movement. They obtained much moral courage from the movement. But very few novelists depicted the participation of women in the movement and in the prison. While finding out the reasons for this negligence on the part of novelists,

Meena Shirwadkar says :

... It seems that most of the writers themselves (women writers Specially) were active participants in this great movement. The superficiality in the depiction of women in the movement by women writers is due to their lack of understanding the great phenomenon..⁴

Although the novelists didn't pay much attention towards women's participation in social and national activities, women themselves came to know, to some extent, their own powers.

Traditionally, Indian woman has been accepting the framework of the family without any rebel. She has accepted it with a very blind faith. She neglected her own individual world. Her negligence of her own psychological, emotional and physical world have made her more helpless and hapless than ever. Thus women lacked social, economical and political awareness. The women who tried to rebel against the established social norms, either have been bycotted by society or have to surrender ultimately to men. Her place in the society was therefore, like a doll in the showcase or a kitchenroom creature. Various social reformers came to their help and tried to re-establish their importance in the family and society. In this connection, Meena Shirwadkar in her Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel says :

... The efforts of reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Phule, Agarkar and others initiated a change in the situation. However, it was Gandhi's call to women that had a stirring effect.... Their whole-hearted participation in the struggle for emancipation indicated that they had acquired enough moral courage..³

It clearly points out that Shirwadkar believes that the work of social reformers^{and} Gandhi's freedom-struggle are mainly responsible for the awakening of women about their status in the society and their regaining the strength.

The various social forces like democracy, urbanization, industrialization, family relationships, education, castism and morality, play a very important role in the theme of novels. These forces bring about many social changes. Nectar In A Sieve⁴ of Kamala Markandaya, for example, is a fine example of the effect of industrialization and urbanization on the life of rural men, and especially on women. Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel has been the victim of the social forces. Industrialization of the rural area has made her homeless and finally her condition is not better than a beggar. Such industrializing and modernising society has put more responsibilities on women's shoulders. They have to earn more money and do the work of a labourer, day and night, besides have to pay all the roles of a wife, mother, etc. Even in The Day In Shadow⁵ by Nayantara Sahegal, the social forces like politics and patriarchal society play a

dominant role Simrit, the protagonist of the novel has to suffer a lot in their hands.

Western life style and new education brought significant changes in the social and individual behaviour of, especially, middle class women. They had been sandwiched, on the one hand, by strict social and moral traditional restrictions on them, and on the other, by the various temptations of new style of the western and educated people. In the later part of the twentieth century, women novelists tried to explore this conflict being experienced by women.

During the first half of the twentieth century, occasionally, there were the portrayals of working women from the lower classes of the society. Women from middle class, after the forties, tried to come out of their cocoons of various restrictions, and due to the new education and economic condition, struggling with old values and new value systems, started hunting for jobs. They continued to work as teachers, clerks, nurses etc. and tried to get more economical freedom which made them more independent and stronger than ever. But such working women had to fight on both the fronts at home, and the place where they were working. Although they were working, in their family and homely role there was no concession for them. Men, especially, husbands wanted their wives' money, but expected them to work at home full time and they themselves didn't like to extend their helping hands in the family works. Due to this double

duty, women used to experience the mental tension. Meena Shirwadkar points out women's psychological and moral conflicts vividly in the following way :

The opposition (overt and covert) at home, the suspicion and the scorn of society, the moral predicament in their own divided minds caused tensions for them in their efforts to stand on their own legs....⁶

Neither the men, especially husbands, nor the society was looking at them reverentially. There was a suspicion about their moral behaviour as they used to spend most of their time of the day out of home. Moreover, husbands wanted their wives to be modern even in their behaviour, but at the same time they were not ready to give up their male-domination over them.

In Rita Velinkar⁷ Saraswati is a woman who gives herself alongwith the dowry of twenty five thousand rupees to her husband Sundaram. Sundaram has been treating her merely as a sex-object and a means to satisfy his sexual hunger. He hasn't thought about her psychological and emotional world. He hasn't had any emotional involvement in her. He is rather mechanical in his relation with her.

She is very much tired of her physical oppression. She says :

आपल शरीर स्वतंत्र होईल ना, होईल ? हो, अर्थातच नाही
का होणार? प्रेमाविमात पडला तर तो (सुंदरम्) आपल्या
नाखूष शरीराकडे कशाला वळेल?

आणि न वळल्यास? न वळल्यास? माय गोंड,
पेढे वाटेन की, त्या बाईचे जाऊन आभार मानेन. ताठ
चालेन. रात्री सुंदरमच्या डोळ्यात येऊ नये म्हणून काळा
रेणू व्हायचा प्रयत्न करणार नाही. माझ पोट दुखणार
नाही. कंबर दुखणार नाही. डोकं दुखणार नाही. मझ
शरीर निकोप, सुंदर आणि स्वतंत्र होईल. (P. 34)

It is quite clear that Saraswati has least interest in the sexual relationship with her husband. For him, there is no need to worry about her emotional and psychological condition. Society and traditions have given him full right after their marriage to behave with her as he thinks. It is Saraswati who should care for Sundaram, and not Sundaram for her.

When Saraswati after receiving an explanatory letter from Rita, meets Mr. Salvi in a restaurant, he tells her that he has never talked about Rita's caste. But further he says that before getting nervous breakdown, Rita became very angry with him at his refusal to live with Rita in her new flat leaving his wife Sushila and daughter Anuradha at home. He further points out that it is impossible because the society will never accept such relationship. He wants to keep himself safe in the society. Although Rita points out that she is willing to live with him even without marriage, Salvi refuses it firmly. At this explanation from Salvi, Saraswati criticizes him and castism and social hypocrisy, too. She says ironically -

म्हणजे "प्रतिष्ठित" समाजात बायको नेहमी जातीतली आणि प्रेयसी - रखेली
नेहमी "खालच्या" जातीतली असण्याची एक प्रस्थापित परंपरा आहे. (P. 68)

Saraswati wants to get rid off all such evil traditions in the society. She wants to rebel against all such social traditions, but when she thinks of her parents and brother living in the same society, her anger gets diluted.

Rita possesses more power and strength than Saraswati, to take a rebellious move against the social injustice done to woman. The reason is that Rita is economically independent. She doesn't have to depend upon anybody for money; but Saraswati has to depend upon her husband and hence, can not go beyond the social circle of limitations. Rita is firm from the beginning in fighting and resisting these social forces. As she is financially very sound, she takes all her decisions like purchasing a flat for her, educating Sangita-her sister and giving the flat to Sangita finally. Thus, she has nothing to do with society.

Rita doesn't want to be the slave of social forces and evils. Hence, she doesn't even think about her marriage. After marriage, she feels, definitely there would be some limitations. Her marriage would provide a right to her husband to treat her as he wishes.

While convincing Salvi to live with her in her new flat, Rita criticizes the society and the castism prevalent in the society. She asks Salvi :

आपला समाज म्हणजे नेमका कोणता समाज? मी तर जन्मल्या दिवसापासून तुझ्या समाजाच्या बाहेरची आहे. मला मामाच्या घरी सुद्धा दुस-या पंगतीला जेवयाला बसवायचे. माझ्या कुटुंबांला ना जात ना प्रतिष्ठा, मग त्याचाच फायदा घेऊन निदान आपल्या मतांप्रमाणे तरी मी का नाही जगू? -(P.68)

She is very sad, unhappy and lonely to see that Salvi is too much afraid of social customs and restrictions. She makes up her mind to take revenge upon Salvi, for his coward behaviour. She goes on increasing her friendship with different types of men using hot coloured lipsticks and dresses. She wants Salvi to be jealous. All this rather strange behaviour of Rita is not revenge on Salvi, but actually on the society itself.

Both Saraswati and Rita are the victims of social traditions. Rita is bold enough to struggle against them from the beginning whereas Saraswati doesn't show that much strength and courage.

The very beginning of That Long Silence⁸ points out the social restrictions on woman. Society has laid down certain norms and limitations for the moral behaviour of a woman. The protagonist of this novel, Jaya, is not allowed not only humming but even listening to the film songs of Rafi and Lata because they are supposed 'frivolous' and they may affect the minds of female children. Moreover, though she is not interested in the classical music of Paluskar and Faiyaz Khan, her father insists on her learning it. About the film songs Jaya says :

When I was a child, film music was considered so outre' that it was banned by our radio. Looking back I realize it was part of the pseudo - puritanism of that time, just after Gandhi's death; those lilting songs were enjoyable and frivolous therefore wicked. (P.3)

The fear is that listening to such film songs, the minds of young girls will be spoilt and they will bring defame and dis-reputation to their parents. This kind of attitude is to be found mostly in the middle class families of the society. Shashi Deshpande being from the same class knows the very pulse of her class very well.

From the ancient time, Indian mythology has created very much idealistic pictures and images of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, who are the symbols of terrible suffering, tremendous patience and a great injustice done to woman by the social customs and restrictions. These images of ideal woman have been imposed on Indian women and they are expected, to follow these ideal images in their life, by the society. This great trio in the Indian Mythology has proved themselves the true (?) companions of their husbands because without any complaints they followed their husbands in agony. About this Jaya says :

I remember now that he (Mohan) has assumed I would accompany him had taken granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails...(P. 11)

It is society that has forced woman to follow her husband in all his deeds, good or bad. In The Ramayana, while following Ram in the exile immediately after marriage, Sita's dreams of happy married life have shattered into pieces. She has no choice except, to follow her husband.

If she had refused to do so, the society would have called her a disobedient woman. Hence, she follows Ram silently, though her mind is burning with anger, anxiety and fear. Savitri of Satyawan knows about her sad future life, but even then accepts Satyawan as her husband and finally, when he is dead she goes on fasting, requesting and praying to the Lord of Death to give back the life of her husband who ultimately has been revived. Society thinks it is her duty to follow her husband, to help him in need and to work for his welfare by sacrificing her life. Draupadi in The Mahabharata, knows what her five husbands Yudhishtir, Bhim, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadeo are doing. She doesn't like 'Dyut' a kind of gambling. But being an ideal wife, she watches all her tragedy silently. She doesn't have daring enough to rebel against her husbands. And she has no chance even to warn them against 'Dyut'. Finally, she follows her husbands alongwith their sorrows and sufferings.

The sacrifices of these three mythological women are used as ideal models for examining the social and moral behaviour of a woman. Whether willingly or unwillingly, every woman of our society is testified on these standards.

Jaya is aware of all this social situation. While describing the social restrictions on Jaya, Sarabjit K. Sandhu in her The Novels of Shashi Deshpande writes :

The dreams of her (Jaya's) childhood,
to change the ascribed situation of

woman resulting in achieving her goals, are shattered by the environment, the surroundings, and above all by the society which imposes all sorts of restrictions on women. She is absolutely helpless, and is unable to do anything to improve situation.⁹

Jaya's condition in the society, therefore, is not better than Nora in Ibsen's A Doll's House. But the difference between Nora and Jaya is that Nora throws off all the social restrictions and leaves the house whereas Jaya doesn't accept this rebellious way. She lacks such courage. Finally, she adjusts herself with the society and traditions.

In our male-dominated society, from the very childhood of female we try to educate them, train them, impose on them that man is always superior to woman. A woman must obey him be he her husband, father or son. He is treated as a symbol of strength, power, intelligence whereas woman is treated as a symbol of beauty, sex and tenderness. Man's role is to protect the members of his family and give them shelter. Hence, in That Long Silence the recurrent image of man is that of 'sheltering tree'.

The elder women like Vanita Mami and Jeeja, the maid servant, in Jaya's family warn her again and again.

'Remember, Jaya', she (Vanita Mami) had said

'a husband is like a sheltering tree'. (P.32)

Not only this but she further advises Jaya that even if her husband pays more attention to other women than her,

she should neglect it. It means that a woman is an enemy of a woman. Again for such psychology of women the social traditions and restrictions are responsible. Almost all women characters (except Jaya) like Jaya's mother, Vanita Mami, Kusum - Vanita Mami's niece, Jeeja the maid servant, Vimala - Mohan's sister, Tara - Jeeja's daughter-in-law, are the real products of male dominated Indian society.

In her essay called 'Breaking The Silence: Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence Sarala Palkar writes about woman - society relationship as follows :

The novel, as it were, is Jaya's protest against the kind of treatment that is given to our women in our culture and her attempt to give another version of history from women's points of view.¹⁰

A woman has a place neither in her parent's family nor in husband's family. The reason is the history of family is counted by men only, and not by women. Jaya speaks of the place, role and the condition of woman in her family and society when she says :

A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There's only order and despair - today I have to change the sheets, tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after, clean the fridge...(P, 148)

This remark of Jaya clearly points out that though a woman is very much angry with many social restrictions and traditions, to be angry and to revolt is beyond her capacity. Living in the sea of people she is alone,

facing the problem of loneliness.

Both the protagonists Rita & Jaya, of respectively Rita Velinkar and That Long Silence, push forward various problems of woman especially of middle class educated woman. Rita's parents, due to her father's retirement, are expecting all financial help from Rita. They are worried about Sangita's education, and Dolly Sherry's marriages. They therefore, don't think about the marriage of Rita, but on the other hand, responds Salvi to continue their love affair. They want from her only financial help in any case, Like Rita, Jaya's relatives like brother, husband, Mami also want to have help from Jaya. The only difference between Jaya and Rita is that Rita is in a good service and earning a good deal of money, but Jaya is not doing such good service. But, the attitude of society looking at such educated women is the same. They want all sorts of help from them, but in return are not ready to lessen any social restrictions. Thus, society is very much selfish and keeps double standard with women.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. T.N.Singh : Feminism and recent Fiction in English
Ed.Sushila singh, (Delhi : Prestige,
1991), P.12
 2. Meena Shirwadkar: Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian
Novel, (New Delhi, : Sterling,1979)
P.122
 3. Ibid, P. 118
 4. Kamala : Nectar in a Sieve
Markandaya (Delhi : rpt, Jaico, 1988)
 5. Nayantara : The Day in shadow
Sahegal (Delhi; Vikas, 1971)
 6. Meena Shirwadkar: Image of woman in the Indo-Anglian
Novel
(New Delhi : sterling, 1979) P.128
 7. Shanta Gokhale : Rita Velinkar
(Bombay, Mauj, 1993)
(All quotations are taken from this
edition)
 8. Shashi Deshpande: That Long Silence
(London : Virago, 1988)
(All quotations are taken from this
edition)
 9. Sarabjit Sandhu: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande
(Delhi : Prestige, 1991) P.37
 10. Sarala Palkar : Feminism and recent Fiction in -
English Ed. Sushila Singh,
(Delhi: Prestige : 1991) P.130
-