
CHAPTER IV :

QUEST FOR IDENTITY

QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Since the rise and development of the feminism which studies various problems of women and creates awareness among them, their quest for identity and freedom has become a very dominant theme in literature. Virginia Woolf is supposed to be the mother of the feminist movement. It is she who started first to think and analyze clearly the plight of women from various angles. It is she who gave the inspiration and strength to this movement. Her book A Room of One's Own¹ began to challenge the existing patriarchal norms in society. Lateron, Simon de Beauvoir's The Second sex,² Mary Ellman's Thinking About Women³ and Kate Millett's Sexual Politics⁴ created a new feminist trend in literature as well as in criticism.

The Second Sex of Simon de Beauvoir discusses that women are always treated as an 'object for men' and are 'denied individuality' and responsibility. They play the secondary roles in the daily life. Mary Ellman's Thinking About Women tries to resist, with the help of wit and irony, weakness and passivity of women. Kate Millett's Sexual Politics 'traces the history of women's symbolic oppression'. It presents the method of overpowering the other sex. All these books have given much strength and inspiration to the women in general and women writers in particular for struggling and fighting for their existence, self respect and freedom.

According to Sushila singh feminism is not only 'the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression' but:

... Feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women, an effort to make women become like men. But the struggle for equal rights historically and politically emphasizes the value of women as they are. The very argument rests precisely on the fact that women are already as valuable as men.⁵

She believes that women are already as important and valueable as men. So they should come forward by strengthening and selfrealizing themselves.

Karen Offen while defining feminism gives us two different arguments : "Relational" and "Individualist".⁶ "Relational" feminism stresses on women's rights as women in relation to men, whereas "Individualist" feminism insists on 'abstract concepts of individual human rights' and 'the quest for personal independence'. The modern novel gives much stress on the "Individualist" feminism. Quest for identity and freedom have become one of the most important themes of the modern novel.

In comparison with the well-educated and economically and politically independent western woman, average Indian woman is traditional. She is still under

the pressure and control of men and society. All the chains of social, moral conventions are still around her.

For an Indian wife, there is no separate identity of her own, for her 'Pativratadharma' is an ideal tradition. This concept of 'Pativratadharma' expects the merging of her own identity in the identity of her husbands. Naturally, the idea is ingrained in her mind that she has no identity at all, and her husband's identity is her identity as well. But there is a gradual change in her during the recent period. She is trying to analyze and observe her place and role in the family and society; and while playing such roles like mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, she is trying to understand her individuality. The spread of education and other educational facilities have enabled her to increase her knowledge about the world of women, their problems, western influences, different concepts of feminism and freedom etc. Moreover, the political stability and democracy in India, have offered her selfconfidence and many political rights too. She is still struggling for complete freedom from all the social, cultural, religious and moral norms. Slowly but firmly, she is challenging the patriarchal structure of society. Various modern women writers in India like, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahegal, Uma Vasudeo, Kamala Markandaya have been creating a proper background for the new women-writers who will not only struggle but fight to assert their

Importance and individuality over men. Injustice of men to women, social and moral compulsions on her behaviour, negligence towards her education, treatment as merely a sex-object and the overall dominance of man as father, husband, brother and son, are being challenged by women writers. It is a good sign of their regaining self confidence, strength and self realization. In many fields women are outshining even men, but still there is need for concentrated efforts on destroying the traditional, submissive and weak image of woman. Only then, she will be able to get dignity.

In the modern times, there is a constant process of strengthening woman. The areas of her knowledge are widening. She is trying to know her own place in the social structure. In this connection Meena Shirwadkar says :

The emergent woman, with her individuality, changing attitudes, and roles, has made her appearance, in the Indo-Anglian fiction and one can reasonably hope that the writers to come will succeed in showing her in the full light of the changing reality.⁷

This remark clearly points out that the present writers are trying to give proper justice to woman.

The two novels under the present study, That Long Silence and Rita Velinkar are remarkable examples in the theme of quest for identity. But both these novels are from the Indian culture and hence, they are not the extremist in terms of sexuality. They present a modest attempt of discovering the self of woman, especially educated, middle-class woman.

Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence presents Jaya the protagonist of the novel, who is a graduate in English and a writer, a columnist. She is a representative of educated middle-class women. From her childhood she has been observing, witnessing the sad and bad condition of women. Their total dependence on men may be father, husband or son, lack of freedom and independence, slavery of man, continuous tremendous psychological pressure of men, pains of childbearing and other domestic works, have made Jaya introvert. She doesn't like this plight of woman. But as her family members go on hammering her that 'husband is like a sheltering tree' or husband is a God, her voice and strength[•] are also suppressed very much, in the beginning of her married life with Mohan. As a child her desires of singing beautiful songs of Lata and Rafi, are suppressed by her father. Even after marriage, her desire to watch every advertisement in the theatre is suppressed by her husband. In fact, these are simple

things, but they teach many things to Jaya. They made her to think. She doesn't rebel immediately against it, but learnt to endure such injustice silently.

As a mother , she is upbringing her children very carefully. She pays more attention to Rati the daughter than Rahul the son. Therefore, she avoids telling the story of a sparrow and a crow to her children. She believes that if Rati keeps this story in her mind for ever, like the sparrow she also would become 'self-centred', 'dutiful', 'shrewd' and wise wife who would never come out of her house and would never become independent. She remarks ironically :

... and eventually they (girls)
will become that damnably,
insufferably priggish sparrow
looking after their homes, their
babies and to hell with the
rest of the world. Stay at
home, look after your babies
keep out the rest of the world,
and your'e safe. (P.17)

She is afraid of such stories which would make her son as foolish, irresponsible, dull and improvident as the crow; and her daughter as dutiful, shrewd and caretaking as the sparrow whose place is in the four walls of house only. It throws light upon her efforts of struggling for independence.

As a wife, Jaya whose name is changed at the time

of marriage as per custom and she is given a new name Suhasini, is really a good housewife, paying much attention to her husband, obeying him silently, never complaining about anything and keeping in mind Vanitamami's advice 'husband is a sheltering tree'. It is Mohan who takes all the decisions at home. Unknowingly she is dragged with him. She expresses this dependence on him aptly in the following sentences :

... The truth is that it was Mohan who had a clear idea of what he wanted, the kind of life he wanted to lead, the kind of home he would live in, and I went along with him. (P, 25)

Whether she is willing or not, she is dragged with him along with his various decisions. He never considers her opinion important. The decisions, which, in fact, should have been taken by her, are taken by him. Whether she should continue her writing or not, it is also decided by Mohan. Moreover, once again it is Mohan who discusses about her writing with the editor of Sunday paper, and then Jaya continues her writing. She is involved in her daily domestic life in such a way that she has forgotten her 'self', her true voice, her own identity.

When Mohan is trapped in the malpractice in his office, he is advised by his companion not to be at home for some period, and hence they come to live at Jaya's flat at Dadar leaving their well furnished flat at

Churchgate. This is the place where Jaya begins to think about herself. She goes on surveying her past. As Mohan is busy in subsiding the effect of his malpractice and most of the time of the day, he is outside, Jaya uses this time for thinking. It is this thinking which makes Jaya strong enough to think her about independence, freedom and who really she is. She tries to analyze her relationship with Mohan and comes to a conclusion that she should resist his forced and one sided decisions. And therefore, after identifying her own strength and power she takes the decisions like bringing Kusum at Bombay in spite of Mohan's resistance and sending her children on a tour with her friend Rupa.

As a writer, she knows her strong points. She expresses them rightly in the following manner :

...The woman who wrote it had no doubts about anything, only strong convictions. And she was a liberal, without any prejudices. (P.119)

She even wants to rebel fully against Mohan. But she can't . Her traditional mind and social impact on her make her to adjust with Mohan.

It is Mr. Kamat who helps her to think and act independently about writing. He advises her to be realistic and matter of fact in her writing. While inspiring and supporting her power of writing he says to Jaya :

'Spare me your complexes. And
 you're a fool if you think I
 was joking. I'm warning you
 beware of this "women are vic-
 tims" theory of yours. It'll
 drag you down into a soft,
 squishy bog of self - pity.
 Take yourself seriously, woman
 Don't skulk behind a false
 name. And work- work if you
 want others to take you
 seriously... (P,148)

He, directly, tells Jaya's mistakes to her. He cheers her up to be serious, to be real and to be true to herself. By such ascertaining words from Kamat, Jaya regains her lost self-confidence. She comes to know her abilities and powers as a writer and as a woman.

Jaya has never spoken freely about sex even with Mohan. Talking about sex was considered to be doing something sinful. Jaya hasn't ever imagined that man and woman can speak about such a tender subject openly. She is almost frightened to speak on such a subject even talking with her husband. It shows clearly that she is under tremendous pressure while doing sex-acts. She doesn't have any freedom. She knows only one thing, when Mohan needs her physical company, she should respond him without a word; no discussion, no thinking, no words, no whispering at all. She has crushed her sexual self and hasn't let it come out of her mind in the company of Mohan, for Mohan also has never encouraged her or

involved himself in such a talk.

Once again, it is Mr. Kamat who has helped to create the feelings of frankness in her and it is he who has made her aware to speak about sex freely. Therefore, the things which she had never spoken with Mohan, her husband she speaks about them with Mr. Kamat. She confesses the debt of Mr. Kamat in this case in the following way :

...But this man... it had been a revelation to me that two people a man and woman, could talk this way. With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself - Jaya. There had been ease in our relationship I had never known in any other. There had been nothing I could not say to him. (P,153)

This confession of Jaya about Kamat throws light on her sexual relations with her husband too. She has been behaving with him as all other weak, submissive women behave with their husbands. But now, she feels somewhat separated from them. She has known her own ideas of love and sex. This is a real self-realization. This is true, even from the point of view of French school of critics that to discover herself truly, a woman should start from her own body.

It is this quest for identity of Jaya which separates her from all other women like Mohan's mother,

Kusum, Vanita Mami in the novel. They never try to know themselves, and as a result they have to suffer a lot throughout their life. They have been treated as only dolls and slaves by their husbands : without a single word of opposition, they have stuck themselves with the traditional, submissive, weak and meek image of woman.

Although Jaya succeeds in knowing herself and her identity, she is not strong enough to challenge traditional value system in the society. She is not like Ibsen's Nora who turns her back completely towards her husband and home and slams the door leaving her house. Jaya lacks such a rebellious and revolutionary nature. She resists, opposes, refuses, rejects, complain but with a certain limit which doesnot allow her to go away from her husband, home and children. With all her problems she adjusts herself but doesn't want to break all the framework of her family life. Therefore, though she has lost faith in her husband, finally when the scandal of his malpractice with Mr. Agarwal is over, she joins Mohan as usual. In this connection, she says :

...We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this : life has always made possible. (P.193).

Even after her successful search for identity, she wants

to adjust herself with the present situations. She believes that no change comes very quickly. It takes a long period. But she is hopeful and optimistic about her life.

Like Jaya's quest for identity, the novel traces even Mohan's quest for identity. Mohan who from the beginning is in his own imaginary, traditional world of male-dominated society, thinks himself to be the master of all the family. He is very much confident about his job and money making. But when he finds himself trapped in the malpractice with Mr. Agarwal, he tries to analyse himself and reality. There is a definite change in his behaviour after self realization. He adjusts himself to live in Dadar flat which he has been hating for not being comfortable and in good location. It is he again who asks Jaya to begin her writing once again. He admits her decision like sending Rahul and Rati on tour and bringing Kusum to their flat. The change in his behaviour is described by Jaya thus :

And for that moment he has his old
air of authority and confidence .
Then the old self vanished leaving
behind a sad bewildered man. (P.8)

But perhaps, as Sarabjit Sandhu aptly puts it, "Mohan's character is perhaps deliberately weakened in order to glorify the image of woman as a prudent wife, compromising and adaptable to the situation"(8) Mohan doesn't get much scope for his search for self identity.

Before Jaya's self-revelation, Mohan's image of changing himself in self-understanding seems to be neglected.

The other novel Rita Velinkar also gives much scope to the theme of quest for identity. In it the novelist presents three women struggling for their self revelation. They are Rita the protagonist, her sister Sangita and Saraswati - Rita's friend. All these three middle class women are well educated and can think of themselves in a good manner. Education has provided them enough power and knowledge to observe and analyse their own behaviour and lives.

Among them Rita and Sangita are more active, bold and courageous than Saraswati. Moreover, both these sisters are unmarried. But they have their own independent ways of living. They don't care for the world. They are not afraid of the society. Both of them are in service; hence not dependant on anybody for money.

Rita is a young educated girl, quite free, independent and wise. Her father Shankar has lost his job. Being the eldest, Rita anyhow gets the job in Salvi's office. She knows her responsibility and has ability to shoulder it. She has confidence in herself. She is a woman of strong mind. Once, she gets the job her parents think that it is her duty, now, to work for the welfare of all of them. They forget deliberately to think about her marriage, on the other hand, they think that before her marriage, she must help her sisters for

their marriage. Her responsibilities have made her quite adult before time. She has no time to think about her own marriage, her life. Economical independence has given her much confidence and power and hence she herself takes all the decisions of the family too. In spite of her parents' protest, she allows Sangita to continue her education. She herself, after many efforts succeeds in marrying her two younger sisters. Moreover, in order to have free relations with Mr. Salvi, she has purchased a new flat. All these decisions confirm her maturity.

She is quite aware of the social institution of marriage. She knows that after marriage a woman's world is closed down and her position is not better than a **S**lave. Hence, ironically she remarks about the marriage thus.:

उंबरठयावर माप ठेविले,
ते पायाने उलथुनि आले,
आले तुझिया घरी,
कराया तुझीच रे चाकरी,
कराया तुझीच रे चाकरी. (P18,

Moreover, for her, marriage is a trap in which woman is victimised.

She continues her love and sexual relationship with Mr. Salvi who is already married. With the economical independence and full freedom she has taken the decision of her relations with Mr. Salvi. She has a bleak hope that after some time Salvi would give divorce to his wife and would marry her. But when Salvi refuses this she is totally collapsed and suffers from nervous breakdown,

but she holds herself responsible for this. She says :

माझं आयुष्य अनेकाना चाकोरी बाहेरचं वाटेल,
पण तसं जगायचा माझा निर्णय नव्हता. गोष्टी
होत गेल्या तस मी त्यांना तोंड देत गेले-पण
आजूबाजूची घडी फारच विसकटता (P.37)

Here, she blames the circumstances which made her behave like that.

After purchasing the flat she requests Salvi to visit her any time. He firmly refuses it because he feels guilty about their love relationship. She feels it as a great injustice which disgusts her very much. Thus, the very base of her faith in Salvi's love goes on shuddering. She says angrily :

... नाही, मुळीच नाही, हे मला अमान्य होतं.
हयात कुठेतरी माझ्यावर अन्याय होत होता.
अशा अचानक जाणीवेनं मला पोखरुन टाकलं.
(P. 38)

She tries to re-analyze her relations with Salvi. Whom she has bestowed her body and soul, the same person rejects to accept her love publically. Now, she begins to think seriously about her life. She can't take any firm decision about Salvi's such behaviour. Her self confidence, strength and maturity begin to shake. She seems to be unable to decide what to do. It can be clearly seen from her following sentences :

आपला प्रेमावरचा जर विश्वास उडाला, साळवीला
आपण जर दूर लोटलं तर त्यामुळं निर्माण होणारी
पोकळी भरायची कशी? म्हणजे खरा प्रश्न हा
आहे. साळवीला नाकारण्याचा निर्णय घेणं सोपं
आहे, पण तो अमलांत आणण्यासाठी लागणारी
अवघ्या आयुष्याची उलथापालथ करण्यासाठी

आपल्याकडे श्रद्धा, विश्वास, दम आहे का?

(P. 41)

Her self decisive power and confidence are challenged by Salvi's refusal to her. All her freedom and independence are also challenged here. When in order to console her, Salvi once brings a talisman from a hermit, she can't control her anger and she almost pushes him out side the room and says :

... मी चारी भिंतीना ओरडून सांगितलं,
साळवी माझा कोणी नाही. . फक्त मी माझी
आहे. माझं जीवन माझं आहे मी ते घडवणार.
मला ते घडवण्याचा हक्क आहे. केवळ मलाच
तो हक्क आहे, बाकी कुणाला नाही. (P. 46)

This remark shows that once again she is gathering her lost balance, confidence and strength, and trying to know herself in the new light. But finally, she adjusts herself with Salvi's demand which shows that her search for identity is within certain limits.

In order to understand herself fully, Sangita has to struggle a lot with her parents as well as with her officers. Like Rita from the beginning, she too is very strong minded and confident. She wants to marry such a person who would give her full freedom. She is unable to endure any type of injustice done not only to her but also to a girl in her office and for this only, she resigns the job too. She also takes all decisions herself. But finally, she has to adjust with the present world.

The married life of saraswati seems to be very happy. Before getting letter from Rita she also thinks so. Though educated she is very timid, submissive, dependant and traditional woman. She has never thought about herself and her life independently.

Saraswati's quest for identity begins when she gets a letter from Rita, and comes actually in her company. Rita becomes a source of inspiration to her self search journey. All her passivity, submissiveness and meekness are put aside by her. Rita's letter has created in her self-confidence, awareness and self-understanding. Showing her gratitude for that she says to Rita :

... मला पत्र वाचून जगच वेगळं दिसायला
लागलं. नवे डोळे, नवे कान आल्यासारखं
किंवा गहाण टाकलेले डोळे-कान परत आणल्या
सारखं. आता माझ्यात एक वेगळाच उत्साह
भरलाय. मला स्वतःतलं पाणी तळापर्यंत
ढवळून काढायचंय. स्वतःत बुडी घ्यायची,
बाहेर येऊन आज-बाजूला बघायचं, पुन्हा
स्वतःत घुसायचं,....(P. 87)

When she tries to probe into her mind in order to find her real self; she comes to know her short-comings. In this light she analyzes her married life with Sundaram and comes to know that Sundaram is very much selfish, selfcentred, traditional and an inseparable part of the male-dominated society. Thus , she has regained all her strength and independence. She declares to continue her writing with a new power and courage.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf : A Room of One's Own,
(New York : Harccurt, Brace
and World, 1929.)
 2. Simcn de Beauvoir : The Second Sex, tran. H. M.
Parshley (London : Penguin,
1972)
 3. Mary Ellman : Thinking About Women,
(New York : Harcourt, 1968)
 4. Kate Millett : Sexual Pclitics,
(London : rpt., Rupert-Hart-
Davis, 1971)
 5. Sushila Singh : Recent Trends in Feminist
Thought in Feminism And
Recent Fiction in English,
ed. Sushila Singh, (Delhi :
Prestige, 1991), P.23.
 6. Ibid, P.23
 7. Meena Shirwadkar : Image of Wcman in the
Indo-Anglian Novel.
(New Delhi : Sterling, 1979)
P. 154
 8. Sarabjit Sandhu : The Novels of Shashi -
Deshparde (Delhi : Prestige,
1991) P.45.
-