

WITNESS THE NIGHT: A PROFOUND INSIGHT INTO GENDER DISCRIMINATION

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Abstract

Modern society is highly efficient with developments in science and technology. But the social problems like atrocities against women still remain. Literature is a reflection of life. So, it is natural that the social evils gets reflected in the novels like *Witness the Night* where we come across a mass murder. The scene is terrifying with thirteen dead bodies and a fourteen year old girl called Durga with her hand tied to the cot. She seemed to be a victim of rape and violence. It is from these circumstances the story unfolds, presenting before us the atrocities underlying gender discrimination. In spite of this, the injustice of the police becomes evident as they accuse the girl as the murderer. The mystery behind the murder and rape is maintained till the end. As the mystery is unraveled the unholy alliances in the society come out. Durga and her sister are no doubt the victims to violence. Another burning issue discussed here is the dowry, female foeticide and infanticide. It is particularly the prevailing situation in Punjab where the sex ratio is 895 which is below the national average of 940. The concept of equality is not a new phenomenon. It was there in the scriptures and the Vedas but the picture of women is one of exploitations even now. Principles and concepts were there always but the atrocities continue. The solution to the problem is nothing but a return to the Gandhian way of life which is based on truth, justice and fearlessness. There is no doubt that we come across the gruesome picture prevailing in society here in the novel. This novel is a true representation of society. This paper brings a parallel between women in ancient and modern ages. This paper intends to reveal how the law lies dormant while the man stands helpless.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Violence, Foeticide, Dowry, Justice, Fearlessness

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INTRODUCTION

Modern society is supposed to be highly developed with all the developments in science and technology. Even though the facilities improved the social evils remain. When the evils prevail, how could we claim to be a developed society? There are burning social evils like atrocities against women, inequality, widespread violence, and corruption. What happened is the erosion of values. The social evils are to be rooted out to make life comfortable. Literature is always a reflection of what is going on in society. To know the quality of life at any period we have only to refer to literature of that period. Thus we can confirm the presence of evils at any time from the olden times to the modern period. *Witness the Night* by Kishwar Desai brings out a striking picture of modern life in India, especially in Punjab. The novel is supposed to be a detective thriller that startles us with an atmosphere of terror and suspense. It opens with the mass murder of thirteen people. But what makes the thriller a higher level of writing is its portrayal of women's predicament. Discrimination against women reaches its height in this novel. Rules and regulations are there in tact but there is a total failure in the implementation. The solution to the problems is nothing but a return to the Gandhian principles like non violence and fearlessness. Non violence is a way of life with a wider perspective. It is not merely negation of violence but a decision not to hurt anyone with your thought, word or deed. But the society distanced itself from the Gandhian values.

The insurance of rectitude and legitimacy has not been easy as it seems to be and the gap between statements and reality is huge. Are women in India safe and sound, is a question of everyday relevance even though it doesn't showcase that propagated relevance through placards or slogans. Historically women's actions have been curtailed within the boundaries of a house in the name of family, marriage, religion and cultural traditions. These prejudices instill the idea of inferiority to women as the weaker sex and thereby enable men to exercise power over them. Relegated to the back of social fabric, even the control over their sexuality and fertility is at the hands of men. Sometimes even the helplessness of females as well their living, anchors the roots of male domination such as the case in Burma, Nepal and Bangladesh were women and girls accept fraudulent jobs or marriages which lead them to forced prostitution just because they wanted to eradicate their poverty. Similarly, in South Africa lack of access to alternative housing is the reason why some of them hesitate to report domestic violence.

Media in itself celebrates the sensitive issues. They rather sensationalize matters instead of sensitizing it. Kishwar Desai's *Witness the Night* is the depiction of a patriarchal India with its amalgamation of domestic violence, prostitution, female infanticide, female trafficking, brutal rapes and moreover the exposal of the erring law-holders that corrupt rather than protect.

The extreme conservative attitude towards women both in their outer and inner world, puts them abandoned of love from

their family as they are born as a "woman". Gender becomes a character in the novel. Unfolding the story in Jullundur, Punjab, and Desai paints through the character of Durga, a society that mercilessly draws chains upon her basic rights and boundaries of progress. The novel broods around Durga who is arrested and confined in a prison for her being the only person found in her home tied to a bed, raped and barely alive when the rest of the thirteen members of her family lie dead. Through the investigation of the bold and independent NGO, Simran, a saga of violence and brutality against women unfolds. Sharda, the sister of Durga becomes the scapegoat of decisiveness and prejudice when she turns mad at an asylum where she is taken to, as she bears the brunt of being pregnant with the child of her tuition teacher, Harpreet, one among the very few who sympathizes with her existence. A timely rescue of Durga from the same fate as that of Sharda happens along with not only the exposal of the vicious mind of her tuition teacher who propelled Durga to murder her over conservative family but also the brutal plans of the proponents of the law represented in the novel through the portrayal of Ramnath.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The character of Durga is scandalized and made vulnerable to be forced into any kind of further situation after being kept in trial for the murder of thirteen members of her family. Fueled by Harpreet who later unveils to us as the tutor of Durga, he becomes the first black mark of patriarchy by playing a compelling role in manipulating her angst from years of oppression since birth into this murder. Made for fourteen years the scapegoat of a family blazing in gender discrimination, the revenge made is not only for her but also for her lost sister, Sharda, the only pillar who seemed to acknowledge her existence.

The introductory scene of urgent impersonal sex imposed by Harpreet over Durga is symptomatic of abject servitude and objectification of woman.

Even though we were surrounded by blood and burnt flesh, he pushed up my shirt and squeezed my breast, and then he took me to my room, where he removed my salwar and pushed me down on the bed. (Desai, 3-4)

By the Indian constitution kidnapping or abducting a woman to compel her to marry or force or induce her to illicit intercourse will be punishable with ten years imprisonment.

"Of the constitution insist that it is the duty of every citizen in India to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women." (Article 51A (e), The Constitution of India, 1949)

Evidences from Epics and Literature

When we scan through the Indian epics, it shadows immense commendations on the glory of women. Considered the foundation of love, patience, will-power, dharma and sacrifice they are placed on a pedestal and praised. Most women who were portrayed with the will-power and courage were given a platform to voice their opinions. *Ramayana* heralds the character of Sita for her '*pativratya*'. She becomes the emblem of sacrifice and devotion to her husband upon her decision to leave with her husband 'Lord Ram' when he was exiled to the forest for fourteen years. But this same Sita is abandoned and relegated to the forest by King Ram, when she was five month pregnant as one of his subjects questions the chastity of Sita. Her abduction by Ravana, the demon King of Lanka, during their fourteen year of rustic life resulted in the doubts. This is of course not the reward to be given for a wife who had forsaken all the royalties of her life for her husband.

No matter whether it is ancient or modern, women are obliged to bear the brunt of anything and everything that happens.

In the epic, *Mahabharata*, Draupadi stands as a symbol of unbending will. When Pandavas, whom she was married to, lost the game of dice with Kauravas, Draupadi who was put on stake by her own husband Yudhishtira, was dragged forcefully to the Kaurava court and tried to be disrobed. Though she never stands naked in front of the people due to the intervention of Lord Krishna who makes her garments endless when she

surrenders all her faith and devotion, this act of disrobing is a scene of heightened abuse and disgrace. Her determination and courage has been praised, but the perpetrators are sure to lack any kind of respect to women or her dignity. The objectification of women and her body is clearly evident in this humiliating scene.

It is not that these women characters went without echoing a voice out to the world to remember. Sita and Panchali in the epics, when observed at a feminist point of view, rejuvenate their life with spirited blood running through their veins to hammer the cause of their suppressed emotions and forbearance. Sita's descent into mother earth when she is asked for another *agnipariksha* (a walk on fire) as a testimony of her chastity is not only a revolt to reveal her true identity and nature but her emancipation from social and political ties that strangled her as a woman.

The character of Nora in Doll's House by Ibsen has a similar ending when she asserts her individuality and freedom by slamming the door behind her, embracing a world beyond her snobby and assertive husband. As Bernard Shaw said; "the slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the canon of Waterloo or Sedan." (539-41)

The great poet Tulsidas writes "*Dhol, gawar, shudra, pashu, nari, ye sab tadana ke adhikari.*" meaning animals, illiterates, lower castes and women should be subject to beating. (Kapur, Status of Women in Ancient India)

Manu, the legendary first man and the law giver states in his *Manusmriti*, "ladies are ensured by father in infancy, by spouse in youth and in maturity by their children" (Patwari)

Durga's act marks the elimination of the sinners from the lives of the women forbearers who suffered humiliation in the name of gender. 'Durga' is the name of Mother Kali, as she is the harbinger of virtues and destroyer of evil. Hence this murder equals her way of emancipation.

DOWRY

Dowry, the deciding factor in Indian marriages has become a threat to the very well-being of women. It has become an indispensable part that any decline in it could mean a prolonged humiliation and suffering to the bride in her in-laws' house. A woman is not only made to shoulder responsibility of the house but also to bring a hefty prosperity in the name of accommodating and feeding her a lifetime which ranks her no less than a slave. Besides she is nothing but an object on which her husband satiates his urge. Demanding dowry affirms identifying women as a commodity. It takes away their whole sense of right and dignity.

To prohibit the practice of giving and taking dowry came 'The Dowry Prohibition Act' of 1961 that underwent an amendment in 1984 making the practice a cognizable offence. Demanding dowry can cause imprisonment for a minimum of 6 months or a maximum of five years and a fine up to Rs fifteen thousand. But unfortunately marriage with its dowry system has become nothing less than a market in various communities in India. In the novel, Harpreet Singh's wife with her disheveled and discomfiture face appears as a victim of the tyrannical society that poured acid on her countenance as she was unable to produce a handsome dowry in her first marriage. Unfortunately, the treatment that a bride receives depends on the heaviness of the dowry. The parents are forced to send their daughters away with hefty amounts hoping their children will be received happily in the new home.

The concept of *paraayadhan*, 'the wealth owned by somebody else' resonates through the novel. Durga is just one among the many.

Despite the laws these are illegally practiced. It is a truth that it is unable to abolish the practice of dowry system or the atrocities of men. This shows how the laws or judicial system fails to take action against those many who deviate from the rules and compress the freedom of other individuals.

FOETICIDE

A girl child is welcomed as the carrier of misery and burden. The needs of supposed extra care from evil eyes and lusty hands which otherwise may disturb her free movement and the additional burdens of dowry to marry her off, make the families prefer male children. Male child never comes with the burden of dowry but insurance for receiving one in the future

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 permits abortion under certain conditions which includes,

- when pregnancy is a risk to the mother or to her mental or physical health,
- when there are chances for the child to be handicapped either physically or mentally,
- when it is rape that caused the pregnancy
- when it is caused due to failure of contraceptives and could cause grave injury to the mental health of the woman.

The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994, banned prenatal sex determination to stop female foeticides. Despite the multitudinous laws passed by the government such illegalities happen in several hospitals and nursing homes spanning all over the country.

In the novel, the obsession with sons tempts them to manipulate the doctors into doing an ultrasound scanning and thereby getting rid of female foetus eradicating the burden of property division and dowry. Such grievous condescending acts from a reputed family as presented in the novel leave no doubts regarding how it would be among the underprivileged and uneducated. When Durga's sister-in-law, Binny conceived a baby girl an ultrasound was done.

My father-in-law spoke about the need for a small compact family. My mother-in-law tried to tell me how it would be nice for my parents as well if the firstborn were a son. They were all worried about the division of property. The matter of the small dowry was also brought up. (Desai, 135)

INFANTICIDE

Sharda was saved by their cousin Jitu from an earthen pot buried inside the ground. The several attempts by her own grandmother and servants to kill the new born by putting the child in a pot of milk mixed with butter or burying deep inside the earth in an earthen pot depicts the hardcore prejudices which leads to such brutal merciless actions. Suffocating them, sealing in pots and rolling them on grounds, feeding opium are few among the many disquieting episodes of the attempts murder saga. "Sharda took out a tiny paper envelope from which she drew out a tiny skeletal hand...This hand was buried deep in the vegetable plot. There was also a tiny skull and other limbs..."(Desai, 138)

The prejudice against women begins neither when they become wives nor when they reach puberty, but it is something that takes its root at the very moment they mark their presence in the womb. Punjab is a state with strong son preference. The sex ratio in Punjab is 895 which are below the national average of 940.

Moreover, the state ranks high in Infant Mortality Rate with 21 per 1000 live births in Punjab as per 2016 census among which the female were 21 and males 22.

About a quarter of the twelve million girls born in India every year, do not survive to see their fifteenth birthday. Girl children are either wiped out without even given a chance to breath or eliminated surreptitiously as infants. Deliberate malnourishment or poisoning, pause a great threat to their survival. And the propulsion comes from economic burdens like dowry or the notion of women as "the harbinger of death and destroyer of virtue".

WHEN THE EXECUTIVE AND JUDICIARY ERRS

There is no law that denies equality to women in the Constitution of India. Back from the days, Constitution was written, the various Fundamental Rights reinstates their equal

rights by rubbing off the chances of omnifarious indifferences that could pose before them.

Article 14 ensures equal protection of law and prevents its discrimination on the basis of sex. Article 15 of the constitution insists that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Art 16(a) and (b) prohibits discrimination in general as well as same because of sex in offices and those employed under the State. Gender discrimination is not permitted. (Article 14-16, The Constitution of India)

The legislature more or less plays its part amply by catering to multitudinous facets in enforcing equality of women in a patriarchy. But these laws would trip when it comes to executives or judiciary at least to some extent.

The crown and scepter of villainy in this novel is worn by the ones who otherwise are the beholders of law and order, the 'Police force'. Pulling the ropes that coils around the necks of Durga and her sister Sharda as barbarous and inhuman assault are the hands of various ones including their own blood but along with those there are the greasy hands of a remorseless police. The events that are marked in the play are an actual reality of what is still being incessant in the contemporary world. The collusion of depravity within the sphere of police, the judicial system, politicians, media which stir up the balance of human rights are evident especially through the character of Ramnath Singh, the police.

The Author mentions in her note that, "the case of Ruchika Girhotra that it has proved yet again, officers like him are few and far between, and gender issues are still treated with contempt." (Desai, 212)

Unfortunately the laws only remain as an obscure reality as Simran, the NGO comments,

"Luckily, because the government has little thought or time for social welfare,...My faultless tribe stands for the human rights of the downtrodden, the voiceless, faceless, nameless, and often blameless millions."(Desai, 07)

WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

What unfolded in Chhattisgarh when a tribal girl was asked by her father to marry off to man who can answer his questions on creation of human beings is truly "the swayamvar of Kaliyug". The freedom to garland the man of her choice is symptomatic to the added privileges of the age that anchors the hold of women.

There also remained the right for abducting a princess to marry, for it remained a right under Kshatriya Dharma. It is by this very right that Bhishma; the great warrior abducts the princesses Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. But even this right doesn't go very well if either the abducted princess or her parents objected. Being himself a tantamount to dharma, Bhishma sends Amba back for this reason the moment she revolts. (Maharaj, Pundit Bhadase, The Abduction)

Gandhi opines on rape and women as,

The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength...It is my firm conviction that a fearless woman, who knows that her purity is her best shield, can never be dishonored. However beastly the man, he will bow in shame before the flame of her dazzling purity. (Experiments With Celibacy, Comments On Rape: Gandhi's Controversies)

Kunjan Nambiar's Sheelavati in the poetical work 'Sheelavathi Naalu Vrutham' takes penance to protect her leprosy stricken husband, Ugrathapas from the curse of Sage, Mandavya. The Sun itself restraints from rising, as the sage cursed Ugrathapas for his death in the following sunrise. The power and potential of a chaste woman for swaying even the life forces definitely becomes the central theme. The flip side of it is Ugrathapas proved to be a nagging husband .Sheelavathi showcases a self imposed passivity and silence which she unknowingly and happily surrenders to. The sufferings of the women should not be considered as a new phenomenon as exemplified by the ancient stories. But the saga of exploitation continues. The time

and the background changed but the story is the same. There were women of will power and idealism in the ancient period just as we find them now a day. In spite of all the developments, the plight of women remains the same.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions do matter a lot. Perceptions of how women should be treated differ from country to country. It is based on the culture and tradition. In India, woman is described as the creator, caretaker and divine mother of all living beings. But there is no end to her sufferings. Old traditions and strict norms practiced under trying circumstances have put women in the cages of patriarchy. Women's values and feelings are being lost in the thick clouds of the same. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, he mentions the real facet of our law

"ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS" (78)

In the preface to *Women Power: A Gandhian Discourse* by Justice Chandrashekar Dharmadhikari it is said that "the culture of *tyag* is being replaced by *bhog*" (15). It tells us about the modern predicament. There is a solution to the problem in the Gandhian thought process. It is based on the non violence and fearlessness to be practiced by all. Women were given more importance by Gandhi. There were more women around Gandhi to carry out his instructions. He got immense faith in women's power. That is why, he gave more responsibilities to Sarojini Naidu even during the salt satyagraha. Gandhi considered women as equals. He explained his non violence as a gift from Kasthuba Gandhi. He called her 'ba'. Kasthuba addressed him as 'bapu'. It also tells us about the sense of equality that he practiced. The present scenario can be changed only with a revolutionary change in the attitude of the people.

In the novel *Witness the Night*, we come across the gruesome picture prevailing in society. A character like Simran is a sigh of relief in the general drama of pain. As it is a novel we cannot insist on a solution to the problems. The novel offers a situation to stimulate us. There lies the success of the novel.

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