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WOMEN IN THE SHORT STORIES OF MANNU BHANDARI: INNER DESIRES VERSUS
SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

There are two types of perceptions that are prevalent from the very beginning of the society regarding woman and her existence. At one place she is worshipped as a "Goddess" and at another regarded as an "object of entertainment". The societies which consider women as scared are believed to be most progressive. But then this respect and sacredness is only restricted to high caste women, who further enjoy it only if they are married to a man holds a prestigious position in the society. Woman either high-caste or low caste doesn't have any existence in isolation or so to say 'away from her husband'. That is why the society still sees a single woman or widow with an eye of contempt. In this paper I have tried to emphasize on the difference between conventional woman and modern woman in relation to the social roles they are expected to play in the so called 'Liberal and Modern' society.

Keywords: Modernization, Marginalization, Biasness, Inequality, Self-conflict, Expectations, Self-awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

Various attempts were made during the post-colonial period for the upliftment of women in India. Later by passing of the Hindu Code in 1955/56, complete equality of rights for men and women in the family was achieved, and it was expected that all the imperfection in law would be removed in the law courts. Since then the legal position has been changed in favour of women, at least on papers. Other than Law, women started getting the representation in literature. During the recent years a bunch of women writers have emerged on the scenario who write with the self-imposed task of representing themselves in a style away from the stereotyping of women in fiction which was the outcome of their clear objective scientific attitude towards tradition bound Indian social structure. . With the development of civilization and coming of modernization, the concept of woman as "Goddess" began to change. She started playing a role equal to man but unfortunately this complicated her position more in the society which actually is not prepared to accept her bold image. Often from her childhood she is trained to be an ideal wife and mother by making her conscious of the difference between her and the opposite sex. This training is responsible for their deteriorated condition since ages.

Among Hindi writers Mannu Bhandari's contribution is most recommendable. There is a variation in her women characters. Some of them raised above the traditionally assigned role while the others stick to the stereotypical image of silent sufferers. Mannu Bhandari has successfully depicted her microscopic observations about the society in her short fiction. Anita Myles here rightly point out, "*A woman's experiences of life as a member of a gender biased society formulate her psyche. Moreover, she is bound by certain other factors such as her individual circumstances, society's expectation related to age, class, race etc. Thus each woman's experience of life is different and therefore, unique.*"¹

Mannu Bhandari has contributed in providing a distinct dimension to the social and cultural picture of women in family and society. These discriminating socio-cultural values, attitudes and practice which cripple the personalities of the female psyche are highlighted in her stories. Here I would like to discuss two stories by Bhandari 'Saza' (The Sentence) and 'Ek Kamzor Ladki ki Kahani'. (Story of a Subordinate Girl)

Saza is a story of a sensitive young girl Asha, who becomes mature before age due to the harsh circumstances that befall her. Bhandari here also explores her efforts to harmonize the native and the acquired ideas as well as her problem after education. Asha's father was to be sentenced for the embezzlement of twenty thousand rupees which actually was done by someone else. He has been dismissed from his job and her (Asha's) Mama (Maternal uncle) who has just returned from England took all the responsibilities of rescuing her father. Asha and her mother are the silent sufferers of the society's injustice whereas Asha's Chachi (Uncle's wife) is depicted as dominating and bold. Bhandari often keeps her protagonists either unaware of the injustice done or completely silent towards it. To prove that they have been nurtured since childhood in a society which perpetuates such inequalities. It is a fact that even today a woman has been made acutely conscious of her gender since childhood. Restrictions on her movements are enforced as soon as she reaches puberty. Any girl, who tries to rebel against such restrictions is severely reprimanded and shown her place. Seema Sunil rightly points out, "*Before marriage, women are brought up strictly according to the traditional codes. The moment girl reaches adolescence; she is reminded of her femininity. She is constantly reminded by society that she need not assert her individuality as she is destined for man which is the ultimate goal of her life.*"² It is important to note here that Asha was not the victim of patriarchy in the literal sense. Her father cared for her the most and never wanted her to waste time in household works. When her Dadi once teaches her to do some household work, her father shouts at her and says, "*My Asha will going to be a doctor. I'll send her abroad. Will I let her ruin her life in this, this inkeeping?*" (p 352)³

But unfortunately Asha has to leave her studies because of the critical financial condition and the education of her younger brother which was considered as more important. When her father sent her to take care of her brother at her uncle's house in village she takes up the role of a loving mother and also becomes an expert in the household work. Thus the social structure and traditional codes scatter all her childhood dreams. She only becomes worth of being a good house- keeper in the end. In our society, which is essentially patriarchal, a female child is brought up under the strict control of parents with the view that she has to be given to a new master, her husband, who should find her acceptable, meeting his expectations. Marriage is thus, considered a great ambition and ultimate goal of a girl's life. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive 'commodity' in the marriage market. The story thus

¹ Myles. Anita: *Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian women novelists in English*. New Delhi: Sarup and sons, 2009. P. no.3.

² Suneel. Seema, *Emergence of New Woman in Indian Fiction: A Study of Bharti Mukherjee's Wife, Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence and R.W. Desai's Frailty Name is (W)oman'*. *Feminism and Literature*, Veena Noble Dass(ed.) New Delhi: Prestige Books;1995.P. no. 219.

³ Twentieth Century Women Fiction (Translation) Mannu Bhandari's 'Saza' Translated as 'The Sentence' by Manisha Chaudhary.

presents a meek, docile picture of a young girl who represents all those Indian women who are covered with thick, slack layers of convention, ignorance and reticence in literature as well as in real life and who have no autonomous frame of existence.

The other story 'Ek Kamzor Ladki ki Kahani' almost depicts the same picture of a girl child in the patriarchal system. Since her childhood she is exposed to traditional patterns which presumably supposed that the daughter will have to lead a sacrificing and submissive life. It is indoctrinated in the girl-child to play the role of a disciplined daughter, a meek and submissive wife on which restrictions are forced upon. Roop's mother dies early and her father remarries. But her step mother, like the typical ones prove to be very hostile towards her. She makes Roop's father over-conscious of Roop's attending youth and asks him to stop her studies and let her learn household work which will ultimately going to count in her life and not studies. In a typical Indian set-up, daughter is considered a burden to be eased, a problem to be solved, a responsibility to be dispensed with and a person who has no right to any choice in life.

Roop like Asha has a sense to differentiate between right and wrong at a very tender age but has neither courage nor voice to speak it out. She never wanted to leave her studies but couldn't oppose when her step-mother insisted on it. But even like Asha, Roop's father too was aware of the injustice done to his daughter and observes, "*Slowly, one after the other, all household responsibilities are sliding from the shoulders of Tara devi to Roop and she is also accepting all these silently without any oppose. Within few days she has been changed from student to house holder.*" (p 435). In both the stories fathers are depicted as compensate towards their daughters but are helpless because of the social and conventional restrictions. But being a man he couldn't bear it for long and decides to send her away for studies without her knowledge, to this Roop reacts, "*Why should I leave my own home, they forced to leave me school also, I also do this much household chore, though they don't want to keep me here*". Roop deadly wanted to rebel against this tradition of sending the daughters away but is always stopped by the imposed parameters of being reserved from ones father and other male members, who actually take all the decisions.

Thus Roop is depicted as a weak, docile and easily bent character at other's will which is the outcome of so called tradition and Sanskaras. As a girl she is told to mould herself according to her gender roles and even when she is grown up her position remains the same.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the observation that Bhandari has given convincing portrayal of middle class women, who are often educated but couldn't materialize their knowledge in a society which attach no value to a girls education than her character and household work experience. Bhandari has tried to depict the rebel prevailing into the hearts of her women characters but never provided them with a voice. Marginalization of woman as daughter, wife, mother, is clearly indicated in her stories. They are suppressed socially, psychologically, physically and spiritually. Her writings could be categorized as feminist but the feminism needed to be pushed a little further. I would like to end with Indu Prakash Pandey's observation of the women characters in Indian fiction, "*The tone of Hindi Feminist writers is melancholic, not even really tragic as there is no heroic attempt to do something to change their circumstances in their favour. Hardly any female character shows some courage to put her foot down and take a decision and act to fulfill her wish. Even if the female characters have shown some courage...their rebellion ends up in tearful submission. Whatever slight fire seems to burn in thee beginning, gets extinguish by their own tears towards thee end of the story.*" (p 15)⁴

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