

RISING FROM THE ASHES OF HER TREACHERIES

Upasana Chatterjee

M.Phil Research Scholar,
Women's Studies Research Centre,
Calcutta University
Kolkata -700027

Abstract

“To catch a husband is an art; to hold him is a job.” (Beauvoir, de, Simone, *The Second Sex*) Inevitably this is regarded to be the established role of a woman who is supposed to be confined within the domestic peripheries, ensnaring her husband, giving birth to his children and taking care of them. In a country like India where motherhood is worshipped but exploited and pregnancy is celebrated but in the sole expectation of a male child, authors like Rabindranath Tagore through Mrinal in ‘Streer Potro’, Ashapura Devi through Satyavati in *Prothom Protishruti* have presented us with emboldening and progressive women characters who have fought their survival by coming out of the shackles of patriarchy. Similar liberated woman characters are depicted through the roles played by Shabana Azmi in the movie ‘Arth’, Tabu in the movie ‘Astitva’. This paper aims to delineate such inspiring opinionated woman characters from Indian Literature (focusing on Bengali Literature) and Indian Films (focusing on Bollywood) who are the epitomes of survival, fighting through various resistances offered by the son-preferred male dominated society. Girlhood and Motherhood is limned in a different light, where a woman is not a puppet who dances to the whims and dictates of a man; she moves out from her four-walled household to re-search her identity and finds fulfillment in herself.

Key-words : Patriarchy, Resistance, Emancipated New Woman , Survival, Indian (Bengali) Literature and Indian (Bollywood) Movies.

In a son preferred patriarchal society one is not born but rather becomes a woman. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that it is not the biological condition of a woman that makes her a handicap. It is relatively how a woman construes this condition which renders it to be positive or negative. None of the uniquely female experiences like the development of female sex organs, menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, have a meaning in themselves ; but they take on the meaning of being a burden and disadvantage in the way

patriarchy accords them and the society blindly accepts them. Looking down the ages. It has been seen that a woman is either viewed to be a 'Devi' or a 'Property of Man'. Man has subdued women just as he had subdued nature and as Frederick Engels said in *The Origin of Family, Private Property and State* (1884), – “The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children...” Raised on the pedestal of a Devi too meant that the woman had to conduct herself in accordance to the 'noble' ideas that the patriarchal society had set for her. Women have never set up female values in opposition to male values; it is man who desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives, has invented that divergence and has created a feminine domain, only to lock up women therein. However not conforming to such patriarchal norms, this paper explores the various emancipated paradigms of survival strategies of women characters from the pages of Indian Literature and Indian Cinema, who instead of being subjugated have stood against the veiled and unveiled harassments offered by the male-centric society, hence paving the way for their independence and identity. Focusing on Bengali Literature and Bollywood Cinema, unconventional fictional characters like Mrinal in Rabindranath Tagore's short story “Streer Potro” (1913), Satyavati in Ashapura Devi's *Prothom Protishruti* (1964), Shabana Azmi as Pooja in the movie *Arth* (1982) and Tabu as Aditi in 'Astitra' (2000) are the emboldening and progressive women characters who have fought their survival by coming out of the shackles of patriarchy. The objective of this paper is to uphold the fighting spirit of women who have risen from the ashes from their treacheries, hence paving the way for their emancipation themselves.

The kinship between Mrinal and Satyavati is unmistakable and both these representations of women in Bangla fiction in 1913 by Tagore and 1964 by Ashapura Devi herald the promise of the emergence of empowered women as active agents of social change. The character of Mrinal in 'Streer Potro', written in an epistolary form by the protagonist herself marks the metamorphosis from her traditional parasitic identity “Mejo-Bou” to that of the freedom seeking independent woman, Mrinal. After fifteen years of marriage, at the age of twenty seven, Mrinal leaves her husband's house, determined never to return. She flees from an incarcerated existence in her husband's house into individualism and freedom and this representation of a housewife taking a desperate step is a bold construct, marching away from the conventional roles of being a daughter, wife and mother. Mrinal remembers how her daughter had died immediately after being born and how the English physician was surprised on seeing the deplorable condition of the women's quarters and the unhygienic condition of the nursery. The continual erosion of women's self respect, owing to the mal-treatment they received at their in-laws' hands gradually made them indifferent to neglect and caused no new pain. Mrinal writes in her letter,

“... women felt ashamed even to feel sad... If it was the destiny of women to suffer at the hands of society, then it was better to let them wallow in neglect; love or caring merely increased the pain caused by the neglect.”

While reading Mrinal's letter, one is reminded of Vrinda Nabar's lines in 'Caste As Woman', where she says “There is a sense of the 'other' when referring to the girl child. One also finds a clear discrimination between the rights and privileges of a daughter/girl and a son/boy.”

Ashapura Devi's Satyavati in *Prothom Protishruti* is the epitome of the frustration and anger, the rebel spirit that every girl dreamt of being at that time but could never master enough

courage to achieve. Ashapura Devi has raised a question which many ponder over even today : “Has the situation of women really improved? Can we say for certain that in today’s modern world, where women are ‘successful’ and are often reaching ‘the top’, they are not actually landing from the frying pan into the fire?” She opines that she has created a rebel protagonist like Satyavati as a medium of protest; but such protests are not violent in nature, that voice of protest rather seeks to understand and explain and rationalize. Satyavati’s journey to Kolkata was symptomatic of a rejection of the village, of the rural antecedents and an un-acceptance of all that is immoral, non-traditional and conservative. She begins teaching elder women at the ‘Sabarmangala Pathshala’ established by their tutor Bhabatosh Biswas. The war she wages to acquire education and other modes of emancipation for women began long before the birth of her daughter Subarnalata, later on whom she pins all her hopes.

In ‘Streer Potro’ the atrocious treatment meted out to Bindu anguished Mrinal’s heart and through Bindu, she viewed the helpless animal like condition of womankind as a whole. When the desperate Mrinal was about to go to her room along with Bindu and lock herself inside, she found to her dismay that Bindu had departed with her brother-in-law to her husband’s house, never to return again. The words of Manu kept rankling in the dumfounded Mrinal’s ears that a virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a God even if he behaved badly, freely indulged his lust, and was devoid of any good qualities. Unable to make peace with such patriarchal conventions she decided to leave and re-search her identity, as she wrote in her poetries which constituted a singular subjective space where her feminine identity flourished outside the paradigms of patriarchy – “... atleast there the boundary wall of the inner compound could not stop me. There lay my freedom, there I could be myself...”

Satyavati in *Prothom Protishruti* can be regarded as a true sister of Mrinal, who is literate, assertive and has the courage of her convictions. Just like Bindu’s death was like an awakening call to Mrinal’s soul to emerge out of its hemmed existence and move towards freedom, Satyavati’s mother-in-law Elokeshi’s effort to thwart Satyavati’s ardent struggle for women emancipation and giving away her grand-daughter Subarnalata in marriage behind her back triggered Satyavati to leave her husband’s house forever. She refused to turn back and disregarding the pleas of all relatives and her husband, left behind everybody saying that she has to look for answers to the questions that are haunting her. Like Mrinal, Satyavati leaves saying, “For thirty years I have been looking at you for everything, now at the fag end I want to look at myself.”

This awakening call to look at oneself and in the process re-identifying oneself paves the way for personal freedom and self-fulfillment. Why should a woman be forced to live life like a prisoner and be marginalized by the man made constraints when she can find happiness in herself, outside the four walled boundaries of her husband’s or son’s house? Women with such emboldening personalities have been sketched in Indian movies too through the characters of Shabana Azmi as Pooja in ‘Arth’, Tabu as Aditi in ‘Astitva’ and many others. The movie ‘Arth’ (1982) through the role played by Shabana Azmi graphs the emancipation of Indian woman from the stranglehold of her image in society. The contented house-wife Shabana Azmi as Pooja, while fixing the name-plate of their new flat is informed by her husband, Inder that he wishes to stay with another woman named Kavita. Their marriage collapses and so does Pooja. Her condition mirrors that of her domestic help, whose alcoholic husband has taken a mistress but surprisingly, she copes with the situation better than Pooja as she has known men to be unfaithful

and violent. Pooja's life is devastated but she evolves from being a subservient component in the scheme of marriage to an independent being. From her initial recurrent self-recrimination – “Where did I go wrong?”, Pooja finally accepts her circumstance and this struggle to accept reality both purges and strengthens her. Later when the repentant Inder wishes to return to Pooja, she refuses the reconciliation by asking him, - “Would you accept me if I would have done the same to you?” The answer lies within the question itself. In Raj, Pooja gets a good supportive friend but when he professes love to her, she backs off, gently explaining to Raj that she doesn't want to be weakened by his support and walks away with the child she had adopted, never to look back again.

The film ‘Astitva’ (2000) through Aditi's character vehemently protests to the discrimination directed at women, who despite experiencing equal sexual desire as men, are devotedly expected to subjugate that desire in order to satisfy the needs of men, securing their egos, and keeping them happy at any cost. The male chauvinist Shreekant Pandit in the film scorns his wife Aditi and their twenty seven years marriage for her mistake of sleeping with her music teacher for a night and giving birth to a child in the past. Justifying that incident to be an act of weakness and not infidelity, Aditi refuses to be considered guilty as women have the same desires as men. She retorts back that Shree, being the ‘man’, in spite having affairs with several women have conveniently forgiven himself but expects complete fidelity from his wife, who was left alone at home for long stretches because she has to bear the burden of being born as a ‘woman’. Aditi makes a remarkable acknowledgement of female sexual desire which is as true as male sexual desire and therefore demanding its equal acceptance. The traumatized but self-confident Aditi goes further to upbraid Shree for satisfying his own needs without restraint and without consent – “You have raped me many times...”. The idea of marital rape and its unacceptance by women is well highlighted. Aditi, tired of playing the roles of being the “doll-wife” and “doll-mother” finally leaves the house without any regret to search her *astitva*, as she says – “The horizons of the open sky is calling me,/ I am eager to find my own identity.”

When men are oppressed it's called a tragedy but when women are oppressed it is accepted as a tradition. A good Indian wife have to acknowledge that men can err but it is her duty to forget about his infidelity. None but women themselves have to change this patriarchal tradition, be educated and economically self sufficient to rise from the ashes of Her treacheries. It would be wrong to conclude that situations are not changing and since Literature or Cinema is a reflection of the society, this paper intended to uphold such inspiring and unyielding woman characters like Mrinal, Satyavati, Pooja, Aditi and hinting towards other characters like Giribala in Rabindranath Tagore's short story ‘Giribala’, Bokul in Ashapura Devi's *Bokul Kotha*, Bandana in the movie ‘Shet Pathorer Thala’, Ketki in the movie ‘Mritydand’, Vaidehi and Janki in the movie ‘Lajja’ and many others who have validated that a woman is not a shadow of her man; she can survive alone, retaining her individual self, earning her own bread and withstanding both apparent and latent resistances offered by the patriarchal society. This paper epitomizes these ‘New Women’ who instead of dancing to the whims and dictates of her husband or son, steps out of their four-walled household to re-search their identity and in the words of Virginia Woolf, find a room of HER own...

Bibliography:

- Bhatt, Mahesh. Arth, 1982
- Devi, Ashapura. Prothom Protishruti, Kolkata: Mitra O Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd
- Dasgupta, Sanjukta. "Streer Patra" – A Feminist Text?, <http://www.museindia.com>
- Dasgupta, Shyamali. "On Reading 'Streer Patra', Mrinal's Letter to Her Husband", Rupkatha Journal Vol 2 No 4.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex, Vintage Publishers, 2011
- Engels, Frederick. The Origin of Family, Private Property and State. Penguin Publishers, 2010
- Gahlot, Deepa. Sheroes: 25 Daring Women of Bollywood, Wwstland Publishers, 2015
- Manjrekar, Mahesh. Astitva, 2000
- Manu Smriti, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/7189037/Manu-Smriti-Sanskrit-Text-With-EnglishTranslation>
- Nabar, Vrinda. 'Caste As Woman', Penguin Books India, 1995.
- Sen, Amrit. Rabindranath Tagore 150 Years: Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies, Vol 2 NO 4
- Tagore, Rabindranath. Selected Short Stories. Trans. William Radice. India: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own, Penguin Publishers, 2002



BIO-NOTE

Upasana Chatterjee is a Research Scholar in Women's Studies Research Centre, Calcutta University. She is presently working on Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of woman characters in his works and Representation of Queer characters in 21st century Indian Literature and Indian Media.