

# Women with dignity and freedom in reference to Lavanya Sankaran and Baby Halder.

1. (Bathula Srihari Rao, (Research Scholar), Faculty in English, Sri Viswasanthi Schools and Colleges, Vuyyuru, Near Vijayawada, India)

2. Prof. Prasanna Sree

Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India.

## Abstract

Indian women writers have been exploring feminine subjectivity and dealing with themes that range from childhood to complete womanhood. The women wings started to fight against the atrocities done to them. The modern women groups have started only to fight for the reason of quest for their identity as equal members of the men dominated society. Women's writing in India has seen a galaxy of women writers with much more quality and depth in projecting a vision of their own.

**Key words:** emotional blackmail, fight for self and identity, neglected motherhood, sexual abuse, self-assertion.

## Introduction:

Lavanya Sankaran and Baby Halder have joined the galaxy of those women writers as voices for the voiceless. The writers through their works namely, *The Hope Factory (2013)* by Lavanya and *A Life Less Ordinary (2006)* by Baby Halder reveal that the women decide to live in a society as individuals with their own identity without depending on any member of the family or any other outside their families. Kamala in *The Hope Factory* as mother, as domestic servant, as daily labourer and a widowed wife and Baby Halder's own experiences as a neglected wife, as mother of three kids, as a domestic servant, fight with various social evils that can easily misuse women.

**Discussion:**

Lavanya Sankaran depicts Kamala, the protagonist as the hero of the novel, *The Hope Factory*. She is caught between her hope and the pathetic conditions of living. She hopes to look at the ray of hope. When the ray diminishes she takes a bold step towards life. One can say without any doubt that she is the hero of her life and hope as

*I, who have never asked anyone else for a paise, not for a glass of water that I have not earned, now you want me to lower myself, abase myself, abase the entire work of my blood and body, and go, like a beggar, and ask for money? (lavanya:241)*

*Baby Halder* is a domestic servant who by encouragement became an author. Her birth and brought up is in West Bengal. Her memoir *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) reveals that her life was full of trials and tribulations since her childhood. She had a traumatic childhood, as she was abandoned by her mother at the age of four, ill-treated by her father and step-mother, was married off unlawfully at the age of twelve and became a mother at thirteen.

Kamala and Baby are the clear depiction of agony, pain, lacking personal security but they have not shown any type of discouragement in life. We can see in their character a quality like a quest for life with dignity and freedom from patriarchal dominations. It may be apt to quote George R.R.Martin, the author of *A Game of Thrones* (1996) who has rightly referred to the strong attitude of women like Kamala and Baby who stand strong to make themselves equal members of this men-dominated society as

*Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armour yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you. (Martin: 455)*

Kamala becomes a widow at a very young age. She is expelled from her husband's family. Her life takes worse turn. The author explains how common it is for the poor wives to suffer when their husbands die. Kamala as a widow goes around to feed her little kid. She goes from pillar to post to look for a place to keep her baby warm and feed it with her milk.

*When the course of her young life had left her widowed and along, expelled from her husband's modest family hut by his parents, the*

*starving mother of a baby boy, she had turned to her brother for help. (176)*

Her own brother turns his deaf ear to her woes. He blames her fate and finds fault with her as if she is responsible for the death of her husband. He treats her cruelly and beats her up for being an extra responsibility to him. The patriarchal domination takes the worst turn in her young life from her own brother. And outside her family, she has to face the society as a widow. As one is aware of the fact that in traditional Hindu society, a widow is treated as something inauspicious, dry, clad in unflattering white dress without a single ornament on herself. With the loss of husband, a woman's utility is practically over. This is very clear in Kamala's life too. Rajul Sogani writes in her *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature* (2002) for a Hindu wife as,

*Widowhood traditionally meant one of two things; immediate death, lifelong condemnation to segregate and drudgery, and subjection to clandestine sexual exploitation by the males of the family or locality. (Rajul: 29)*

One may remember Urmila in Deshpande Sashi's *The Binding Vine* (1993), who does not submit to the patriarchal system and questions the systems for others too. Kamala fights for her identity and wants to see justice is done for son. The novelist is trying to convey that mother is important to the growth of human generations. Kamala is also a complete mother caring for her baby son despite many hurdles of her personal life. Kamala may be compared with the character of Virmati in *Manju Kapoor's Difficult Daughters* (1998). Virmati rebels against tradition. Like Virmati, Kamala too loves to be independent never depending on any one. Hence she decides to leave her brother and village and go to the city to get a job that

*Would give her body with nourishment ... to enter the eager sucking mouth of her son (177)*

As Kamala does not want to return to her brother, she becomes a coolie, a day labourer at a construction work. Even here, she has to face gender bias. She works very hard on par with the men but she paid half of the money that men receive. Maistri underestimates her physical work. It is a clear indication of gender bias. We may remember the words of *Sojourner Truth* in her famous speech, *Ain't I a Woman?* at the Ohio

Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851. She was feminist who fought for the equal rights of women in America.

*I have as much muscles as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have ploughed, planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And Ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear de lash a well and Ain't I a woman? ( Sojourner: 228)*

Kamala experiences the serious area of gender discrimination at workplace. Kamala may be compared with Shoba De's Asha Rani in *Starry Nights* (1991) who dares to quit films for a better future. Kamala too becomes rebellious for a better future for her son unable bear the men-domination at work place. In this pathetic condition, one could appreciate her bravery in protecting her child just because she dreams of a good future for her little son. One can compare kamala like *Pandu's mother in Mother*, by *Baburao Bagul*. This story interrogates so many identities. Mother, but also a Dalit, woman, widow, single parent, and raises her son alone.

Unlike Pandu's mother, Kamala would not give into second marriage or any kind of illicit relation with anyone. Kamala makes her body become a well of milk for him. The child grows up to be two and a half years old. Kamala could not see her child grow up in the construction muddy work place and the inhuman treatment by her contractor. Raged by their inhuman treatment to her little Narayan at work place Kamala walks away from the work abusing, shouting at the contractor and to join as a house maid in the house of Vidya-ma through a job broker since the child has grown up to be two and a half years old. As a domestic servant she remains there for a decade.

When the novel opens, Kamala is with her 12 year old son Narayan who goes to middle school in a government school. Half day he attends school and the other half he sells papers, flowers at the traffic junctions. Kamala always dreams of his academic growth, thus owning his own plot and a car. But Narayan shows more interest in supporting his mother by earning some money than to study as his mother always wished for him.

Her life as a domestic servant in the house of Vidya-ma is not a bed of roses. Even here she faces very bad treatment in the hands of her owner and respect-less treatment in the hands of other women servants. Her employer

Vidya and the cook Shanta are very inhuman and wrathful in treating Kamala. One can see something sinister in Shanta towards Kamala as

*Qualities were an unfortunate stew: of a miserly temper, a sharp tongue an unforgiving mind, a capacity for small meanness-and an unfair semi divine ability to cook like dream. (81)*

The cook, Shanta is senior to Kamala in age and experience in the house of Vidya-ma. But she hates Kamala's sincere work. She is always critical about her work. She would not allow Kamala come into the kitchen, would not allow her to eat in kitchen. Shanta always wants to see Kamala getting caught badly in the eyes of her employer Vidya-ma. Violence need not be physical but can be psychological and mental. Kamala undergoes psychological and mental agony in the hands of Shanta and her employer Vidya-ma.

On the other hand, Shanta also faces physical torture from her drunken husband. It is a clear indication of domestic violence physically. One may think Shanta creates troubles for Kamala but it is only the ego that makes her fear that Kamala might become superior to her in their works. Adhering to the philosophy of India women, Shanta has to face the brunt of her husband and son as well. The harassment meted out to women like Shanta from a foolish, drunken husband is clear in the character of Shanta. At this juncture, Kamala becomes very sympathetic towards her and helps and cleans her wounds on her sensitive body despite continuous torture from her in their choirs. In this connection one can very well understand that Kamala has a hero's heart. She has a heart to feel sympathy for her enemy at work. She has the nature of forgiving her enemies. Lavanya Sankaran describes the silent suffering women in Indian slums. They have no option to escape the wrath of the domestic violence. The writer asks this aspect of the silent suffers as

*For how can one break away from husbands, unless they die?  
And who outside the family could help? Inconceivable to parade  
one's family affairs-the whole world would laugh at such  
shameful behaviour. (Lavanya: 111)*

One remembers Simon de Beauvoir quoting Tacitus (56 AD) when he defines a wife's position with her husband:

*The woman still lived under wardship, but she was a close partner of her husband. In peace and war, she shares his lot; she lives with him, she dies with him... (SS:135)*

Kamala seems to have understood the truth about being a truthful wife. So she supports and sympathises with her enemy Shanta. The characters of Kamala and Shanta come under societal problems for centuries in India. Lavanya Sankaran projects those characters into the light for the modern society to think and rectify. There have been a galaxy of writers who have taken up the issues of violence against women in the recent times to protect and protest for their rights of self-identity and self-esteem. But the women always keep in mind the good of their children and husbands despite the struggle of their own identity. Shoba De comments

*Women don't realize that they are doing themselves a lot of damage in trying to live up to these expectations. The fact is that Indian women still put their families and children ahead of their own health. They feel guilty about being hospitalized and neglect themselves. ( The Times of India: August 2, 2013)*

Baby Halder's husband, Shankar exploited her physically and mentally, beat her up mercilessly, suspected her throughout and did not support her either financially or emotionally. He also shunned responsibility towards his children and made life horrible for Baby. Unable to bear her husband's atrocities any more, she decided to raise her children on her own and showed tremendous courage in leaving her oppressive husband and heading off to Delhi.

*He didn't say a word when he saw me, but roughly caught me by my hair and started kicking and beating me. .... curses and blows rained upon me. People walking past on the road could see what was happening but no one stopped him. (Baby: 80)*

Baby quietly endured all this though there was a latent storm of rebellion feeding inside her. She was shaken when she heard of her sister's murder by her brother-in-law and this incident made her strongly feel that had her sister retaliated against her husband's ill-treatment of her, she would not have met this fate. This made her desire to be independent even

stronger. She questions the norms of the society which found fault always with women.

*My husband beat me up time and again and I tried to ask him why it was I who was getting the beating, and why not the man who was harassing me. (Baby: 81)*

Her bold decision to walk out of a horrible marriage with three children, with whom she moved to Delhi and started working as domestic help reveals not only her courage but also her sense of responsibility towards her children. She vividly recollects how at the workplaces, her employers ill-treated her, exploited her for work and she was not allowed to spend enough time with her children and was treated like a beast of burden. Moreover, she suffered attempts of molestation from some of her male employers which she could not tolerate. Having been exploited at the hands of her employers for years, Baby finally chose to resist this social set up where women from lower caste and strata are seen merely as objects on whom patriarchal power can be exercised to any extent. It was only when she got a job in the house of Prof. Prabodh Kumar, who insisted her to start the search of her identity on paper that she tried to explore her past.

In Indian culture, the patriarchal domination over the females has been a regular practice. In the case of marginalized women writing about their selves, socio-cultural oppression is a common denominator. The social framework is so exploitative towards women that most of the time, they give in to their fate for the sake of family or other social reasons. Baby Halder and Kamala, in *The Hope Factory* also tried to adjust and reconcile to their fate. They waited for years hanging between their father's home and husband's to gain some space and respect but seemed to have none anywhere. They strived for independence, respect and decided to exist in society as individuals with their own identity without being dependent on husband, father or her brothers.

The two women show a great poverty stricken characters in *The Hope Factory* (2013) and *A Life Less Ordinary*. This is the true story of Indian slum-dwellers. The fate of the economically deprived women has not improved. But Kamala and Baby continue to hope for a better life for their children. She is not disappointed. Hence they are heroes.

## Works cited:

1. Baby Haldar. *A Life Less Ordinary*. Trans. Urvashi Butalia. (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2006).
2. Chandana Yashika. Quest for Identity in the novels of Manju Kapur's *Difficulty Daughters* and *A Married Woman*. Delhi University: IJELR., Vol.1. Issue.4., 2014.
3. Deshpande Sashi's. *The Binding Vine*. Penguin India; New Delhi: 1993.
4. Devi, Mahasweta. *Mother of 1084*. Calcutta: Seagull Books: 1997.
5. George, R.R. Martin. *A Game of Thrones*. Bantam Spectra; U.S: 1996.pp.455.
6. Lavanya, Sankaran. *The Hope Factory*. The Bantan Dell Publishing Group; London: 2013.
7. Manju Kapur. *Difficult Daughters*. Faber & Faber; New Delhi: 1998.
8. Nayar, Pramod K. Trauma, Testimony and Human Rights: Women's Atrocity Narratives from Postcolonial India. *South Asian Review*. 29(1). 2008.<www.academia.edu>.
9. Rajul Sogani. *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature*: Oxford University Press; Delhi: 2002. pp.29.
10. Review on *A Life Less Ordinary*. Memoir of domestic help, Rafeeqe
11. Sathupati Prasanna Sree. *Woman in the novels of Sahshi Deshpande: A Study*. Dissertation Submitted to Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visva Vidyalayam. Tirupathi. 1999.
12. Shoba De. *Starry Nights*. Penguin Books; India.1991.
13. Simon de Beauvoir. *Second Sex*. Vintage Books; 1949.pp.135.
14. Sisir Kumar Das. 'History of Indian Literature: 1911-1956, Struggle for freedom: Triumph'. Sahitya Academy, New Delhi 1995. ISBN: 81-7201-798-7.
15. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Womens-security-onus-on-state-Shobhaa-De/articleshow/21540926.cms>
16. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t\\_I\\_a\\_Woman%3F](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t_I_a_Woman%3F)
17. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/...Baby\\_halder/.../Aolo-andhari-Baby-halde](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/...Baby_halder/.../Aolo-andhari-Baby-halde)