

FEMALE MARGINALITY IN CHANDRIKA BALAN'S *THE STORY OF A POEM*

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Abstract

Chandrika Balan's concern with the issues of women in the patriarchal Indian society is expressed powerfully in the short story, *The Story of A Poem*. She exposes in this story how women are forced to play a docile, meek and subservient role, especially after their marriage. It reveals the predicament of Sushma, a simple Keralite woman, in a male-dominated society and her annihilation as a poet at the altar of marriage. She remains the obedient wife bearing silently the brunt of the actions of Reghuraman, her husband, doing her wifely duties at the expense of her selfhood. She never wants to offend the unwritten rules and regularities for fear that she may be ridiculed or degraded by her husband and the society. Sushma is a representative of the middle-class Indian woman trapped in wed locks, one who does not complain, who thinks nothing of making sacrifices and is willing to let go of their dreams. Chandrika Balan does not try to take sides or give any resolution to the issues she discusses in her stories. She presents the two opposing views or ways of lives one finds in reality and leaves it to the reader's choice.

Keywords: patriarchal, subservient, predicament, trapped, sacrifices.

Chandrika Balan, a contemporary fiction writer focuses on the problems that women face in the present society. She is known as Chandramati in Malayalam literary world and is well received for her depiction of women characters, confronting familial issues albeit, in different ways. Perceiving that all is not right with the woman's world, she depicts her women as gaining strength and trying to confront their problems. Her stories have been translated into many Indian as well as foreign languages.

In *The Story of A Poem* Chandrika Balan presents a common, contemporary situation that can be seen in a household anywhere in India. She focuses on the inequalities patriarchy thrusts on the Indian women. She feels that they are forced to play a docile, meek and subservient role especially after their marriage whereas an Indian male thinks it is his right to dominate, exploit and suppress his womenfolk. *The Story of A Poem* sums up the situation of a creative, intelligent woman in a traditional society whose norms dictate her to curb her talent and keep it hidden. It reveals the stereotypical ideology meted out on women. Sushma, a simple housewife in Kerala leads a cloistered life. She writes her poems secretly in between her chores at the kitchen table. Her poem begins like this:

A tear-drop sways my lashes
As I think of you- even now. (p.92)

They may seem like very ordinary lines that could be written by some romantic poet. But when it is written by a woman, especially a married woman with two children, it takes on a different light in an Indian society. Because our society is always on the lookout for some autobiographical element in women's writings. Sushma's husband Reghuraman will definitely become suspicious if he happened to read them. For, "he is very particular that his wife, like Caesar's, should be above doubt." (p92) Naturally her poems are written in secret in such a suspicious, hostile world. Like so many other women she is caught between the vicious clutches of expectations from a traditional society and her own wishes.

Though intelligent, Sushma quietly accepts the supremacy of her husband Reghuraman on the patriarchal value system. She remains the obedient wife, bearing the dominant actions of Reghuraman, discharging her wifely duties at the expense of her selfhood. But she is not free to do what her heart desires. Dr. Priyanka Vaidya states that, "According to UN definition the deprivation and denial of opportunities for basic human amenities and means of livelihood like health, education, training, skill building are also part of violence against women." (p.5) In between her chores Sushma is impelled to continue the poem which is nostalgic in tone:

I remember-
how we walked huddled under an umbrella,
how the torrential downpour drenched the lonely street,
how you put your hand on my left shoulder,
how my whole body shivered at your touch. (p.93)

Though the sun is burning outside and it is very hot, it is raining where Sushma's mind is concerned. Even as she is taking a bath, one more line is born within her and she runs out to the dining table to add it to the bottom of her poem. She is worried that it may vanish if she does not write it down immediately.

As she rushes back to the shower, she recollects Reghuraman's flippant comments on her body. Once when his colleagues had come to their house, he has remarked to them insensitively, "You see, there is one difference between my wife and Miss Universe. The curves are in the right places on Miss Universe and in the wrong places on my wife".(p.96) Sushma knows her husband for what he is; a male chauvinistic, overbearing hypocrite who has no scruple of humiliating her whenever he gets a chance. When one of his colleagues, a Shriranjini, tries to comfort her by telling that Reghuraman is very fond of her and keeps talking about her all the time in the office, she keeps quiet. She knows very well that, "if at all he talked about her it would only be in comparison with other woman". (p.96) Still she puts up with him because society recognizes and respects a woman only when she is with her husband. A single woman is looked down and has no position in this patriarchal society. Shusma represents the middle-class Indian woman who is trapped in wed locks.

She continues to pen down her poem rapturously as if she is possessed. The reader is left to wonder when she gets restless and suddenly makes a telephone call. The suspense is built up when she silently replaces the receiver after listening to a masculine voice answering her call. She calms down and adds few more lines. It is really ironic that she completes the poem only to destroy it. She tears it into pieces and throws them out as she hears her husband and children arrive. From the secretive, dreamy poet she transforms herself into an ideal Indian wife and

mother within a few seconds. She is after all, one among the so many thousands of Indian women who have been silent sufferers for so long, a woman who thinks nothing of making sacrifices and is willing to let go of her dreams.

ChandrikaBalan vehemently attacks the male society which is ready to look for some personal content into women's writings. The critics always take them to be confessional. This is what Sushma is afraid of. She is frightened that if her husband or the society happened to discover her poems, they will immediately become suspicious of her. That is why she destroys her poems. She never wants to offend the unwritten rules and regularities for fear that she may be ridiculed or degraded by the society and her husband may think wrongly of her. As Vimmie Manoj states, "Indian patriarchal society uses marriage as a scourge to coerce and silence women. Using it as an institution, it has placed women on a subordinate status and repressed their individual desires."(p.124)

It is through Sushma's husband Reghuraman that ChandrikaBalan hits at the middle-class Indian male. She also exposes the hypocrisy in the male-female relationship within the families. Reghuraman is a typical Indian husband. He wants a wife, "who is quiet, does not talk much, does all the chores without ever complaining and is excellent in culinary arts."(p.93) He is quite complacent that he has such a wife in Sushma. He is portrayed as a double-faced, uncaring hypocrite. Among his colleagues in his office, he has a female friend Shriranjini, who is also a feminist. He likes her very much and is attracted to her. He has even fantasized some of her body parts as belonging to his wife. But, of course, he has never wanted her for a wife. To him Shriranjini is only, "good enough to be taken to Indian Coffee House to argue over a cup of tea and masala dosa about Borges or Aravindan or Deconstruction."(p.94) He even tries to seduce her with sweet words and flirts with her. He calls her a combination of contradictions and tells admiringly, "but I must tell you that the paradox adds to your charm."(p.96) He has no love or respect for his wife and insults her in front of his colleagues. He tells Shriranjini arrogantly, "I

enjoy only hot or warm food. That was why I was particular about marrying an unemployed, unambitious girl.”(p.96)

Shriranjini also writes poems in English, but Reghu has no problems with that. He is just relieved that his wife does not write. When he happened to listen to a conversation between his fellow passengers in a bus he feels glad that Sushma is not a writer. They were discussing a female writer’s work and assume easily that it is her story,” ...Haven’t you noticed - all her heroines go in for extra marital relations?... So the affair of the girl in the story ...is of course the author’s.”(p.94)

ChandrikaBalan also brings into open the awkward fact that even an educated and employed woman can continue her career only if she does her preordained domestic chores. Whatever she may be, a lawyer, a teacher or a writer, the discharge of her womanly duties should take priority. A married woman who takes her career too seriously is thought of either as easy game or frowned upon. Shriranjini is looked on as a sexual object and easy game by Reghu. Her poetry only encourages him to take liberties with her. Shriranjini, the feminist, looks on helplessly when he tells her, “Will you wear the red sari tomorrow? Please it’s a request.”(p.97)

This is the plight of the majority of women today. It is only through a process of self-analysis and self-acceptance, through determination and assertion can they change this situation from mere survival to meaningful living.

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