

The Problem of Identity with reference to the Novels of Kamla Das, Veena Paintal and Shashi Deshpande – A Comparative Study

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In a society dominated by man, a woman can only pretend to be happy and satisfied. This idea is well brought out in one of Kamla Das's poems entitled 'Suicide' – "But, I must pose, I must pretend, I must act, the role of a happy woman, happy wife. This pretence gives rise to frustration and suffocation". As a result, the boredom and frustration compels characters like Kate to complain : "I am sick of being the victim of trends I reflect but don't even understand" (Mies Maria – Indian Woman and Patriarchy, 32). Kate appears in Jane Wagener's recent feminist play. From pretence of happiness results in the feeling of being a victim and finally a woman realizes that she should certainly have her own identity - A Room of Her Own. In recent Indian-English, fiction we come across heroines who are sure of themselves, of their rights and their place in society. They are fully alive to their existence and are no longer submissive living in silence. There is a marked difference in their attitude as compared to that of the heroins of earlier fiction writing has been, until recent years, taken to be a male domain. But seeing the recent emergence of women writers, who do not mind narrating their own story, we know that the pen is no longer in the hands of men only. In recent years, more and more women are becoming aware of their rights. They are bold enough to rise in revolt and are raising their voice against their exploitation. Some major women novelists who have projected strong, determined and assertive heroines, are Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandaya, Geeta Hari Haran and Veena Paintal.

Key word :- Submissive, Exploitation, Frustration and Suffocation

Kamla Das's "My Story" is a reflection of her dislikes for the conventional and traditional role of women. Infact, My Story happens to be Kamla Das's deeply personal protest against the marginalization of women. This is an autobiographical work. It is her, self – assertion. It is her self-realization – no more living in oblivion in some dark corner of the four walls of the so-called house. Kamla Das doesn't mind sharing her grief's with the readers. She has always been disturbed and annoyed by the imbalance of rights and roles of men and women. She has this to say in 'My Story':

"You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her in the long summer of your love so that she would forget not the raw season's alone, and the homes left behind, But also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless pathways of the sky."
(Das Kamla – My Story, 192)

Thus, when her marriage was fixed by her parents, and she could not do anything to prevent it, her only way to revolt and express her displeasure was to behave in an untraditional manner. She was no more the shy quiet and demure bride but behaved more like a tomboy. Instead of pulling on good saree and traditional jewellery, she wore a simple white saree on her marriage day. In the midst of every one's joy and rivalry, she was feeling uneasy and un-comfortable. She felt pained to see that the bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue. After marriage, she would like to have an emotional and intellectual companion, not a mere sex object. Her position in her husband's house was similar to that of most other women. She was supposed to forget her identity, serve her lord, and master obediently. Although she kept herself busy with the household work, her spirit protested and cried out. She, however, managed finally to escape not by running away from the bonds of marriage, because in an orthodox society getting a divorce was not easy for a woman – but by indulging in creative writing. This activity gave her an opportunity to give expression to her desires and hopes, to assert herself. Writing gave her the opportunity of establishing an identity of her own. Thus, she was able to speak out as well as be heard.

While Kamla Das protests against male domination by establishing her identity through literary writing, Veena Paintal's heroine Charishma, walks out of her unhappy marriage and finds a dignified place in society. Charishma is the heroine of veena p. novel entitled "An Autumn Leaf". Charishma, too, wants to have a husband who would treat her with equal respect and love. She desires a companion in the true sense and not a dictator, Lord and Master. She was against people opting, for arranged marriages, where women are usually tied down like slaves, and have little chance of survival. She gives her consent to marry Amit, a colonel in the army. He is the brother of her friend Neeru. Since her parents would not have consented to this marriage, she takes a bold step, by running away from her home and starts living with Amit. Thus, she is not legally married to him. Later when she hears of Amit's infidelity, she does not tolerate his unfaithfulness and cuts herself off from Amit. She does not bother about what society may think of her. She moves away from Amit and lives life in her own way. After being separated from Amit, she establishes a new relationship with Rohit. But this, too, results in failures. She breaks this relationship, too and arrives at the conclusion that an equal

relationship can't be achieved in marriage. She realizes that in order to establish her own identity, she, has to break the fetters of conventions and traditions, which are applicable to women in a male dominated society. Survival in a male dominated world is difficult and a woman has to fight against heavy odds, and only then can she have a room of her own. Charishma finds happiness in the happiness of her children and devotes her time to them. "She had discovered a flair for writing and was kept busy" (Pantal Veena – The Autumn leaf, 159). An Autumn leaf is the story of a strong, assertive woman who knows how to realize her dreams. Charishma Says :-

"I have my own personality and my dreams. I refuse to be tied down like a slave to some rich man I don't even know and be treated like a piece of furniture" (20-21).

Shashi Deshpande's heroine Saru in The Dark Holds No Terror, is also able to escape from the trap of marriage, after a lot of struggle and unhappiness. Ultimately, she succeeds in having a room of her own. Isn't it paradoxical that a woman who looks after the whole family and household doesn't even have a room of her own. Her life is meaningless and her existence is fertile and drab. It is an established fact that a women's life during childhood, youth and old age is spent in her parent's husband's and son's home respectively. At all the three stages of her life, she is dependent on man for her survival. She is forced to live at the margins and never becomes the subject. Her contribution goes unnoticed as she is taken for granted. But now some women are realizing that all norms of traditional feminine behaviors have been laid down by men for their own stakes. Shashi Deshpande heroines are bold enough to revolt against the attempts of men to marginalise them. Saru is finally able to live a life that is really happy in the real sense of the term. There are no pretensions, no masks. Her childhood was not a happy one and she has only bitter memories of it. Her mother makes her feel guilty of her brother's death. Saru had seen her brother Dhruv drowning in the water but was unable to save him. Her mother all the time accused Saru of being the cause of his death. The harsh words of her mother, "Why are you still alive ? ". "You killed your brother". "Why didn't you die?", keep ringing in her ears even when she has grown up. She hates her mother and revolts against her by going to Bombay for higher studies. Here she falls in love with Manohar and marries him against the wishes of her mother. Saru hopes that her marriage would put an end to the dark chapter of her childhood days. Little did she know that she had only moved from one prison to another rather a worse one. It was hell this time. When she hears of the news of her mother's death, she takes this opportunity to escape the violent world of her husband's house and joins the family just to take care of her father. It is here that she feels that merely shifting between her father and husband's names will not provide her the freedom that she longs for. She ultimately realizes that she is left with no option but to walk out of these homes to lead her life as she likes. When we first see Saru in her husband's house in Bombay, she is shown to be an unhappy woman who is on the verge of disintegration. She feels,

"No worse, of being just like a ventriloquist's dummy, those smiles, laughs and talks only because of the ventriloquist. The fear that without the ventriloquist, I will regress, go back to being a lifeless puppet, a smirk pasted on to its face".(Deshpande Shashi – The Dark Hold No Terrors, 22)

Her needs are simple. She just wants to live and, in order to do that, she has to get away from this house. That is why she decides to get away from "This hell of Savagery and Submission" (28).

When Saru reaches her father's house, she ponders over what had happened. Her's had been a love marriage but her husband Manu turns out to be vicious when his career as a poet doesn't pickup. He feels more jealous when Saru establishes herself as a successful doctor. Earlier she was known as the bride of the poet Manu. But later she was becoming popular and famous as a lady doctor and Manu was referred to as her husband. The element of love had disappeared from their relationship. She realizes that Manu is a sadist and this becomes the cause of their marital discord. On being asked to explain her relationship with her husband by her father she remarks

"He attacked me like an animal at night :- I was sleeping and I woke up and their was this man hurting me with his hands, His teeth, and His whole body." (200)

Now love and romance were only illusions. They were no longer necessary in her life. She now feels that the code word of the present age is sex. " Fulfillment and happiness come not through love alone but sex. And for me sex was now a dirty word." (133)

The tragedy of Saru is that she is unable to come out of the trap into which she has fallen in her husband's home she was like a terrified and trapped animal. Even in her parent's home, she did not find the kind of freedom she had longed for. The change comes when she slowly realizes that there is more to life than just depending on an unsuccessful marriage, parents, home and other such institutions. Finally, she decides to lead her life as an independent individual. She decides to walk out of the traditional bonds of marriage and home and gets into the wider world. Although she is critical of her mother, there is one thing that she finds, she shares with her- "Neither she nor I have that thing – A room of our own." (136) She sees the hollowness emptiness and nothingness in their lives. This feeling of having a room of her own is heightened when the brother of Madhav is lost and his parents are after him to find his brother. Madhav is a young boy who stays with Saru's father. He grows frustrated and irritated by their constant messages and cries out : "I can't spoil my life because of that boy. It is my life after all." (208). It is the magical effect of these four words that gives a new meaning to Saru's life. These four words keep ringing in her mind, almost haunting her.

Towards the end of the novel, she receives a letter from her son Abhi, informing her that Manu is on her way back home : On learning this, she decides to go away. But she doesn't know where to go. Her condition is such that she doesn't even have a home. She couldn't call her husband's home in Bombay, her home because it was far from being a home. And neither was her father's home a home to her. She finds herself in a dilemma. Abhi's letter makes her uneasy and uncomfortable and once again, she

feels trapped. She feels the desperation and helplessness of a trapped animal, who has nowhere to go, and who will, finally, be the victim of his pursuer. She is sick of her life and tells her father that she just cannot go on, like this. She has lived as a guilty sister, undutiful daughter, unloving wife. At last, she finds the connecting links. She decides not to be a puppet anymore. She no longer wants to be a part of a disintegrated marriage. She gets over her difference and becomes assertive. She is a different woman now. Earlier she has asked her father not to open the door for her husband. This is the attitude of a coward who runs away from unpleasant situations. Now with newfound courage and confidence she tells her father : “If Manu comes, tell him to wait.” (22 1). With these words, she goes to attend to a child who is now the victim of constant fits. Once again, she comes into her own – A doctor and a women.

Talking to an interviewer, Shashi Deshpande remarks : “Having a life outside the family is very important for women. (Vishwanath Vanamala – Interview with S.D. in R.S. Pathak, 235) Accordingly, all her women protagonists Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmila succeed in creating a self through individual professional achievement. They also manage to come to terms with themselves by redefining their relationships, accepting at the same time social constraints and emerge as fully developed individuals doing justice in their domestic as well as professional fields.

Identity is concerned with the self-esteem and self-image of an individual, a gender, a community, a class, a race or sex or a nation – real or imaginary – dealing with the existence and role: Who are we ? What position do we have in society? (Kukreti Sumitra – “Female Protagonists in Shashi D.’ Novels”, 195)

So for as sex and gender identities are concerned, these are the quest for equality and dignity for their progress and development. The multiple identities of women, distribution of their gender roles in distinct and dominant cultures i.e. in The U.S. and India and their reflection of class position. It is believed that aesthetic value is not universal, uniform, constant or eternal. Rather it is culturally and historically specific. It is the materialist analysis of Literature or Politics, which should offer a real possibility for women who are disadvantaged, disabled or working class.

In a multicultural country, the State is responsible for ensuring safety to all the minorities and marginalised groups. In multi-cultural countries like the U.S. and India, the identities such as Nation, Language, Caste, Race, Gender and Sex are culturally specific despite their similarities. The American concept of National Identity rejects the basic European ideas. Here individuals of all nations get merged into a new race of men whose labours and contribution will one-day bring changes in the world. The post independent India experienced varied identity problems as a result of the process of industrialization, Globalization and Expansion of Information Technology. These varied identities do not indicate any uniform identity as they come from different socio-economic political fabrics of India, and some times, they are identified on the basis of suppression, oppression and exploitation.

The beginning of identity politics emerged in the form of feminist and civil rights movement, which emerged through various identities. The feminine gender identity is an enquiry into the multiplicity of cultural practice particularly of discourse and representations in relation to power. It is self assertion, which is rooted in experience of inability, deprivation and disability. Today, feminists have been claiming separate identity on all fronts. So the women’s movement throughout the world has shifted from women’s emancipation of women’s empowerment in human interest. While the western radical feminist fought for sexual orientation and free sex, the feminist movement in the developing countries is primarily based upon the socioeconomic issues, such as high mortality rate, female infanticide, bride burning, dowry, violence against women rape suicides, adverse working conditions and rising inflation. Infact, their struggle comes within the socioeconomic and cultural fabric of the patriarchal society. Women’s movement in India has many layers within itself. The Urban elite women are quite aware of their rights while rural women are almost unaffected by the feminist movement. The concept like gender equality and emancipation are dreams unlikely to be realized. The rural women are also turning to find their own individuality.

Indian woman’s identity is one that is usually connected to the cultural norms of a familial structure. This identity is defined with in the parameters of their social relationship to men. They are traditional conservative and therefore they are reluctant to cross the “Laxman Rekha” of their family and culture. They are to smile, always welcome their guests and entertain them, care for their family members and perform all the household work. Thus, Indian women are supposed to become a metaphor for purity chastity and sanctity of the ancient spirit that is India. The family and nation denote eternal and natural ties for national uniformity. It is believed that Indian women in general have no identity of their own. They belong to their parents before they are married and to their husbands after they are married and in old age, they have to depend on their children. However, urban educated Indian woman are claiming their rights within their family and beyond it. They are attempting to establish a new identity with their changing gender roles, For example, in the past a husband used to represent in public affairs but now most of the elite women represent and manage the public and political affairs. These identities of women are separate form their husbands. Further, the working women particularly are to compromise and adjust themselves as wife, mother or an employee performing their household traditional work and doing all the other sorts of work connected with their working place.

Infact, the western feminist movement fought for undeclared sex orientation, while the feminist movement in the developing countries is based upon socioeconomic issue. However, all agree that there exists a gender struggle, gender power politics and its solution lies in empowerment of women rather than emancipation. Reservation for women, legal provisions and women welfare programs can be suitable platforms for substantial feminine representation in various walks of life. Thus, the change

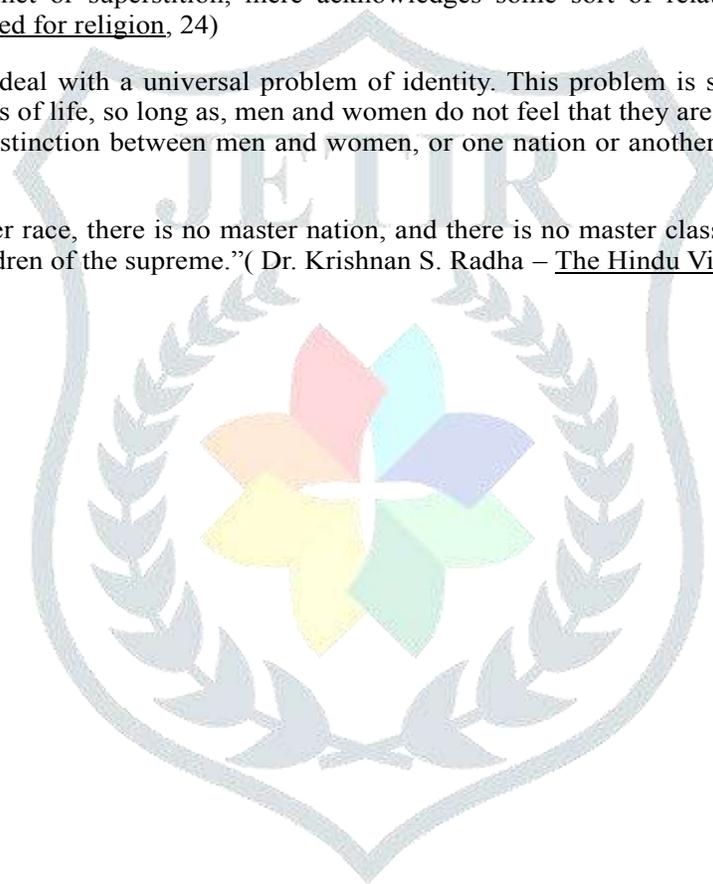
in sexual revolution came into two successive ways. The first marched under the banner of freedom and the second under feminism based on equality.

Shashi Deshpande has come to be identified with the claims for equality and emancipation. Her novels bring out those features of life, which are expressive of women's desire for self assertion. Infact, Shashi Deshpande seems to suggest that gender bias is like a poison that infects all our society and make it sordid and in human in the long run. Her women characters are no doubt placed in unpleasant situations but make sincere efforts to come out of their burrows and cells in order to establish their identities. The author thus vividly portrays the wretched condition of Indian women especially in urban areas and suggests the changes that are coming about by furnishing a lively account of the heroines and enlightened reaction to tradition and custom corrupted through men's selfishness, ignorance and vested interest. In spite of many advances made in the field of selfhood and self assertion, Indian women have still to suffer exploitation by both her husband and society. They make sincere efforts to free themselves form their clutches. Her novels depict the struggle for women's emancipation and empowerment. It is a known fact that exploitation whether expressed or suppressed, is still visible in many parts of India. It is to be noted here

“No men can live without certain moral codes. There are some who in the egotism of their region declare that they have nothing to do with moral codes. But it is like a man saying that he breaths but that he has no nose whether by reason or by instinct or superstition, mere acknowledges some sort of relationship with the divine.” (Gandhi Mahatma, The Need for religion, 24)

Thus, Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with a universal problem of identity. This problem is so cancerous that if it is not treated timely, it will kill the healthy values of life, so long as, men and women do not feel that they are all the children of the supreme God and therefore there can't be any distinction between men and women, or one nation or another. There will be quest for identity to quote Radha Krishhan,

“There is no master race, there is no master nation, and there is no master class. We are all equally citizens of this world and the children of the supreme.”(Dr. Krishnan S. Radha – The Hindu View of Life, 27)



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