

Those Unheard Voices: A Study of Indian Feminism in Maitreyi Pushpa's *Muskurati Aurtein* ("Smiling Women")

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Abstract

Undeniably, humans are social beings as well as individuals. When an individual exists, s/he enjoys as well as suffers for time does not always remain the same. However, when it comes to the issue of the relationship between the individual and society, the question that perplexes one whether the society exist for individual or the individual for the society? After having deep insight into the experiences, ideologically the answer seems in agreement with the penultimate part of the question i.e. 'society exists for the individual'. Now when society takes responsibility for the fruition of an individual, it must provide freedom and opportunity to each and every of its individual for their comprehensive development. Unfortunately, the role of society here seems not to be as transparent as it should be for the simple reason of marginalization of the so-called second wheel of the humanity or 'The Second Sex' in the feminist term. It is from this stance, the second answer arises and finds suitability to the above-mentioned question. To put into other words, traditionally the answer reverses in favour of the second assumption that 'individual exists for society'. As individuals must obey the set societal norms for their better and peaceful survival, so now it becomes

the matter of adaptation where if one goes astray, s/he may be discarded at various levels be it economic, social, physical, mental, and material. Evidently, the case becomes more serious with women folk of the society. When all the ideals to keep the social order and virtues are applicable for women and not for men, the double standard of society gets unveiled. And here the pens of the authors bleed and the blank white pages assort various bitter realities of sufferings and pains of women. In the same light, the present paper is an attempt to bring forth the idea of 'Indian Feminism' with special reference to the short stories of Maitreyi Pushpa.

Key words: Indian feminism, Maitreyi Pushpa, Society, Women.

Though often termed as the western venture, 'feminism' needs to be understood through the lens of Indian socio-cultural patterns. A steep look beyond time unveils that 'feminism' has its indigenous roots too. A quintessential glimpse of the rich Indian culture and its bequest evinces the fact that women have always enjoyed a place of dignity and respect and have been privileged as *devis* and *shakti*. Evidences of the pre-Vedic and Vedic ages too remind us of the undisputable high status of women where they had enjoyed being on the zenith. As Kanwar Dinesh Singh rightly puts it in his *Feminism and Post Feminism*:

Women enjoyed considerably high status and freedom of thought and expression. Women were skilled in music and various other arts. They used to participate in the *yajnas*, the religious observances. Some women used to accompany their husbands to the battlefield, such as Kaikeyi and Vaishalya. Women were allowed to participate in intellectual pursuits. There is mention of some highly educated and learned women like Sulabha, Maitreyi and Gargi. (28)

A throwback to the ancient times witnesses ample examples that declare the position of women through the time and space. From 'Rajputs' to

the 'Buddhists' the grandeur of women remained of a certain importance. To say of a few Ambapali or Āmrāpālī of Vaishali, gifted courtesan of Buddhist age, who later becomes a Buddhist nun, left behind the marks of her sharp intelligence and expertise in all the spheres of the then civilization. On the other hand, we have examples like Kaushalya, Dropadi and Kunti who are better known for their ruling spirit over the rulers of the time.

Now the question arises what happened to such rich feminine legacy and ethnicity. Was it the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy that paved the emergence of 'Indian feminism'? Moreover, until the present, in some or the other way, it is still prevalent. Indian authors of women fiction have written down the pain and sufferings of the women from time to time and explored the rigid patriarchal system. Among those authors, the present paper seeks to analyze the selected short story of Maitreyi Pushpa in the light of 'Indian Feminism'.

Creating the space among the best Hindi writers, Maitreyi has ten novels and seven short story collections to her credit. Among her short story collection, published by various publishers, *Lalmaniya* (1996), *Chinhaar* (1998), *Goma Hansti Hai* (2008) *Piyari Ka Sapna* (2009) comprise stories from varied aspects of her experiences that she lived in her times in the village. Expressing deep sympathy for the feelings and agonies of the village women and the societal viewpoint towards them, Maitreyi is often entitled as the first author detailing the experiences about 'the women of the village '. Rajendra Yadav, whom she acknowledges as her mentor and inspiration in literature, writes in this regard:

Thrilling the readers with her works like a storm and unexpected revelations through her women characters, Maitreyi Pushpa unveils the confidant woman of her times with all her personal decisions to live and lead her life. Certainly, she provokes the thoughts of the readers with boldness and freedom. In her stories, she has tried to connect the stories of the middle-class with those of the hard-working village folk. These people have their own prevalent and preset social dogmas and the *khandan ki naak* ('decorum of the family') is above all the other . . . All women live and breathe under the mercy of their '*malik*' (husband or any male member of the family) and so all the complaints of Maitreyi's women characters are addressed to this '*malik*'. . .

These stories, comprising the theme of the rise and empowerment of women, are not merely a revolt against the present circumstances but also a flag-bearer of social change with futuristic perspective. Although Maitreyi has dealt with the life of urban women too, but the intensity and emotions with which she dealt with the rural women folk seem beyond the literary ambit of the common literary figures . . . These stories are the document of silent woman sufferers, their struggles and silent mutiny of their unrecognized dreams (cited in *Samagr Kahaniyan: Ab Tak* 7, Trans.)

Maitreyi Pushpa in the story *Muskurati Aurtein* ("Smiling Women") portrays the innocuous women characters being victims of the prevalent patriarchal mindset yet they veil their unheard panic cry behind their plaintive smiles, the story exposes multiple dimensions of women's condition in the various facets of society. The story opens when Renu, the protagonist of the story compiles her memories in an album and in the flashback, the morning gossips among the villagers on a rain-drenched

photograph of two village girls, published in the newspaper set the theme. Renu and her friend Murli were captured by a camera man while enjoying the rains in all their playful mood. Under the effect of patriarchal suppression, Murli's mother calls her as *aawara* 'wanton' that annoys Murli to revolt against the mother's connotation and she retorts: "How come we are wantons"? But pulling her braid and slapping Murli, the wordless reply of the mother assails- "drenched in the rain if your picture is clicked out; will you be named as '*Sati Savitri*' (pure woman) if not a 'wanton'?" (390 Trans.).

As the story moves, we witness the so-called importance of a male child, or a boy to be precise, in the typical Indian social perspective. Murli's brother is given due care and attention and that is revealed through the mother that a boy cannot be called as *aawara* ('wanton') in the same situation. Murli's brother feels offended and insulted as the rain-drenched photograph of her sister publishes in the newspaper and the villagers' gossip about it. For him, it was a matter of their social dignity as he overtly dominates, "I'm a boy and hence a man! Who would dare to click me? And what if one had it? Who would yearn to gaze a boy's photograph?" (391 Trans.).

The truth behind the agonized smile and suffering of working woman has been portrayed at its best through the character of Madam Phoolkali in the story. Taking away the breath of the readers for a while, Maitreyi Pushpa transmogrifies the readers through the portrayal of Phoolkali, the Assistant Development Officer, and the subsequent revelations about Manisha Madam, the Regional Director of Women's Welfare Association in the story. The submissiveness and dutifulness of Indian wives under the spell of patriarchy reveal that despite living like hell and being

assaulted, how Phoolkali decides to remain silent. Murli's mother considers Phoolkali as an ideal woman and exemplifies her because she is established and economically independent. Renu, the narrator, reveals in the story thus:

My mother sees Madam Phoolkali as an ideal woman of free India. Ideally, it's not that she stepped out of home due to any compulsion; nor she expectedly tied the knot at the earliest being a girl's race, but she spotlighted the career first. She holds on the economic independence as a birthright. Now what remained was just to marry! Seeing her convenience, she too married with a **Gramsewak** (VLW) as per her own accord. My mother applauded her decision for its worth. Now women will no more be abolished by men in the name of a naturally weaker one. If not that much high, he will respect her likewise. When such set examples are being eyed, my mother gets more ireful at me as I often brushed aside her choices of a suitable boy for me because I find them unworthy (394 Trans.).

The sweet convictions of Renu's mother, Kusum about 'economically independent' woman shatter when Phoolkali unfolds the reality:

I had no idea, Kusum *Bahin* (sister) that the promises of marriage are like the indelible marks on a stone. Who else can rub them out when one's future itself is turned into a stone? Hoping the spouse a lifelong companion is a biggest lie that one comes to know only in the aftermath of marriage. Marriage is a rebirth for any girl where she has to mould herself as per the other's wishes leaving her own likings or disliking (397 Trans.).

Men's censorship on women may be the outcome of their fear. Avadhesh K. Singh opines, "Fear leads to torture and suppression. Man

begins to torture what scares them" (121). A never to be helped out doubtful mind and voraciousness of man to dominate his wife disentangles when Phoolkali continues:

Kusum *Bahin*, it doesn't mean for the husbands if you're settled in job and earning; and so he will allow you to meet any other guy or colleague, that he'll agree for your meetings with them or that he won't create turbulence when you're going on the professional rural tours with them. A vigilant eye keeps fencing me around. Even if in a dead tired condition when I return home, the abusive and sarcastic language and scathing taunts follow as- "whom did you spend the last night with?" (397 Trans.).

The savagery and cruelty of man unlock its shades when he forgets to treat a woman or a wife as a 'human being' at least and brutally assaults to show-off his false manliness before the public. Maitreyi, here, moves the story at her best that leaves us cold and frightened while reading.

You, the sluttish! How dare you argue with me? So what, if you are earning? Did you forget manners? While saying he put off the waist belt and scuffled on me. How could I go to the office next day with the brazen scuffle marks on the face; . . . all these punishments follow me whenever I went to the rural tours, Kusum *Bahin*. Whom would I share my agony with and what should I share? (397 Trans.).

The story imbibes another theme within the themes. The story evidences man's heinous mentality and degraded frame of mind when Kusum urges Phoolkali to meet Manisha Madam, to ask for help. The revelations Phoolkali make about Manisha expose another brutal face of patriarchy. She reveals:

...Our Regional Director is well qualified, potential and impactful woman but when she steps out of the home, she wears 'the chastity belt' . . . Perhaps, we all are forced to wear the 'chastity belts' indeed. Yes! We are fastened around by someone's invincible vigilant eyes much stronger than the iron belt- be it Renu, you or me... no boon for anyone! There is no cession for the virgins, married ones or to the widows; all women are vigilant under the same precept (401 Trans.).

Can we imagine the agonized condition of a woman in a steel 'chastity belt' around her waist? Whatever may be the answer to the interrogative but Maitreyi Pushpa certainly aroused the discussion in everyone's mind through her powerful narrative. To analyze the story further, in the hope of a good future with husband Phoolkali fears to separate to and refuses to file 'divorce'. Again, the typical Indian feminism felt where marriage is considered a holy institution and 'divorce' a sin. Under the preset social dogma, Phoolkali answers to Kusum thus:

Do you think that the knot will be resolved by divorce? *Arre*, Kusum Bahin 'divorce' is another sinful serpent that doesn't sting itself but spread out its venom with each distinct glance of the people around until a woman's blood turns blue. Bringing along the pangs of restlessness, 'divorce' is that abuse which frightens a woman to pine for another shell in the name of marriage. Hadn't you seen Vidyavati Shukla's miserable plight? She's labelled as a 'criminal'... (402 trans.).

Maitreyi Pushpa's fearless diction and scathing dialogues presented in the story are heart-rending and departs the reader with incessant questions about patriarchal norms and coercions. Let us come to the question posed in

the introductory part about the rich feminine legacy. To answer in an indirect way, the critical survey of the story submits the solution in terms of 'the subject and the object' i.e. the cause of oppression and the oppressed respectively. Though not exhaustive, dismantling is caused by the louder speaker or 'the first sex' in the feminist terms and the voice of the 'subaltern' is subdued in the Spivak (ian) terms. Revitalizing the feminist discourse Gayatri Spivak has rightly pointed out the regional differences between the European women and those of Asian and so the difference in the presentation of women characters overtly take place. To paraphrase her views on the third world women, it can be drawn that feminism as a theory could not take into consideration the visions and re (visions) of all the women in the world. The analysis of the differences reveals through the writings of the authors like Maitreyi Pushpa, who depicts the entire 'women's village' and their bizarre world of endurance in her stories and that is an open question calling continual submissions and revisions to provide women their salubrious right instead of throbbing deliberate decisions up on them.

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