Male Chauvinism as a Social Evil in Indian English Fiction

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Male Chauvinism, a concrete manifestation of psychic disorders, is the most blatant violation of human dignity and the principle of equality amongst all human beings. This is universal phenomenon which has engulfed almost all societies and cultures and has been prevalent in all periods of history. Being physically strong, man has created a false notion of masculinity which he has used for his ulterior motives. Many moral, social and economic rules have been in existence in all cultures of the world, particularly in Indian and Islamic worlds, which permit continuance of male chauvinism. Resultantly, because of such practices, woman has been at the receiving ends in the family whether she is at father’s house or at her in- laws and society. Before 19th century, woman was treated as slave and second rate citizen. In spite of the introduction of democratic practices in all walks of life in modern society in the 20th century, she remained the target of variety of discriminations and oppressions. Gender based discrimination has always been prevalent as it is difficult to locate any period in the history which has been free from no victor- victim, oppressor-oppressed, exploiter- exploited; powerful-powerless, ruler-ruled phenomenon. Perhaps, this human society will never reach a stage where one can say that all human beings are equal, selfless, prosperous, peaceful, civilized and humane. A pessimistic picture seems to continue in future too as the efforts of social reformers, scholars, human right activists, philosophers and political leaders do not seem proportionately fruitful in making the picture rosy as gang rapes, physical and psychological torturous attitude of men still continue vitiate the humanistic perspectives.

Indian social philosophy and practices have been point of criticism for its gender based discrimination and exploitation of the weaker sections of the society, women in particular. Woman has continued to strive for her proper place in spite of her limitations to break the male
domination and old shackles of tradition. It was Guru Nanak Dev who voiced his concern for woman as he said, *SO KYON MANDA AKHIYE JO NIT JAMEI RAJAAN* (How can we blame a woman with biased wrong reasons as she is the one who gives birth to Kings). Then came Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who prevailed upon the traditionalists to eliminate the long standing ‘*Sati Pratha*’ (burning of widow to death at the demise of her husband). English rulers too play a very significant role in ameliorating the anti-women.

In support of the struggle of liberation and getting her deserving place as well as breathing space in social, moral and economic arena of discriminatory and unjustified male dominated system, many novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Shoba Dey, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya, Ramesh K. Srivastava, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy and many more Indian novelists have voiced their concerns on these serious issues. In poetry Kamala Das and Toru Dutt presented the physical, psychological and spiritual upheavals of women. They try to lead their struggle for wriggling out of the old shackles of tradition. Kamala Das’s confessional and candid attitude substantiated her virulent sense of feminism. In spite of the criticism from traditionalists, she boldly voices her views on the mental and psychological liberation of women even in the modern and so called civilized society.

Indian fiction in English is replete with short stories and novels which deal quite extensively all kinds of injustices perpetrated on Indian women. Mulk Raj Anand, Ramesh K. Srivastava and Arundhati Roy excel in their humanistic perspectives of life that cover various phases of Indian fiction and regions of Indian cultural panorama. They touch the issues of perpetual social injustice against the marginalized section of Indian social system. They conscientiously aim at liberating the deprived and helpless women who have been suffering not because of any of their wrong doings but because of the system in which they are born and compelled to limit themselves to the established norms. Women of all castes, regions and economic backgrounds have been at the receiving ends. Their efforts to get justice and be heard are taken as a rebellion by the society and severe reprimand is slapped over them as an example for others. Anand’s *Old Woman and the Cow*, Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock*, Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ramesh K. Srivastava’s *Neema* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* are very sincere efforts to raise the issues of suffering of women of twentieth century. Gauri of *Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), Neema of *Neema*(1984), Ammu of *The God of Small Things*(1997), may come from different regions, cultures, decades, economic backgrounds but their sufferings are similar
in form which face the male attitude towards them. Having feminist perspectives they all ask the answers to the questions –who is responsible for curtailing the freedom of women and when and how will they get their rightful in the tradition ridden society?

Mulk Raj Anand, in his fiction, has quite extensively picked the issues of exploitation and discrimination of the poor and the under privileged. Conscientiously, he castigates the unending oppressive and unethical practices. *The Untouchable, Two Leaves and a Bud, Coolie and Old Woman and the Cow,* are Anand’s fictional creations which have brought forward the long standing issues of social and moral injustice which curtail the freedom of the women in male dominated society. Women too occupy a major portion of his imagination. He poses some pertinent questions to the social thinkers and human right activists- what is the proper and rightful position of women in her house and society?, what role parents and family members should play in ameliorating their sufferings?, what changes in laws are to be brought keeping in mind the changes at national and international levels? And how much boldness and agility are to be shown by the women themselves be displayed?

In many of his novels, Anand follows a particular philosophy – a struggle between haves and have- not. In *The Old Woman and the Cow,* Gauri is the female protagonist who starts her life as a meek and docile girl. She behaves as a submissive daughter- in- law and faithful wife in spite of her ‘good for nothing husband. Situated in a precarious fix of life and getting no support from any side, she ends up as a rebel. Gauri, like Henrik Ibsen’s Nora of *The Doll’s House,* does her best to cope with the unbearable circumstances. Finding her sincerity going wayward and bringing no proper response from her benefactors, she retaliates by refusing to succumb to relentless injustice. She is forced to take a very bold decision by separating from the traditional ways of life and entering a new and unchartered world which had never attempted by any of her ancestors , “I am not Sita that the earth will open and swallow Me” and “takes the road back to Hoshiarpur to begin her life anew”¹. In *The Old Woman and the Cow* Anand brings up his strong faith in passive resistance to get the due which “is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature.”²: Anand dislikes the subjugation of women under the guise of tradition. He criticizes the undue respect given by wife to her who is symbolized as ‘god’ and image of Lord Rama. For Anand ‘patriarchy’ smells of thousand evils as Raman
Seldon views it “subordinates the female as inferior. Male power is exerted directly or indirectly in civil and domestic life to constrain women.”

_The Old Woman and the Cow_ is a pathetic travail of sufferings of Gauri which engulf her life after her marriage with Panchi. In spite of her adherence to the set customs of as a typical Indian wife she faces a lot of hardships in a house of Punjabi village. The position of newly wed woman in Indian houses is very vulnerable as the reign of mother-in-law leaves no space for the daughter-in-law. Gauri too is more ruled by her mother-in-law (Chachi) Kesaro rather than by her “poor and violent villager (less a weak and ignorant character than real badmash)”.

She is blamed and held responsible for all bad occurrences in the house and even changes in the natural phenomena are attached to her presence. Ironically, the delay in her conception is considered her fault being fully aware of the fact that it is her husband Panchi who is impotent. She is targeted and doubted for having illicit relations with many young men of the village.

In this novel, Anand reveals the plight of women in Indian social set up. The husband acts as a dictator whose orders remain unchallenged by wife as long as her mother-in-law is alive. Male chauvinism is a distinguished hallmark of Indian society. Married in a traditionally set ritual to a husband she had not come across before, Gauri finds herself condemned to a conventional arranged marriage. She is made to behave like a slave to Panchi’s impulses and oblige him by submitting to his impatience and narrow-mindedness. Her duties are confined only to cook, to clean the house and satisfy her husband sexually to his whims and fancies. Niven is right when he sums up, “The irony of the situation is that Panchi himself does not greatly venerate tradition, nor do many of his fellow villagers. They are motivated more by a fear of what other people will think, then of how they will appear in the eyes of God.”

In Indian society stories and characters from the epics and religious narratives act as important guidelines to the youngsters important while leading their private and public lives. Mythical characters and their impressions are taken as models. This is comprehensively reflected in Anand’s novels too. The names of many of his characters are extracted from the Holy Scriptures. On several occasions, Gauri is reminded of her role to follow life in principle “be like Sita.” (Old Woman...p.30) But Kesaro and Panchi ill-treat her and regard her as the incarnation of the Goddess kali. Panchi truly believes, “my aunt Kesari is right when she says this bride is the incarnation of Kali, the black Goddess who destroys all before her, who brings famine in her
beauty and lays bare whole villages.” (Old Woman… p, 33) Kesaro, taking the role of a ruthless mother-in-law continues her incessant venomous campaign against Gauri. She abuses Gauri calling her “a whore from Piplan,” “filthy woman,” “sweeper woman,” “shameless” etc. She accuses her for going out without covering her head which is taken as open rebellion against social norms by a daughter-in-law. Kesaro wanted ‘duppatta’ on Gauri’s head; she maliciously accuses her of being free with the young men like subedar’s son Rajguru in the absence of her husband Panchi. This provokes Panchi to beats Gauri. He justifies his beating thus: “…the husband has to chastise his wife if she goes wrong.” (Old Woman… p. 51)

Similar to Anand, Ramesh K. Srivastava and Arundhati Roy seem deliberating on the plight of women- young girls in particular- who are socially oppressed. They become miserable victims of deep rooted taboos and social customs. They feel trapped to the extent that it is an uphill task for them to extricate from the prevalent vicious circles. From birth a female in Indian society is a suffering creature. Even in her parents’ house she is taken as a burden till marriage and an image of honour to be protected from of neighborhood eyeing her beauty and body. Through his novel Neema, Srivastava raises the issues of women who continue to suffer incessantly from the day of their marriage because parents feel liberated after sending them to the in-laws. The husband is too constrained to raise his voice against the parents and in favour of life partner. Neeta Maini finds in Neema “a strong rural woman caught in the tentacles of familiar traditions, caste restrictions, social customs and deceptive assurances but who feeds herself from them and moves steadily forward with her sheer will power and irrepressible zest for life.”

Ramesh K. Srivastava’s novel, Neema, in brief is a realistic portrayal of a village girl of the same name who, after her painful childhood, gets married to an impotent husband and unfortunately becomes a widow. She undergoes so many sufferings in her struggle for survival. She is sexually exploited her hypocritical devar (brother in law) and is finally married to a physically-deformed and poor boy named Sunnoo. Her life is long chronicle of struggle in futility for legitimate rights and justice at every step of life. For Ramandeep Singh, "Neema's life represents the fate of a feminine consciousness in a repressive milieu by patriarchal values". The focus moves around certain fundamental problems relating to women’s suffering in an arranged marriage, her status in Indian society and the role of karma in life. Though the novel has twenty-six chapters it can broadly be divided into three parts; the first dealing with the period from
Neema’s childhood to her marriage with Jeewan Jyoti, a poet, the second, with the painful days of her unconsummated marriage, the third with her extra marital relationship with her devar, her illegal pregnancy and her desperate search for a husband to give legitimacy to the child. Neema’s sufferings which go unabated in all the parts provide a unifying thread to the story.

Pathetic travails of women are common in all literatures of the world. The suffering of the wife at the hands of her husband dominate the themes of enumerable novels in all literatures whether it is Thomas Hardy’s Tess, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Pryne or Anita Desai’s Maya. But Srivastava has given a peculiar turn to a typical Indian situation which makes the problem all the more complicated. An arrange marriage is typical Indian system and Neema is made to marry not only to widower but a sexually impotent man and worse still, the husband knows his deficiency before his second marriage. Interestingly and ironically he is poet who considers himself a champion of human rights. Why did Jeewan Jyoti marry? is a very pertinent question which needs to be discussed. The answer lies in the fact that Jyoti simply did not want to disappoint his mother may not appear proper for a poet but is true of numerous husbands in Indian society. If he could be so considerate to the mother’s happiness, then why not to his wife? But far from being considerate he beats his wife ruthlessly on mere suspicion that too to satisfy his male ego. Actually it is false notion of masculinity. Neema on the other hand, has to swallow false accusation of being “barren” and “harlot” by her mother- in- law. A woman in Indian society cannot take an independent decision and raise a voice against the injustice perpetrated on her by others. In order to maintain the family honour in the social circle, she has to gulp a cup of poison without being recognized her sacrifice by anybody. After hearing from the doctor that Jeewan Jyoti had married her while he was impotent, Neema realizes that he was not a great poet but a person as low as a worm: " to me, there appeared something slimy about the poet, something base and detestable like a worm wobbling in the mud I had seen in and around the water-room at Jilla. I tried to remove the image, and thought of something dignified, but obstinately it stayed there." Similar situation is described by Kamala Das in “The Freaks” in which the female persona expresses her mental and psychological upheavals in the company of her husband who is quite disinterested to give her real love rather than physical satisfaction. In spite of her inner unhappiness, she doesn’t speak openly of her domestic disharmony. She confesses that she has to give, “…flamboyant show…”
How long the continuance of injustice and repression is to be tolerated by women is a vital question which in Indian culture is viewed in multiple of explanations. The traditionalists opinionate emphasize that a woman’s existence after marriage lies in complete submission and sacrifice towards her husband whereas modernists term such ideas as outdated ones. Therefore, Feminism emerged as a very strong voice for the liberation of women. Neema’s sense of commitment and fidelity to the institution of marriage is to be appreciated by the fact that she is willing to live with her impotent husband but is forced to revolt because of her mother-in-law’s false accusations and Jeewan Jyoti’s ruthless beatings. Neema’s heroic struggle, thus, has to be evaluated in the light of the monumental problems that confront her. Her desire to seek support for her sinful activity is a cry of a helpless woman in wilderness seeking vicarious sustenance from them.

The Old Woman and the Cow and Neema are attempts of two wedded women in raising resistance against the onslaught of unjustified patriarchal system. Gauri’s decision of abandoning her husband is a symbol of the emergence of new form of women and their quality of searching firm solutions. Similarly, Neema mitigates the injustice done on her by husband and mother in law by sleeping with her devar Rasik Lal. Neema is a novel which is full of symbols of various types. Barinder K. Sharma rightly avers, “When Neema shares the bed with Rasik Lal, it turns to a symbol of revolt against social norms as also against the entire patriarchal system represented by her husband.” So both the novelists try to raise the submerged voice of suppressed consciousness of women by challenging the male chauvinism.

In the last decade of 20th century, Arundhati Roy gifted a fictional creation to the world of literature which made her famous overnight. Her debut novel, The God of Small Things (1997) which won Bookers Prize, like Anand, Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Ramesh K. Srivastava, too brought up the problems of women of upper caste of Syrian Christian family of south India. Based on her autobiographical elements and personal observations, Roy reveals the weaknesses of Indian social system, in which women of upper castes and well to do families as well as untouchables and underprivileged are treated on equal footing. They are suppressed and exploited at every step of day to day working. Male chauvinism and caste based exploitation seem to be merged in one another as the treatment of women at the hands of male family members and the lower caste people at the hands of socially and economically powerful people appears quite
similar. Arundhati Roy is of firm opinion that social evils such as the exploitations of the poor by the rich and mal-treatment of women in the patriarchal society are curse and a big blot on the face of modern India. The central theme of this novel is to raise the voice of suppressed women who feel too helpless to break the age old bondage.

*The God of Small Things* is a beautiful narrative of two lovers who belong to two different communities based on caste and economic classifications. Most of the female characters of the novel suffer from the evil of male chauvinism and patriarchal system of conservative India. Ammu in the novel is really a tragic and unfortunate person who suffers even at every step of her life. To resist to the discriminatory ideas of her father, she plunges into an intercommunity matrimony which turns out to be a catastrophic decision and ends in divorce. With Estha and Rahel- a son and a daughter she returns to her parental house as a dependent. The treatment extended to her by her blood relatives, in her parental house, is very startling nightmare. Ironically, her own aunt; Baby Kochamma- an unmarried female-proves to her biggest enemy at every step. She extends a very bitter treatment not only against Ammu but to her children Estha and Rahel also. For her, Ammu is an outsider, as she very bluntly says that women have no right in her parents’ house and married and divorce have not right at all. In Baby Kochamma’s words, “a married woman (Ammu) had no position in her parents’s home. As for a divorced daughter, she had no position anywhere at all.”

Even the children become the victim of such a crude treatment. Estha and Rahel have to bear very harsh word, even from the house servant. Kochu Maria, Baby Kochamma’s maid servant asks them, “What are your plans? How long will you be staying? Have you decided?”( GOST.p.29). Children too feel tense in Baby Kochamma’s curt and sharp remarks as Roy writes she always “disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She was keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother’s house, where they really had no right to be” ( GOST p.45).

Written by a female, the novel focuses upon pertinent social, moral, political and feminist issues which attract opinions from the legal and human right experts and activists. In spite of the existence of laws and constitutional provisions such as the implementation of rights of property inheritance and social equality, women are still subjected to violence; psychological tortures and
moral taboos. There seem no proper allowances toward the suffering lot. The questions taunt the implementation at many levels. It is quite heartening to see that in the last two centuries, many sincere and consistent efforts are being made by social thinkers and political and human rights activists. The contribution of the novelists is credible and of paramount importance. Anand, Markandaya, Desai, Srivastava, Shoba De, Kamala Das and Arundhati Roy etc. have tickled the dormant human conscience and have significantly paved the way for the elimination of prevalent mal practices. But still a lot is needed to be done to pin point the causes; persons and institutions existing in the social system which are responsible for their continuance even in the modern and civilized era.
Notes and References

1. Mulk Raj Anand, *The Old Woman and The Cow* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinneman, 1981), p.30. All textual references have been cited from this edition of the book and have been given in parenthesis.


8. Ramesh K Srivastava, *Neema* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1984), p.87. All textual references to the novel are from this edition and page numbers are given within the text in parentheses.
