

## Impressions of The Agonised Women in Padma Sachdev's “Caretaker”

Deepali Kapur

Research Scholar

University of Jammu

Jammu and Kashmir, India

[deepali.kapoor2013@gmail.com](mailto:deepali.kapoor2013@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Regional short stories in translation have always been a pasture of research in the field of English literature. It opens a vista of information, debate and discussion on the cultural and social crisis faced by the people lying hidden in the smaller pockets of our country. Jammu region is embedded with a rich heritage of Dogri language with an idiosyncratic regional flavour of its folk-tales and short-stories. Translation of Dogri works into other languages has helped the readers in the country and across borders, to peruse the social and cultural milieu of Jammu region. This paper critically examines the Dogri short story “Caretaker” by Padma Sachdev which reveals the agony, insecurities and position of Dogra women in the male-dominated society.

In the earlier Dogra society, women suffered at the hands of complex social-cultural norms, rituals and patriarchal models of suppression. They were often forced into ill-matched marriages and *dohri* (reciprocal marriages). Further, they were expected to become obedient wives to their husbands while their own identity got submerged under the burden of family responsibilities, catering to husband needs and rearing children. They often longed for a “home” of their own blessed with love and respect. However, the marital home failed to

provide them this blessed home and the parental home became alien to them after marriage. The relationship between husband and wife seems like that of an orient and the occident as man becomes the agent of power, domination and male-centric prejudices against woman. On the other hand, woman acts as an orient who suffers from the societal prejudices for misinterpreted identity and enslavement for her social-cultural representation. As Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* analyzes that man fundamentally tries to oppress women by characterizing them as the 'Other'. Men impose his will on the other and women are cursed with the feelings of inwardness and suppressed voices. "[Man] attaches himself to woman –not to enjoy her, but to enjoy himself." Hence, Padma Sachdev tries to echo a critical view of the patriarchal social institutions, which subjugate women's identity for the gains of male supremacy. She also focuses on an unsaid bonding between women as they can sense the misery of each other. They may get corrupted by the feeling of insecurity at some point of time but soon they reconcile as they realise the pain of the other.

Keywords: Agony, *Dohri*, Home, Reconciliation.

The famous British Indian novelist, Salman Rushdie states that, "Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart" (Goodreads). Literature is believed to be the mirror of the society. It holds the delicate frame of human emotions, imagination and desires. It takes a conscious step in representing society with inseparable traditional roots and to spread its socio-political realities. Among many branches of literature, regional literature deals with the depiction of local hues, language and atmosphere that holds a true regional spirit of a particular place or society. Its characteristic features are chiefly based on the historical setting, cultures that take out the deep rooted local kathas, myths, fables, oral stories to the forefront. The regional literature is thus translated

into other languages particularly English, in order to present a global platform to such writings. It opens vistas for the exchange of cultural values, art and discussions over the socio-political problems faced by the people of particular region.

The structure of Dogra culture draws socially and politically feudalistic society, which was quite similar to the other parts of India. The natives of the state were caught in the vicious circle of religious superstitions, ill marriages and social obscurantism. There were many blind beliefs and practices followed in the society which were considered to be religiously sound. Among these social evils like Sati, Female infanticide, burning of widows, ill marriages, forced celibacy of women and homelessness; women were the victimised class who had been inflicted with utter injustice and unlawful atrocities. These social evils were deep rooted in the culture and traditions which hampered the position of women in the Dogra society. The patriarchal models of suppression acted on the social public sphere and it was equally venomous on the private sphere of the women which was not only controlled by power politics but also religion. Earlier, the birth of a girl child was considered to be a burden on the parents and believed to be inauspicious as it brings a life-time liability to cater the demands of the in-laws family and dowry. The girls were often married earlier and out of their innocence they often became a victim of ill marriages or reciprocal marriages. These regional issues came into much limelight when writers like Padma Sachdev, Chhatrapal, Madan Mohan Sharma shaped their characters in such a way that they evoke the suppressed voices of women in Dogra culture.

Padma Sachdev is the first modern female Dogri poet and novelist. She was born in Jammu region in 1940. She is the daughter of eminent Sanskrit scholar, Prof. Jai Dev who got killed during the turbulent era of India's partition in 1947. She got married to famous Dogri poet Vedpal Deep and later in 1966 she married Surinder Singh, the Hindustani vocalist of the musical duo 'Singh Bandhu'. She wrote many Dogri books like Tavi Te Chanhhan (Rivers

Tawi and Chenab, 1976), Nheriyan Galiyan (Dark Lanes, 1982), Pota Pota Nimbal (Fingertipful Cloudless Sky, 1987), Uttar Vahini (1992), Tainthian (1992) and also wrote song lyrics for Hindi films. She has been bestowed with much fame and literary awards. At the young age to thirty, she was awarded with Sahitya Akademi Award 1971 and later got the Padma Shri 2001, Kabir Samman by Government of Madhya Pradesh, Saraswati Samman, 2015 for her autobiography “Chitt-Chete” in Dogri Language, Krutitava Smagra Samman, 2015 by Bhartiya Bhasha Parishad, West Bengal, Hindi Academy Puraskar, U.P Hindi Academy Puraskar, Joshua Poetry Award, Hindi Ratna Award and the Jammu & Kashmir Government’s Robe of Honour. She has not got any individual collection of Dogri short stories but most of her short stories have got published in journals.

Padma Sachdev has pioneered the art of portraying the social evils as the backdrop of her short stories to focus on the problems of poverty, roles of women, reciprocal and ill marriages, victimisation of women and the burden of domestic tensions. In her short story, “Caretaker”, the conservative society totally negates the importance of women decision-making and even to have a control over her own life. They are expected to be passive, resistant and given the status of the other. As Simone de Beauvoir states in her book *The Second Sex*,

‘There is a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman,’ says Pythagoras. The Laws of Manu define her as a vile being to be held in slavery. Leviticus assimilates her to beasts of burden, owned by the patriarch. The Laws of Solon confer no rights on her. The Roman Code puts her in guardship and proclaims her ‘imbecility’. Canon law considers her ‘the devil’s gateway’. The Koran treats her with the most absolute contempt (91).

She has been specified the role of mere a caretaker to man and it is her sanctified duty to cater the needs of her husband and his family. Manu, the great lawgiver of Hinduism states in *Manusmriti*,” Like a Shudra, a woman is entitled to only one sacrament and that is marriage”. (Massey 61). The female characters in the short story “Caretaker” have been subjected to rigid social beliefs and norms which changed their life completely. Nuri is the epitome of women suffering and sacrifice. She becomes victim of ill-matched marriage and its consequences. The word ‘Sacrifice’ is always seen in relation to women because she is subjected to the burden of selfless duty and becomes string-puppet of the society. She always tries to demonstrate devotion towards husband and family. In the Dogra culture, women were often expected to cross the threshold of their parental home and forget the earlier upbringing to enter into the martial home with strength of endurance and composure. In this view, Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* emphasizes that women consider their sanctified duty to maintain the marital home and society keeps an eye on the amount of devotion showered by her upon the family. “By administering her home, she achieves her social justification; her job is also to oversee the food, clothing and care of the familial society in general” (484). The patriarchal beliefs of the society changes this thought further by taking humble caretaker to as a servant. This idea is prevalent in the character of Nuri. She fell in the trap of ill-matched marriage and *dohri* (reciprocal marriages). She got married to a boy who was ten years younger to her and merely five years of age when they got married. Nuri tried to cater the needs of Sher Khan by attending to his demands and requirements. She handled the household chores and even took in the rash behaviour of Sher Khan. He would often misbehave with Nuri by throwing away the *katora* (bowl) of milk given to him. With the reverberating sounds of the *Katora* falling on the ground, Nuri’s heart would also vibrate with emotions of self pity and disappointment. Nuri continued to drag the baggage of her marriage and never tried to out step her chastity. She was a well mannered blooming bride

who had no secrets to share or to giggle around with other women because her personal life was extremely troubled. “She would keep standing alone, on one side silent, like one guilty” (Shivnath, 166). Sher Khan often argued with his mother over the issue of marriage decision with Nuri. The matter of age difference between the two became a barrier for satisfactory consummation of their marriage. Sher Khan seems to go through the dilemma of accepting Nuri as her wife or caretaker because he always wishes to get the care and affection from Nuri but on the other hand, he was often bullied by his schoolmates for having an elderly wife. “But in school, every one teases me. Yesterday even the teacher was saying” (163). Sher Khan does not even remember the day of marriage as he was sleeping in the lap of his mother but Nuri’s life got ruined with every sacred vow she swore. It only moved her closer to be doomed. As Sher Khan was growing up, the disgust for his marriage increased more. Amman (mother of Sher Khan) used to recite some lines which depicted her hidden fears for Nuri and Sher Khan’s marriage.

Darasi de banan vich binaniyaan Loyiyan

Jinahn gallan dardi si ooai gallan hoyiyan

Laggi kainchi dil noon.

(I’m wearing woollen blankets in the forest of Darasi. What I was afraid of, has come to happen. It’s like a scissor stab on the heart) (163).

She used to feel insecure with Sher Khan’s changing behaviour and uneasiness in his relation with Nuri. She would sigh and speak to herself, “The childhood of my son has been smothered. How will it be with his youth? Ya Allah, have mercy! So many ill matched marriages take place in our community. Then why is it that my son alone feels so sensitive? (166). Amman was concerned only with the despair of his son but the impact on Nuri’s psyche was a concern to none. Nuri on the other hand believed that it is the duty of a woman to remain devoted to his husband because the socially constructed norms shackled woman

thoughts, mind and actions. “To love her husband and to be happy is a duty to herself and society...” (Beauvoir 507).

The story highlights the problems faced by Nuri within the marital home and longing for home. Nuri depicts the actual confinement in the marital home where the patriarchal setup of the society subjects her to total isolation. Her desires from marital life and husband turn to ruins as she did not get the required status of wife. In order to pacify herself she would sing her desires for Sher Khan.

Ajj chhota, kal badda

Ma-ya dinon din jot soayi

(What if he is small today, he'll grown big tomorrow; as the day pass, the flame grows fuller) (Shivnath, 164)

All her youthful days got consumed in the four walls of the house with no physical and emotional love from the husband side. Still she never builds any hatred towards Sher Khan rather facilitated him throughout life. “No, no Sher Khan, you should not weep. I am used to weeping and I like it. I would not allow you to spend your nights weeping the way I passed the nights of my blighted hopes weeping” (169). Soon, Sher Khan was taken away by his maternal uncle in order to provide him with better education, business and second wife of his age. Amman called his brother and says, “Shera is too small and Nuri is too grown up. You take him away, Vir” (167). The ill-matched was criticised by maternal uncle of Sher Khan but Amman narrates him the incident when her suggestions were not heard by Khan's father and that time they needed a person to attend to the household chores. On which she gets a sharp reply from Uncle, “You needed a maid servant not a daughter-in-law. Don't call Sher Khan back until I send him. You can meet him there at my place. But Khatiji, take pity on that helpless creature. Free her” (167). The role of Nuri was changed from a wife to mere a servant in the house. It was easily decided by Amman to get a second wife for Sher Khan

and Nuri would continue to serve the family as a servant. “I’ll get him a second wife. But Nuri wil continue to be the mistress of the house” (167).

In the Dogra Society, the concept of *dohri* marriage led to many selfish offences against women as in the story Amman reveals Nuri’s past and explains,

Chacha had raised her only to sacrifice her for getting a wife for himself in exchange. It is well nigh four years now. He has never asked her over. Her mother’s jewellery now bedecked Sher’s *phuphi*. By the grace of God, she is expectant now. Even when we send her, he does not allow her to come. Nuri has got a home for the first time, Vir. She will not leave it (Shivnath, 167).

The social norms and beliefs are such that it expects the women to adjust in the environment of marital home whereas the paternal home turns a stern back towards her. It raises the question of homelessness and points onto the rigid society as to ‘Where is the home for women?’ On the one hand, women are expected to give affectionate services to family and take on domestic and reproductive duties but on the other hand the same home becomes so unfamiliar to her that she has no right on it. As Devika Chawla in her book *Home, Uprooted: Oral Histories of India’s Partition* says:

From a feminist stand point, home has often been conceptualized as both a haven and as a site of oppression, because on the one hand women are socialised to take on a nurturing role in the home –in fact, to create a home and on the other hand they are consigned to a life of reproductive and domestic labor (26).

Nuri continued to live in the house where she entered after marriage with many beautiful dreams in her eyes. When Sher Khan turned twenty, he realized the agonized life of Nuri and unwillingly married Sarwar Jan. Nuri made up his mind to let Sher Khan marry Sarwar Jan because her own dreams for happy marital life had been shattered badly. She says

to Sher Khan “It is true that I have seen a husband behind your name but he is not you. You gave me a home, my own home and I am happy with this much. I will not allow your dreams to be shattered” (Shivnath, 169). But Nuri had to leave Sher Khan’s home in order to free him from the shackles of their marriage. She then marries a local Maulvi Saheb because his wife had died one month ago. She left a small infant and four daughters to his care. Maulvi Saheb also needed a woman, not a wife. ” But I’m not destined to be a wife” (170). Nuri feels a sense of responsibility to save the infant .She was still too attached with home where she spent fifteen years of her life being as Sher Khan’s wife. “This house is my home. Call me here sometimes. The walls of this house are inscribed with story of my fifteen years’ life. There is not a single wall of this house which I have not embraced to weave the dreams of my past” (170). It was a world for her but she took harsh step for living her loved home and sacrificed her little happiness just for the sake of Sher Khan’s bright future. This is a manipulative act of patriarchy that is embedded in our culture; it even misinterprets religious teachings and demarcates the gender identities in the larger society as well as in the personal arena. As Helen Hardacare explains that,

Religion as a cultural force in human history has been remarkably powerful in establishing long, influential motifs of gender...Religions invest the family with sacred significance, and this extends to gender and interpersonal relation. The family is the primary unit for ritual observance as well as influential site of religious education and the transmission of religious knowledge from one generation to the next. (118)

The culture and religious teachings portrays women with concept of motherhood and sacrifice but it is a power play of patriarchy to keep women’s identity in subordination to men.

## Conclusion

As a reputed female American poet and memoirist, Maya Angelou in her autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* states, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you” (Goodreads). She tried to speak out the agonies of Black American women and explores the subjects like women identity, rape, racism and victimisation of women. She criticized the male-dominated societies which flooded women life with sufferings and miseries. In the similar way, Padma Sachdev tries to ponder over the status of women in the Dogra society. It has exposed the rigid social norms and beliefs that have marginalised women in the society. She tries to portray human emotions in amalgamation with social and moral restrictions inflicted by the patriarchal models of the society. The evil traditions and beliefs try to supersede women respect and importance in the circle of human relations. The roles of women are pre-defined by the moral codes, social norms and cultural beliefs that have made them to feel like ‘Other’ or an outsider. So, the writer has not pointed out any individual or male group for this rather she has approached the topic in a very humanist and socialistic way.

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