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What the Body Remembers: A Feminist Study

Abstract

A woman is a beautiful creation of God. It is difficult to imagine a world without a woman. A female counterpart gives a remarkable contribution in all the spheres of the life. Even behind many successful men, there are women. A woman can be a mother, wife, sister or a daughter. There are many roles played by a woman in the life of a man and her existence cannot be negated in his life. She makes many sacrifices for her family. She is an embodiment of sacrifices and love. But in this materialistic world, the menfolk consider women only in their practical utility. The wants of men have been whittled down the personality of the women and put all sorts of pressure on women to control their individuality. In this manner, the position of women in society is deteriorating. There is a need to change the perception of the patriarchal society. Feminist movement can help the women to get their deserved place. This paper discusses the plight and agonies of the Sikh women during India Pakistan partition. It aims at promoting equalization of women by addressing their discrimination in their individual needs by healthy coping with society. In this paper, feminist approach is applied on Sauna Singh Baldwin's novel 'What the Body Remembers'. This book won 2000 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book. In this novel, she used the language of vernacular Punjabi. This book is written from a woman perspective. It represents the lives of the Sikh women during partition. This novel also dictates the chaos during the partition of India and Pakistan. This novel can be better interpreted through feminist approach.

Keywords: Feminism, male heir, male-domination, gender discrimination, izzat (honour).

Methodology: Feminism generally means a movement to achieve equality of women in all the spheres of life. It aims to achieve the goal of social acceptance and legal protection against the exploitation of women in cultural, social, political, economic and educational fields of life. On the humanitarian ground, it is targeted for the equality and all around development of the women. It is a movement that wishes the world to be equal for both the sexes. Feminism came into existence to break the illusion of men superiority and women inferiority and to end the exploitation of women. It makes the women aware of their rights and supporting them in raising their voice. Feminism is thus a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an amelioration in their social position (Freedman 3). This paper discusses the socio-cultural mindset of society and exposes the patriarchal domination which is explored through feminist approach. This paper aims to visualize the status and position of the women during partition.

Discussion & Analysis: Baldwin brings home the point of exploitation and sufferings of women in male-dominated society. In this novel, almost all the female characters suffer mental agonies in this patriarchal society. The 'male heir' is the main issue of the novel. Satya, the strong-willed woman suffers mental agonies because of the remarriage of his husband, Sardarji for the want of a male heir of the family. She accepts Roop just because of Sardarji as she has no alternative. Satya says, "It is useless for me to fight Sardarji's will, he is my husband, he has married you. Somehow I must accept that- and you" (Baldwin, 7). Many women suppress their will of an independent life and suffer in a male governed society. They do compromises in the life. Actually they are not living their lives in real sense but just passing the days of their life. The heights of patience could be seen when Satya herself, is looking for a new mate for her husband. She wants that his new mate must know the English and rose to sit on chairs. Generally, it is unbearable for a woman to accept the second wife of her husband. She is hurt with the discussion of Sardarji's second marriage for a male heir and even it is tried to give her poison by her sister-in-law when child inducing potions do not prove fruitful. Remaining unable to be productive, it leaves no choice for her expect to accept his husband's new wife. She just says to Sardarji-

"I still have life to give, why do you throw me away?" (Baldwin, 17)

Satya is no longer useful for her husband as she is barren and could not produce an heir for Sardarji. Only those married women are accepted by the society who has child producing utility. In this context, Luce Irigaray exhibits in her work 'The Sex Which is not one', "For

woman is traditionally a use value for man; an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity" (Irigaray 31).

To snub out the protestant tone of Satya, Sardar ji roared, "I do not throw you away, I tell you!

You will have all izzat, all respect; you will be looked after." (Baldwin, 17)

Here, we can see the dominating and authoritative attitude of a man towards a woman. Sardarji shouted at her as he knows he is the owner of his own will and he can justify himself in the patriarchal mind society. Kate Millet says in this context, "Patriarchal, societies typically link feelings of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated both with evil and with power" (Millet 44).

Satya knows sooner or later she will be thrown away because childbearing and child-rearing is the main task of a woman, a marker of femininity in the life of a woman. As she is not capable of this task, she is left alone to die. Now she is only needed to look after the household works. As Simone De Beauvoir exhibits about the life of most of the women in her text 'Introduction to Second Sex', "They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men-fathers or husbands- more firmly than they are to other women" (Beauvoir, xxv).

Satya is an audacious lady who accepts the death than the isolation and dejection from her husband. But she cannot deny that her life and fate are tied to Sardarji. She separates Roop's children from her for her own acceptance by Sardarji by playing the role of a mother for Sardarji's children. Satya is also bound to Sardarji for material protection because all the male members of her family have died. To challenge the cultural beliefs of a male-dominated society is difficult for a lonely woman and nobody is there for the fulfilment of her economic needs and no male protection is there in society for her except Sardarji. In this regard, Simone De Beauvoir says, "Man the- sovereign will provide woman- the- liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence" (Beauvoir, xvii).

Satya's attitude towards Roop is cruel, just because of her frustration as she is unable to win the heart of Sardarji by giving him a male heir. Her frustration is common because no woman can tolerate the second wife of her husband. Roop has almost shaken her authority and position in Sardarji's life. She is afraid of dejection by Sardarji because she could not give a

male heir to Sardarji. In this context, Simone De Beauvoir remarks, "what is still more serious, woman cannot in good faith be regarded simply as a worker; for her reproductive capacity, no less in the social economy than in the individual life" (Parshley 89). So, Satya's response and attitude towards Roop are general. She thinks, "How can she not see danger in blundering deep into the tigress's den to steal her chance of ever bearing a cub?" (Baldwin, 9).

Roop has also suffered a lot throughout her life. Restrictions were imposed on her since her childhood. At the age of sixteen she becomes the second wife of a forty years aged man. She has a deaf ear which could become a hurdle to get a resourceful man like him. Germaine Greer exhibits in her essay 'The Female Eunuch' - "Every human body has its optimum weight and contour, which only health and efficiency can establish. Whenever we treat women's bodies as aesthetic objects without function we deform them" (Greer 41). Sardar Ji has married her to produce a child. But Satya feels panic for her shaken status and thinks, "Why is Roop so trusting? How can she be so confident she will produce a child? How can Roop not look at her, Satya" (Baldwin, 9)? Roop becomes an obedient wife because she knows that Satya is dejected because she could not produce a child and Gujri told her that the stubborn women are always left alone. But she suffers the separation of her children. They are mercilessly separated from her and given to Satya by Sardarji. Roop is afraid that she would be sent back to her parents' home if she revolts. Because she knows that she is just brought as an incubator to produce a male heir. After producing a male heir she becomes confident that she would be valued for being a mother of Sardarji's son. When it is tried to separate her son from her, psychological pain becomes unbearable for her and she takes her son away to her parents' home only then Sardarji goes to her village to bring them back and the result is that Satya is left alone in isolation. Satya and Roop are mere pawns in the hands of male-controlled destinies. Such details serve to open before us the wounds of betrayal and despair that are inflicted on Satya and Roop.

Even Mama is a victim of the male child want of Nani and other relatives. Nani does not allow Papaji to take her to the hospital to show her body to strange men and says, "My daughter will stay here and bring this house another son" (Baldwin, 37). She dies after giving birth to a son but the child does not survive but relatives cry more for the male child than Mama. Gujri tells Roop, "This is why these women cry. Not for your mama, but for your Papaji's second son, for those who are left behind in this life" (Baldwin 49).

Roop and her sister Madani are treated to the rudimentary education in an ordinary school but their brother Jeevan is encouraged to learn English and to go for higher education. Even partiality is there in serving the kind of the food. Jeevan is served with the meat and eggs and Roop is forbidden for meat, as Gujri says, "Eggs and meat for a girl? No, don't waste them" (Baldwin, 27). Such kind of partialities in the upbringing of the female children wastes the actual potential of them which can help in the prosperity of a society.

Roop is conditioned to speak softly and to never feel angry as it is feminine virtue and forbearance of a woman. In rule no. three Lajo Bhua gives instructions to Roop, "Never feel angry, never, never. No matter what happens, or what your husband says, "never feel angry. You might be hurt, but never ever feel angry" (Baldwin, 101). Such type of conditioning starts in the early years of a female child. 'All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of man, not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others' (Islam 6). In this novel, all the women characters are dependent upon the males for their economic needs. In this reason, they can't think to exterminate the male member. They spent their lives dependent on fathers or husbands for financial support. There can be seen master-slave relationship, the woman is considered inferior and the man is a superior being. Because the males are economically independent and every woman is dependent on a man for her needs. As Simone De Beauvoir states, "Master and slave, also, are united by a reciprocal need, in this case economic, which does not liberate the slave" (Beauvoir, xxv).

Lajo Bhua, who conditioned Roop to speak softly and to never feel angry, she herself is a victim of this male-dominated society. Even she could not give a male heir to her husband. Her husband's attitude is very stringent towards her. He says to her in his bitter tongue that "Useless woman, I have paid two dowries for marrying you, no sons you brought me" (Baldwin, 101).

In a patriarchal society, if a woman does not produce sons, she is considered useless. Lajo Bhua accepts the rules of male-dominated society submissively. As Bell Hooks, in her book 'Ain't I A Woman' says, "Black women were told that we should find our dignity not in liberation from sexist oppression but in how well we could adjust, adapt and cope"(Hooks 7). Lajo Bhua knows that women have to follow those rules deferentially. A woman never thinks

herself complete without a man, as Simone De Beauvoir says- "Man can think of himself without woman, she cannot think of herself without man" (Beauvoir, xxii).

In this novel, the experience of other women also follows the same pattern. Gujri, Roop's family servant is given to Roop's mother as a wedding present like mama's dowry pots and pans. Because of poverty many women are sold and bought for household works. At the age of seven, Gujri's father gave her away into virtual slavery. At that young age, she had already been married and widowed and because of this misfortune -"her whole village thought her unlucky," and she could never marry again, lest she kill another husband" (Baldwin, 28). A widow is stigmatized as having ill fate and even she is considered inauspicious in the society. 'Widows are often regarded as having the "evil eye" and many abandoned' (Brewer 13). As a result of this superstition of a male-dominated society, Gujri is reduced to being a permanent domestic slave. In a patriarchal society, the entire rules are formed for the exploitation of a woman only. In this kind of society, men do not live in abstemiousness and restrictions. 'Entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than a widower because of discrimination, ritual sanctions of the society against the widows' (Verma 132).

Even Ravati Bhua is not allowed by Deputy Bachan Singh to follow the religion of her own choice as she has taken a shelter in his house as 'she is an unmarried woman and she has no sons to look after in her old age'. A woman remains dependent upon a male member of the family since her childhood to old age. So, patriarchal head's authoritative decisions are imposed on the female member of the family.

In this novel, only Jeevan, the son of the family, "will have a good kismat; he is a boy". In Indian society, it is an honour to being born as a male. The situation is similar in many societies. 'Everywhere, at all times, the males have displayed their satisfaction in feeling that they are the lords of creation. "Blessed be God...that He did not make me a woman," say the Jews in their morning prayers, while their wives pray on a note of resignation: "Blessed be the Lord, who created me according to His will" (Beauvoir, xxviii). The status of women existence is same in every nook and corner of the world.

In this novel, the 'izzat' of a female, is a necessary marker of a pure woman to get acceptance in patriarchal society. Izzat means the honour or chastity of a woman. Roop's sister-in-law is cut into pieces by her own father-in-law to save her izzat or honour. As during the partition of India and Pakistan 'about 7500 women are thought to have abducted and raped by men of religious different from their own'(Butalia 41). She is killed to protect her from falling into the hands of other men. She is killed because our patriarchal society does not accept a shamed woman. Honour is more precious than the life of a woman. Even a dearest father is more concerned about his honour than the life and well being of his daughters and daughter in law.

Roop ruminates over her father's action of killing Kusum. "Papaji thinks that for good- good women, death should be preferable to dishonour"(Baldwin, 587). Even a religious minded and good hearted man is forced by his patriarchal mind set to kill the dearest daughter-in law of the house. Some good men in the society become the part of a society and see the exploitation of a woman and feel helpless to find a solution to the problems of women.

Conclusion

This illustrates that a woman's value in this society is irrevocably tied to her worth as a wife and mother, and to her honour as a pure woman. Once that value has been removed from her life, she is not worthy of living; her identity is only accepted in a society if she produces offspring. Otherwise, her existence and identity are questionable. Only childbearing and child-rearing have elevated woman's position in a society. The loss of these virtues restricted the mobility of a woman in society. Many women in the society die with the hope to conquer the male-dominated society but in vain. Patriarchal values are difficult to challenge. Baldwin reveals the fabrication and construction of the patriarchal society in such a way that female is just a machine to produce a male heir.

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