

## EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN GREATER LOVE, AFTER THE STORM AND THE LIBRARY GIRL

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to study three randomly selected short-stories *Greater Love, After the Storm, The Library Girl* by Cornelia Sorabjee, AttiaHosain and VishwapriyaIyengar respectively, and to show how far these stories(penned by woman writers) are instrumental in revealing and depicting the saga of innumerable pain of the female section of the society in a country like India, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The main protagonists in these stories tell of the existential predicament of women and their marginalized identity. Each of the stories under study deals with the pain and suffering of women and this suffering becomes a vehicle and instrument for the writer to depict the social, political, religious and economic background in which a story is set. The stories share temporal and spatial differences among one another, but they have one commonality, that they speak unequivocally of the different ways women are made to accept the injustice and subjugation inflicted upon themselves by the patriarchal society, sometimes in the name of religion and sometimes culture.

**Keywords:** Greater Love, After the Storm, The Library Girl, AttiaHosain, Cornelia Sarabjee, VishwapriyaIyengar, Subjugation of Women, Existential Predicament of Women in India.

## INTRODUCTION:

From time immemorial, majority of human societies have been governed by the *male* and his decisions are supported (or forced to be supported) by the female population; be it in the family, society, religion, economy, art or nation. The role of the female is limited to house-keeping, child-bearing, serving the husband and taking care of the children, whereas the male is free from all these liabilities. It is in the animal world that we see such kind of a pattern where the female bears and looks after the young ones; but it should not be forgotten that emotionally and intellectually we are not animals; it is our emotional and intellectual aptitude which separates us from the animals. As far as these qualities are concerned, there is no difference between man and woman. Therefore, it is quite inhuman and inappropriate to offer a subordinate status to woman only on the basis of physical strength which is merely an animal trait. Though undesirable, it exists and finds expression in all forms of art, especially literature, and who else can delineate this predicament of women better other than themselves? Initially, like in all other fields, in literature also the feelings and emotions of woman were described by male writers, as women hardly had any access to literature. But gradually the pattern changed and women also started to try their hand in the field of literature. In the present study, an attempt will be made to look into three randomly selected such short stories penned by women. They are Cornelia Sorabjee's *Greater Love*, AttiaHosain's *After the Storm* and *The Library Girl* by VishwapriyaIyengar.

Each of the stories under study deals with the pain and suffering of women and this suffering becomes a vehicle and instrument for the writer to depict the social, political, religious and economic background in which a story is set. The first story is based on the life of MathaShri a Hindu childless woman and the rest two stories deal with the life of two Muslim girl children Bibi and Talat. These stories put forth a realistic picture of the author's contemporary world in which there is no place for innocence – only corruption prevails. The stories lay it bare that in a patriarchal social pattern, like that exists in countries like India, women are supposed to be just a puppet in the hands of men. Irrespective of any religion, a sense of gender discrimination looms large in an average Indian family. It would be better if we go through a brief introduction to the writers dealt herewith.

## THE AUTHORS:

Cornelia Sorabjee was the first woman barrister of India and actively involved with social and reform works in the pre-independence India. Her most significant contribution was her work for the "*pardahnashins*, women who, according to Hindu law, were forbidden to communicate with the outside male world. In many cases, these women owned considerable property, yet had no access to the necessary legal expertise to defend it. Sorabjee was given special permission to enter pleas on the behalf of the *pardahnashins* before British agents..."<sup>1</sup> *Greater Love* is one of the outcomes of her encounters with such *pardahnashins* and village women, and the story bears the testimony to this fact.

"AttiaHosain was born into a feudal family in Lucknow, north India in 1913 and grew up knowing many of the major political and literary figures of the time. When Independence came to India and Pakistan in 1947, she was among the most privileged and perceptive observers of the partition of the sub-continent."<sup>2</sup> As her husband was posted to London in early 1947, she also had to shift there. Perhaps this distance contributed to the keen insight displayed in *After the Storm* and her other literary creations.

Vishwapriya L. Iyengar is yet another Indian woman writer who is actively involved with social and economic conditions of the fisher-folk of Kerala and children's working conditions in Tamil Nadu. She has a first-hand knowledge of the life as it happens to be in these parts of the country. Her *The Library Girl* acquaints us with the life of a Muslim society in a very realistic and lively manner. Now if we make a brief journey through the summaries of the three stories, perhaps, we would be in a position to appreciate and analyse them – how far they represent the social, economic and religious injustice inflicted upon the female by their male counterparts.

## GREATER LOVE:

The story *Greater Love* starts with the introduction and depiction of the character of Kamala who is childless even after '*three springs*' of her married life have passed. She has arranged a *kunkun* party for all the women of the village so that she is blessed with a son. She distributes grains of wheat to all the invited women. Among these

<sup>1</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelia\\_Sorabji](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelia_Sorabji)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.harappa.com/attia/attiahosain.html>

guests was MathaShri who is also a childless woman and is considered ominous by all other women of the village because of her barrenness. Emotionally hurt she leaves the party and goes to the woods nearby the island temple. Then she makes a decision that she will convince her husband, anyhow, to marry for the second time so that he can have a child. But he does not give his consent for the marriage. Now she makes her mind up to leave her house. When she is gone, finally Nano, her husband marries her cousin Sahai.

In the present story, Sorabjee depicts the life of Indian women in pre-independence Indian society. They are meant only to sacrifice and be subjugated. Along with men, they themselves are responsible for their situation and status in the society. Here MathaShri stands for all the Indian childless women who are deprived of the status in social activities normally enjoyed by other women who have children. She chooses to live a life of seclusion so that her husband can marry for the second time; but ironically enough, nobody cares to remember her after her leaving. If, by chance somebody remembers, it is with the name of her husband. The story also reveals that women in all castes – lower or higher are victimized and are held subordinate to men.

### AFTER THE STORM:

The second story *After the Storm*, like many other creations by AttiaHosain is written by taking the Indo-Pakistan partition as the backdrop. In an interview, she herself told “*It could be that [partition] or it could be a riot. But it is about violence.*”<sup>3</sup> The story portrays very beautifully and poignantly the aftermath of violence through the immature and innocent eyes of the central character i.e. Bibi, a little girl child. The charm of the story lies in the fact that whatever happened to Bibi and the brutality witnessed by her is revealed by herself winsomely but she is nowhere seen grieving about the past. She brings flowers and makes garlands for the speaker and answers all her questions and along with it she also speaks of sweet and gold.

Bibi is a victim of partition who escaped from the refugee camp at night. Regarding her age the writer says, “*I could not tell her age. Her assured manner made me feel younger than herself...Her body was of a child of nine or ten, but its undernourished thinness was deceptive; she could have been eleven or twelve.*” She reports that she was under the protection of one Chand Bibi but during the riot she was murdered by cutting her arm. According to Bibi, she was a brave woman who killed many of the rioters before death. Police then takes Bibi to the refugee camp; but the effect of the violence never ended there; before the violence the girl and her family were somewhat settled; now she has to earn her livelihood herself. Although, sentimentality is avoided in the story, the critical nature of violence still remains the same. It brings suffering to all, but the majority of the victims are women and children.

### THE LIBRARY GIRL:

In *The Library Girl*, Vishwapriya L. Iyengar portrays the character of a Muslim girl very realistically. The name of the girl is Talat who is fond of books and spends her time in reading books and visiting the library. This love of hers for books earned her the name *thelibrary girl*. She is an adolescent girl who lives a carefree life and does not understand the complexities of life. Although she enjoyed going to school, she is forced by her father to leave the school. In the story we can see a clear discrimination between a boy and a girl child. Talat's brother Tahir is allowed to go to school but Talat is forbidden on the pretext of financial problem. This fact is revealed to us by means of Talat's thoughts:

“*Another day she had heard Ammi and Abba quarrelling bitterly and it had frightened her. Ammi was asking how, if there was money for Tahir's education, there was none for Talat's. Her father had laughed and then shouted. She stood at the edge of the ditch outside their house and overheard, 'Buy her silk, satin, velvet, silver – but, fool woman, don't compare her with Tahir.'*”

Talat is excited when she receives a gift, a beautiful Persian *burqa*, from her father but her mother and grandmother are sad. It is because they know what is going to happen with Talat has already happened with them. It is only the father whose ‘*eyes shone with pride and pleasure*’. Subsequently, Talat also comes to realize that the *burqa* is nothing but a beautiful cage to destroy her identity and individuality as Talat when everybody ignores her existence even if she is present:

“*Talat cried and Talat screamed inside her black veil. But they did not hear and did not see*”

### ANALYSIS:

What makes all these stories common and significant is the concern for the crisis of identity, dissatisfied self

<sup>3</sup>AttiaHosain was interviewed in London on May 19, 1991 (<http://www.harappa.com/attia/attiahosaininterview.html>)

and the existence and importance of the women in the family and society. In *Greater Love*, it is MathaShri who is striving for her identity and her place in the society. As she is childless, she is thought to be ominous and not given a normal social and religious status reserved for the women with children. This establishes the existence of women only as child producing instrument. Through the story, the writer raises a very vital question valid in Indian context – if a couple is childless, the wife is held responsible but what about the husband? Now it is scientifically proved that it is not only the woman who is responsible for infertility. But in a society like ours, the barrenness on woman's part is condemned whereas the same in case of man is condoled. In this story, one more point is emphasized that in the pathetic predicament of Indian women, they themselves are responsible to a great extent. The women are brought up in such a way that they lack the zeal or desire to break free from the shackles of male dominated tradition and custom.

Again the writer of *After the Storm* takes a different issue i.e. violence and its repercussions. But here also the victims are the women and girls. The story deals with the possible consequences of a riot or violence (Indo-Pak partition). Here the character of Chand Bibi serves as the image of woman's protest against violence and male domination; but this protest is again suppressed violently by cutting her arm. Gender discrimination is also apparent in the story when we hear that Bibi had an elder brother who could 'read and write' but she is an illiterate. Though she is a child, her head is "covered like the older women, with 'dupatta'."

Finally comes the *The Library Girl*, which delineates the same female suffering but from a different angle and in a different context. In the story, the father of Talat represents the male domination and all the female characters stand for the dominated. It is not that they do not object but they are overruled by him. Like a typical Indian male, he does not believe female education. It is nothing but a male policy of perpetuating the female slavery by prohibiting the girl from education. It is because, with education the girl will gain knowledge and hence develop individuality which detrimental to the traditional male ego.

## CONCLUSION:

All the short stories discussed herein are the expressions of the female self which has to suffer in many respects in a society or a religion which essentially supports the male members. It may not be the self of the writer herself, it may be the self of the woman whom the writers encounter and observe. All the three writers are established women writers who are unlike the characters depicted in the stories; it is their experience with the women whom they meet, which is instrumental behind the creation of the stories studied. One more point that can be made here is that all the writers belong to different periods, but still there are similarities among the stories they write. *The Greater Love* was published in 1901, *After the Storm* is based on the Indo-Pak partition and *The Library Girl* was published in 1985. Although time has changed, the condition and plight of woman hardly have changed or improved. The existential predicament of women still remains the same. Ideally speaking, the male-female relationship should be characterized by equality, freedom and honour, but in real life, as also reflected in the women writings, the idea in no way is real. Therefore, it becomes a responsibility and duty for the woman writers to present in their writing the injustice on and subjugation of women by man. They have come a long way and are successful to a great extent in bringing out some changes in the outlook towards and position of women in our society, but that is far from being adequate and satisfactory, and here writing can play the role of a very very powerful instrument which can be of a tremendous significance liberation and empowerment of women.

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