Portrayal of Women in Dharamchandra Vidyalankar’s Jhooti Kasam

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The present paper aims at a feminist study of Dr. Dharamchandra Vidyalankar’s short stories from his collection called Jhooti Kasam. Dr. Dharamchandra has produced several works based on Haryana’s history and culture. They include Jaton Ka Naya Itihas, a modern history of Jat community; Krantikari aur Sakriya Rajneeti, based on politics and its present day misuse; Naharsingh Kirti Katha, poetry based on life and exploits of Maharaja Nahar Singh of Ballabghar; Surajmal Shaurya Gatha, poem based on Maharaja Surajmal of Bharatpur; Deenbandhu Sir Chhotu Ram, Aag Ki Dahak. His works show his deep interest and knowledge of the regional history and legacy. The local writers, especially those writing in regional dialects remain relatively unknown. But that does not imply that their work is insubstantial. Since they have a better knowledge and understanding of the local customs and traditions, they are able to present them more efficiently than the other writers. Dr. Dharamchandra’s Jhooti Kasam is document of social transformation. The stories in the collection cover various social issues like widow remarriage, sati pratha, exploitation of the dalits, inter-caste marriage, materialistic politics, communal tensions etc. his stories not only provide a traditional view of the social problems but also the modern one, aimed at reformation.

The first two stories are about widowhood. When a woman is widowed she becomes an object of sympathy. She is supposed to carry the burden of her fate submissively. The question of remarriage becomes a big issue. Though it is difficult for a woman to marry second time but if she does, her character and past life are put to scrutiny. But when a man is widowed his remarriage is never questioned. In fact his family and relatives appear to be eager for it. Through these two stories Dr. Dharamchandra portrays two different aspects of an old custom, common in Jats and some other communities. The custom is called ‘chadar daalna’. According to this custom when a woman becomes a widow she is remarried to her brother-in-law even if he is already married. The custom is a modified version of ‘niyoga’, an ancient Hindu tradition. As per this tradition a woman (whose husband is either incapable of fatherhood or has died without having a child) would request and appoint a person for helping her bear a child. The man so appointed must be or would most likely be a revered person, who would follow the custom for his dharma and not for pleasure. There are two instances of niyoga in the epic Mahabharata. Queen Satyavati compels her illegitimate son and sage Vyasa to perform niyoga with the widows of her son Vichitravirya- Ambika and Ambalika, who gave birth to Dhritrashtra and Pandu. And when Pandu is cursed to die on being intimate with any woman, his wives Kunti and Madri perform niyoga with the gods and give birth to five sons called the Pandavas.

The first story in the collection is Dabav and it deals with the progressive side of the above custom. The story is set in Umari village in Rajasthan, inhabited by the Jats, who believe in widow remarriage and by Brahmins, who think of it as base and degrading. Pt. Dtaram’s son Sukhram commits suicide for unknown reasons even before he marriage ceremonies are over. He leaves behind a newly married and suddenly widowed Laxmi. Though in grief, Dataram and Laxmi’s family are worried as to what will become of the young girl’s future. Though they all want her to remarry to Dtaram’s younger son Mukhram but are scared to discuss the matter. This is because by custom the women in their community are forbidden to remarry. And when Dataram brings the matter in Brahm in panchayat, the matter becomes a political affair. He faces denial at first as religious heads like Pt. Gadadhar believe: “हम सब साक्षात्र ब्राह्मण और वैशिष्ट की सन्तानों हैं। हमें पुनःब्रह्म या धिक्या-विधिया जैसा आचरण शोभा नहीं देता। यदि हमारी मुद्दता और परिवर्तन का रहस्य है। हमारी पुरानी पौत्री की किसी भी महं-बहनों ने बड़ी निषेध और तपस्या के साथ कैसे का पालन कर अपने सतीदात्र का परिचय दिया है। जब राजपूतने ने आज भी समक्ष जैसी सती-लाली है तो हमारे समाज में क्यों नहीं हो सकती। मेरी तो यह भी राय है कि इस लड़की की शादी को वहाँ दो ही हिन्दु वयों न बीते हो, इसे अपने पति के साथ सती होकर बैठक-लोक में अपना सम्मान को प्राप्त करना चाहिए था।"

For the younger generation aims such as sati pratha are unjust and inhuman. They see no glory in such practices and want to break free from them. They question their elders: बांतल के विधिया बाहुलकरों की शीख मौखिक प्रकार और बड़े-बड़े नन्दलों के लोकों का शोभा बनी हुई हमारी जीवन बनने भी व्या हमारी मुद्दता की सामी है। क्या कभी सूक्ष्म और विशारद दे ठहकादों ने इस साम अपना यथायथ है। क्यों क्या हम धर्म और
मयौद्ध के नाम पर रहने जा ती की यात्रा का अपहरण किया जा रहा है। हमको मनु का वह आदेश तो याद है कि नारी पुण्यवाह नहीं कर सकती लेकिन कदाचित वह वास्तव स्मरण नहीं है जिसमें उन्होंने नारी की पूजा की बात कही है।

The awakening of the younger generation from the slumber of such discriminatory customs, gave strength to Dataram and Laxmi to marry Mukhram. In Laxmi’s case the custom of ‘chadar daalna’ holds good because it saved Laxmi from a life of loneliness. Also, both Laxmi and Mukhram are of same age group; and as well as their families approved their marriage.

The second story called Nari Mukti, presents the other aspect of the same custom which is suffocating and tyrannical. The story is about a couple, Sheela and Satish, who are educated, working and living in a city. Their lives are disturbed when Satish’s brother Naresh dies, leaving behind his wife and two children. Satish is forced by the family and village elders to marry Naresh’s widow Asha, as per the custom. And this creates problems in Satish and Sheela’s marriage. Sheela an educated and working woman, finds the custom unjust and cruel. She has sympathy for Asha but Satish and Asha’s marriage is something she cannot allow or accept. She feels helpless and suffocated. To her the concept of modern woman- educated, independent, secure, seemed an illusion. She feels as if she is in a primitive world and her education is a waste. At school she expresses her inner anger and disgust in a seminar on ‘Modern Woman and Independence’.

मैंने दृष्टि में नारी चाहे कितनी ही सुशिक्षित और स्वाभाविक क्यों न हो लेकिन वह आज भी पुरुष के आधी है एवं यही पुरुष के लिए यही है। यही है इस की प्रामाण्य न बनाए रखे तो इन (वोल्फक) सारे में नोट कराने वाली मशीन। बल्कि मैं तो यह कहता चाहूहै कि इस भाग्यवादी स्वाभाविक में चक्र में हमें दोबारा दायित्व अपने दूरारंभ कों पर उठ रहा है। पहले तो हमें केवल घर में ही हटना होता था, आज तो हमें लागे चार और बाहर कहीं भी चलना नहीं।

Such customs are not a thing of past, as some in cities might believe, but they are a reality in rural areas. Many women in North India accept such customs not because they agree to them but because they usually do not have a choice. But Sheela is not able to reconcile with the situation and accept the custom blindly. Satish seems adamant on marrying Asha though not willingly but under social pressure. Things become unbearable for sheela but she finds no escape. Finally she thinks that she can get ‘mukti’ only by death and commits suicide.

The 1986 film, Ek Chadar Maili Si, also deals with the negative aspect of the same custom. The film is an adaptation of Rajinder Singh Bedi’s Urdu novella by the same name for which Bedi won the 1965 Sahitya Academy Award. Rano, played by Hema Malini, a feisty woman is forced to marry her late husband’s brother, Mangal, played by Rishi Kapoor. But Mangal loves someone else and is a good ten years younger than Rano. He has always treated her like a mother and Rano has always looked upon him as a child. So they are incompatible and their marriage is irrational. Widow remarriage is noble thing but to force a woman to marry an already married man as in case of Asha or to someone who is no match for her is unjust. It is unfair that in name of culture either a widow is not allowed to marry at all or she is allowed to marry a predetermined man with whom she had a different relationship earlier. But blindly following a custom without any rational thinking holds no good.

A woman’s world revolves around her husband and family. Her education, employment, attire and manners are all governed by them. It is not that she is not aware of their hold over her, but she knows that to stand up against this didactic patriarchal set up would be to wage a war. Only few women are bold enough to take the risks and follow their own way. The rest of them accept the situation meekly. Dr. Dharamchandra brings out this contrast through the characters of Janki Devi and Sona Devi. Both these women have lived in the patriarchal set up, one as a docile wife and the other as an obedient daughter. Both of them provide the opportunity to change their status but one grasps it and the other prefers the status quo. In Yatarth Bodh, Janki Devi’s husband, Lala Omkarnath is a social activist and follower of Gandhian ideology. He is nationalist and active member of a political party. The story discusses the high but shallow ideals that the political class preaches the masses but seldom follows. Lala Omkarnath is not in favour of women’s reservation but now that it is inevitable he wants to exploit the situation. He decides to field his wife as a political candidate in the upcoming elections. His wife, Janki is a housewife. She has no desire to become a politician and has no experience for the job. But she is an obedient wife and does as her husband bids her to.

‘जानकी देवी एक आदर्श हिंदू नारी थी, वह पति की इच्छा की अनुशंसा कैसे कर सकती थी? उनसे भी नवल–धार्म–रत्न विहल व्यतिरिक्त धा राप्त करने दूर कर दिया और समा–समाज में जाकर पति देवी की आवाज़ने थे के सर्वसम्मान अधिकार और कर्तव्य की परिस्वर्तता करने लगी।’

If she wins, she will just be a mask and her husband will be the real player. And it is not just Janaki but there are many women leaders who join politics not because of their own ambitions or vision but for their husband’s sake. Their husbands run their office and the wives have no idea what is being done in their

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name the Women’s Reservation bill is intended to bring forward the women representatives in the country’s legislative set up. So that the elected women members can voice the problems, the needs, and the dreams of their sisters. And also be a part in making provisions and laws for woman empowerment. But sadly it is becoming a tool of political power play. Women like Janaki fail to utilize such great opportunity and hand over all the power to their husbands. They do so to please their husbands and they end up betraying womankind.

Sona devi in the story Sankalp belongs to a wealthy but conservative family. After her graduation she is denied further education. Bored at home she goes to her uncle’s place to spend time with her cousin. In her absence her father is searching an eligible match for her. Sona Devi rekindles her romance with a college friend, Sohan, who is now an administrative officer. Sona Devi is not consulted when her marriage is fixed. She is just informed about it. Sona wants to marry Sohan but he belongs to the backward caste. But unlike Janaki, Sona does not waste the opportunity to liberate herself from the patriarchal hold. She revolts and marries Sohan, the man she loves and not her family’s choice.

In Laxmi, Asha, and Janki, Dr. Dharamchandra has portrayed he typical woman in a patriarchy. They are weak, submissive, and dependent on the family. They have no individual identity. They have no say in decision making, not even in matters concerning their own lives. Though Sheela and Sona are also like the above three characters initially, but they break out of the patriarchal limits later on. Sheela does not accept an old custom being forced upon her. She tries to convince her husband against it but fails. But instead of compromising with the situation, ends her life, though it is an extreme step. Similarly, Sona is not consulted by her parents regarding her marriage. She is in love with Sohan, who is from a backward caste, and her father wants her to marry someone else. But instead of meekly obeying her family, Sona listens to her herself and marries Sohan.

References