

Indian Women in Social Service – With reference to Chudamani Raghavan’s “Herself”

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Abstract: *India is a country where women are worshipped as goddesses and many women have occupied the forefront in Indian politics. Hence, it is quite natural to think that all Indian women are empowered and are having an identity of their own. But the real scenario is entirely different. Many Indian women, though they are educated and are highly talented are not allowed to continue with their jobs or follow their passions in the name of family and children. Women who try to empower themselves are scorned at not only by men but also by women, that too their kinswomen. This situation of Indian women is beautifully pictured by Chudamani Raghavan in her short story “Herself”. The story depicts how an old woman after her late fifties and fulfilling all her responsibilities try to serve the society around her. This paper analyses the mind-set of the daughter who hates her mother doing social service and the determination of the old woman in following her passion.*

Key Words: *Social Service, empowerment, identity, women, society.*

I. Introduction

In Indian Society women are looked at as embodiments of sacrifice. They are expected to just take care of their family, husband and children. When they try to establish their identity, they are scorned at. Even educated women cannot digest the fact that their mother has an identity of her own. The mother of the family is expected to be the epitome of sacrifice who responds to the beck and call of her children, may it be a boy or girl. This situation is beautifully depicted by Chudamani in “Herself”. The writer has pictured the thought process of a daughter who cannot digest to see her mother as an important lady in the village and worse of all, she cannot tolerate seeing her father toiling in the kitchen while her mother is busy in social service.

II. The Story:

“Herself” is the story of an old woman Senthiru who regains her lost identity in her late 50s. She is the mother of five children: two sons and three daughters all of whom are married and away in different parts of the country with their families. After her husband’s retirement, they move to a small village near Kancheepuram where she regains her identity as a music teacher, tailoring teacher and a volunteer to educate the adults in the village. Instead of feeling lonely and depressed in pining for her children, she gets herself engaged in the social welfare activities. Her husband supports her a lot and feels proud of her. In his own words, “I feel more proud

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when a fully developed, independent human entity rather than my slave or shadow, loves me.” (95) Even her own children were not aware of the fact that their mother knew tailoring and music. She lived such a normal life of a housewife that she herself was not aware of her hidden talents which can be understood from the conversation between the father and the daughter:

“I didn’t know that Amma had that much skill in tailoring.”

“So you see, you had no idea. I wonder whether Senthiru herself was aware, while bringing up all of you, that she had some other special talents.” (90)

III. Conventional Daughter:

Her youngest daughter Nitya who comes home for a holiday gets upset by looking at the transformation of her mother. She, who had known her mother with ‘face oily, sweat dripping down’ (88) was taken aback when she saw her mother elegant in a simple cotton sari with neatly combed hair and new vital energy in her bearing. Nitya who came to her mother’s place with lot of expectations to be pampered by her mother was dismayed when her mother asked her to prepare her own breakfast. On the top of it, she cannot bear that her mother’s tailoring classes were the reason for all these changes. Nitya cannot endure to hear Senthiru talking about her tailoring classes at home. She quickly retorts saying, “Enough Amma! Must you carry all this with you even after you come back home? I have come all this distance to see you, remember.” (92) She feels pleased only when ‘her mother started enquiring about her and her family’. (92) Nitya felt content only when her mother plaited her hair and took care of her son.

Nitya was swimming in joy, finding herself in the very heaven she had expected and hoped for when her mother warmly attended to her and fed her with food which carried her special touch and flavour. (93)

Nitya could not view her mother as an intelligent person who discusses literature with her husband. She wants to see her mother as an innocent lady whose world is in her family and its welfare. Hence, when Senthiru discusses poetry with her husband, Nitya gets irritated.

Mother enquired about the books he had brought from Madras, and about the subtle points in the volume of modern poetry he was reading currently. This exchange was quite irritating for Nitya. (93)

The empowerment of Senthiru into a music and tailoring teacher is viewed by Nitya as worsening condition of her mother. “I never thought Amma would change so much for the worse.” (94) Nitya cannot take the point when her father said, “In the past, she was just a mother to all of you, wasn’t she? Now she has found an identity for herself.” (89) According to Nitya cooking was a domestic chore to be taken up by women alone. Women involving in social service is a sin and the sole purpose of women is to take care of her husband and her family. “Where is the need to teach music to strangers, leaving the husband to cook? Why all this unnecessary bother? Can’t she be content looking after you and the house?” (94) She had been moulded into a stereotype woman who cannot view a woman outside the threshold of her home. As Sarla Palkar puts it,

Cultural representations of women in the image of a Sita or a Savitri or an Ahalya – women known for their exceptional devotion to their husbands – still proliferate in popular media as well as serious literature. In most of the popular films, dutiful daughters, devoted wives, self-sacrificing mothers are valorized.

Hence Nitya expects her mother to walk the path of Sita or Savitri whose only duty is to take care of her husband and his children.

IV. Unconventional Husband:

Senthiru's husband is fine gentleman who defends his wife's empowerment. He doesn't find anything wrong in his wife serving the society after having executed her duties as a housewife.

“Your mother has discharged her duties by all of you without any room for complaint. Having done that, what's wrong if she relates herself as an individual with those not belonging to her family and with the society at large?” (94)

Still Nitya tries to sow the seed of male chauvinism into her father by saying, “Even so, it doesn't look nice that she should create an interest for herself while leaving you to do all the chores, does it?” (95) She is silenced only when her father retorts back, reminding her of the old saying disclosing the enmity of women, “How true it is when they say women are the enemies of women! How funny!” (95)

V. A Woman of Self-respect:

Senthiru finds satisfaction in serving the society. She feels happy when the children learn music successfully. But for Nitya, even doing the small chores at home was indigestible when her mother sets out to serve the society.

When Senthiru set out, her hair neatly put up, wearing a bright, clean, simple home-starched sari, carrying some books in her hand, Nitya swelled with anger. Then, when she had to grind the batter for adai, she couldn't contain her tears. With what hopes she had come to her parents' place, to be petted and pampered! But how sad that she was toiling at the grindstone, while her mother went out without a care! (97)

Nitya liked her mother in the past who used to toil for her children without minding her own comfort and happiness. She had set in her mind that a traditional mother will look after the welfare of her family alone and not indulge in social services.

Amma would ask, “What would you like to have for breakfast tomorrow?” and in the morning, she would individually prepare for each one of them what they liked and serve it to them. She would hand them their glasses of water and cups of coffee.

That is what a mother should be like! How come is she so completely transformed now? (98)

The real conflict between the mother and the daughter comes when Nitya's elder sister writes a letter requesting her mother to come to her place to help her with her kids. On reading the letter Nitya empathizes with her sister and expects that her mother would readily go to the aid of her sister. On the contrary, Senthiru is infuriated with her daughter for considering her an office boy who would be at the disposal of her children. She retorts, "Don't I have my house to maintain? Am I an errand boy to be at everyone's beck and call?" She makes true the words of Mary Wollstencraft,

"It's time to bring about a revolution in female manners – time to restore to them their lost identity, and make them as a part of the human species labour, by reforming themselves to reform the world."

VI. The Transition:

At the same time she is not a feminist who rebels against the traditions or sheds away her responsibilities. She is still a loving wife and an affectionate mother. 'She cooked, served whenever possible; every Friday she applied oil to Nitya's hair and washed it. Whenever there was no other work, Senthiru looked after her grandson.' (99) She hasn't gone through the three phases of feminist tradition posited by Elaine Showalter 'limitation, protest and self-discovery'. Hers was a smooth transition, a self-discovery of her lost identity. Unlike a feminist story, the transformation of Senthiru from the role of a dutiful wife and an affectionate mother into a woman of self-respect serving the society was not of rebellion or brazen feminism but a smooth transformation with the support of her husband Chokkalingam who disproved the words of Sarah Grimke,

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has to be desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill.

Unlike her father, Nitya is a conventional woman who would have been happy to see her mother live her life in a sorrowful bliss yearning for her children, pining for their return. She would have been happy if Senthiru had lived her life in 'aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose.' (De Beauvoir 1974: 500)

This is the reason why many women in India have not taken up social service seriously. For some their own mind-set acts as a barrier. Some others do not have supporting husbands like Chokkalingam. For some the other members of the family like Nitya discourage them in the name of tradition and prevent them from following their passion. Only a few women like Senthiru are able to step out of the threshold of their family and serve the society.

VII. Conclusion:

Though India is a country where women are adored and worshipped, where women have actively participated in the administration of the country compared to the West, number of women participating in social service is very less. As a matter of fact, number of women entering employment itself is fast declining in the

recent past. According to a survey, only 30 percent of women of working age are currently in work compared to 80 percent of men in the same age group. According to the estimates from the UN's International Labour Organisation female labour force participation in India fell from 35 percent in 1990 to 27 percent in 2018. The mind-set of women like Nitya and absence of husbands like Chokkalingam might be the reason for this decline. Hence, it is high time women change their narrow perspective and encourage the women around them to empower themselves.

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