

The Predicament of Indian Women as Depicted in Sarojini Sahoo's Novel *the Dark Abode*

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ABSTRACT---India is traditionally a patriarchal and patrilineal society where individual rights are subject to social role expectations. In such societal framework feminine mystique is glorified and a woman's individual self has no recognition. Self-effacement remains as her normal way of life. Woman is supposed to be an ideal wife and an ideal mother and a home-maker. She is expected to be an epitome of virtue. Her supreme duty is to keep the husband happy and satisfied. She should also completely devote herself to the happiness of the household. It is generally seen woman sustains life, she is the preserver of the home and a protector of culture. Even though woman is regarded as 'Shakti' and 'Lakshmi' the society expects her to have a subdued and submissive existence. This paper discusses the burden of such expectations becomes a form of oppression for women.

Keywords---Sexuality, Oppression, Feminine Psyche, Patriarchy, Feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

The Dark Abode is the translation of Sarojini Sahoo's novel Gambhiri Ghara which was published in 2008. Sarojini Sahoo is a feminist novelist who hails from Orissa. She is a bilingual writer and blogger. She is one among the new voices in literature clamouring for attention to a discovery of the inner world of women. She openly discuss about feminine psyche and sexuality which brings negative criticism in a male dominated society. She is admired for breaking sexual and cultural taboos through her writings. The novel is being translated to English from Oriya by Mahendra Kumar Dash. The novel is a collage presentation and there are 23 sketches drawn by the American painter Ed Baker. The paintings celebratemetta (love), mudita (sympathetic joy) and uppekhs (equanimity) which are the states of mind as taught by Buddha. It is a realistic novel and also is translated into many Indian languages. The protagonist of the novel Kuki is an ordinary middle-class Indian housewife married to a man named Aniket and has two children. Once, she and her husband happened to visit the Dhunimal's gallery in Delhi. There she comes across a painting named 'Alienation, -Oil on Canvas'. Kuki was a connoisseur of art. Fascinated by the painting she mails the painter who is a Pakistani Muslim named Safiq and falls into a cyber-love relationship with him. Slowly they start to develop a strong love relationship amidst all the parameters like religion, country, and family.

II. Marriage as a form of entrapment

In India people prefer arranged marriage over love marriage. They believe that love marriages bring humiliation to their family and is an offence. They find arranged marriages remain more successful and last longer than the love

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marriage which loses its charm after few years. People consider a girl who has come of puberty as a burden until she married off to somebody and once married, she becomes the property of husband and his family. Women who are divorced, unwed mothers or single are considered as outcasts. Kuki is a representative of a typical Indian housewife. For her, marriage is a contract that should be honoured till death. Marriage subjugates and enslaves women. According to her, "Married life was such a strange entity. It wiped out all traces of love...living on a day today basis with another person slowly begins to appear like the discharge of one's duties as set out in a contract" (Sahoo 43).

Matrimony serves as a weapon in the hands of patriarchy to coerce and silence women. Patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies, where females are most oppressed as in the traditional system. Even though she is educated, she remains confined within the four walls of the house doing the domestic chores or the 'supermom' marriage, in which the man works and the woman tries to balance a career with childcare and household duties. She is bounded by the duties to her family looking after her husband and children. She is a victim of the patriarchal mind set. She is succumbed to familial obligation which expects her to follow the tradition of holding herself in a confinement of four walls. She is bereft of freedom of thought, expression and identity. She is also deprived the freedom to work according to her wish or choice. Once she is married, everything acts according to the desires of the husband and in-laws. A married woman like Kuki, is left with practically no choice save what her husband Aniket wills and desires. She cannot unburden herself, and her feminine instinct is curbed and suppressed. The access to computer and internet is the only way to pass her loneliness. Kuki is a sensitive and intelligent woman who leads a vapid kind of existence. She develops an emotional relationship with her counterpart Safiq though they are physically apart.

The novel is divided into 23 chapters and every new chapter starts with a repetition of the last sentence of the previous chapter. The plot builds up by a series of soothing emails embellished with romantic poems and personal information that is exchanged between Kuki and Safiq which becomes a routine affair. Kuki is often plagued by her orthodox and conservative thoughts which are ingrained so deeply within herself. The age old values that had seeped into her psyche due to her upbringing didn't allow her to trust even a Muslim. But she never in her wildest dreams thought that she would fall in love with a Pakistani Muslim. His passionate overtures forced her to spend hours waiting for his emails despite the fact that their respective religion and countries will keep them separated.

Safiq being honest with her, revealed everything about him. He had two wives and four children. He also had fling relationship with an American girl named Linda Johnson and several others. Although Safiq's candid and impulsive maundering galvanised Kuki, his foible of going astray had filled her with total disgust and abhorrence. Yet she couldn't avoid him since she felt as if no one had given her so much in her entire life. They had their conversation at three levels- common\man's world, ethereal love and sensual love. To him Kuki was 'Rokshana' which makes her feel numb at first. She felt like losing her identity. But later on she accepts it for the sake of unconditional love. Safiq, once gushed out that he had sex with 52 different women to which Kuki felt betrayed by a Casanova. His perverted nature caused her acute mental turmoil. But the love she had nurtured for him kept them going. She tasted the fruit of happiness with Safiq.

"Kuki remembered that she had not fallen ill for the last eight months. She had smiled her way through these last few months. All the rebukes and the mishaps had not succeeded in leaving her heart broken. Aniket's anger and outburst didn't seem to matter to her any longer.(Sahoo 43)

III. Privatization of Wifehood

Women remain as mute spectators of the atrocities directed to them by their counterparts. They suffer all the exploitation and barbarity silently inside them without letting others knowing about it. It is the male individuals of the family who even selects the dress and decides how she should walk, talk to whom and even eat what. A woman is expected to live for 'others' than for herself since she is controlled and moulded by them. She was caught between two worlds. Kuki's husband Aniket was an example of a civilized individual, urban-educated executive working in a multinational company. But he was short tempered and used foul language when he was angry. He shows his patriarchal authority or manliness over her by slapping her in front of the public for drinking water from a road side stall. He considered her as his property. "Kuki was his property; he would scold her, beat her, love her, adorn her with sarees and jewellery and Kuki would accompany him like his shadow at parties and picnics he went to" (Sahoo 48).

This shows his nature of privatization of wifehood and his possessive nature. On one hand there was her husband Aniket who was the love of her youth and on other there was Safiq who was the love of her middle age. Aniket was short tempered and obsessed with cleanliness while Safiq was honest, broad minded but perverted. Kuki before marriage desperately longed to get imprisoned from the golden cage where she was born and fly to freedom. Aniket who imprisoned her from that golden cage curbs her into the confines of domesticity which in turn chokes her existence. Kuki loved to work, and she had a plan to start an NGO. But Aniket was a prey to the age-old belief that working women will lose their simplicity and softness. Aniket also didn't like Kuki being a socialite. When a gentleman enquires Kuki's absence in a party, Aniket replies that Kuki doesn't feel comfortable in crowd and she didn't like parties. Also, Kuki was forced to say that she hardly got time after taking care of the studies of her kids and the domestic duties. In reality Kuki had a lot of time after taking care of everything and it was Aniket who looked after the studies of children. It is a common thing in Indian households that if children commit a mistake, their mothers are responsible and blamed. Here Aniket rebukes Kuki for spoiling the children when one of children's conversations ignites his anger. He beats up Kuki for this silly matter. Since Aniket is the master of his family he thwarts all the frustrations to wife battering and abusing children. He even makes fun of Kuki's education despite she is being a postgraduate in arts. Aniket always doubted Kuki's abilities and never shared anything with her. He considered her as not competent enough in many things like in teaching children, looking after them while they are sick etc. This caused her great agony. He ridiculed her by calling her a 'white elephant'. There was no use in rearing a white elephant, but it had a great expenditure. Likewise, Kuki was considered by him of no use. Be it Aniket or Safiq, Kuki hadn't an individuality or a sense of identity of her own. She was a possession just to be showed off like a white elephant. To Safiq, she was just a showpiece.

Kuki inhabited two worlds both literally and figuratively. While Aniket ignored Kuki in every matter, Safiq craved for her company in each and everything. For Aniket, Kuki's existence was only meant to receive him at the home when he returned from his working place and keep his things in order. Women are treated as slaves by Men. Their bodies are the sights of enjoyment for them. Women can't discuss openly about sexuality. It is considered as a forbidden topic. Men attain pleasure whenever they want. They can seek love from wherever they wish, and it isn't a crime of taboo for them. They can gratify their sexual hunger with as many women they want. Even men are

allowed to keep more than one wife in several religions. It's quite natural with the society. But if a woman does so, it isn't treated in the same manner. People view her as a person with bad moral conduct and call her 'whore' keep her away from the mainstream. Men have the license to blurt out how many women have he slept with. It is considered as a trait of their masculine nature. Safiq openly tells Kuki that he has slept with 52 women without any repentance and shame. And he who lives the life of a butterfly is ready for the falling with Kuki and longs for her. Even sex is according to the wills and desires of the "Master". Sahoo openly renders sexuality in her novels.

"sex is just a game for him. I am yet to discover what an orgasm is. You will be astonished to know that i have not been kissed for last fourteen years. i know it probably seems very unnatural" (Sahoo 57).

Women have always been portrayed as objects or commodities for carnal pleasure by earlier writers. Sahoo through the psyche of Kuki gives vent to the physical and psychological needs of a woman. It is said that Kuki was able to grasp and use several words while communicating to Safiq which she marked as taboo terms to use earlier. A pillow stands as a barrier between Aniket and Kuki once his sensual hunger is satisfied. Once he is done, he turns his back and goes to sleep. The touch and breath of his wife becomes intolerable and infectious for him. Women should be readily available for craves of men whenever their desire. But if a woman expresses the same, there may be every chance of her being misunderstood as a bad woman by her own husband. She may be misunderstood for having pre-marital sex. The active role of woman has always been denied in the case of sexuality. A woman isn't allowed to be open to sexual desires. According to Indian scenario, women's sexuality is used for raising of children only and there is no place for sexual desire in it. There is a social construct that women are sexually passive than men which is not true. Kuki along with another character named Tabassum who is Safiq's second wife celebrates sexuality in the novel.

IV. Conclusion

Even though Kuki accepts Safiq's words that his love is more intense and purer than Aniket's, she doesn't want her family to disintegrate. Through the power of love Kuki is able to transform a perverted man into a dedicated lover. The novel presents the miserable state of a middle class housewife enmeshed with the responsibilities towards her family. The novel ends in a positive note of longing for their union. The novel also discusses several issues like polygamy, terrorism, Job security in corporate world and freedom of expression through art. The novel aptly portrays the struggles of Indian women from a middleclass point of view.

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