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An Overview of Feminist Themes in Shobhan Bantwal's Novels: A Comparative Study in South Asian Diasporic Literature

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Abstract

This paper shares an overview of Shobhan Bantwal's novels and the way she intertwined romance, family, social issues experienced by south Asian women. In her novels like *The Dowry Bride*, *The Forbidden Daughter*, *The Sari Shop Widow*, and *The Unexpected Son*, Bantwal pin point at critical topic such as dowry, mental violence, gender inequality, caste, and cultural expectations. Her writings are easy to relate and provide a platform to ponder upon social system. This study showcase problem which can be share in simple narrative so reach commercial purpose as compare to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Arundhati Roy, whose work are literary and takes times to understand. This study also highlights how Bantwal's character is indulged in dilemma due to tradition. Bantwal's novels share women's experience and challenges within South Asian fiction. This paper brings out reappraisal to theme, narrative, women voices in Bantwal's novels and examine importance in literature world.

Keywords - Indian-American story, romance and social realism, commercial vs. literary, Feminist Themes, Narratives.

Introduction

In the early 21st century need of diasporic writers especially South Asian literature came into existence that captured ignored themes of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation. Among the prominent voices Shobhan Bantwal is also one of an Indian-American author whose novels weaves story around lives of South Asian women caught in the crosscurrents of tradition and modernity.

Her fiction has flavor of "Bollywood in a book," Bantwal combines romance with pressing social issues like dowry violence, gender discrimination and caste oppression (Bantwal).

This paper discuss an overview of Bantwal's major works *The Dowry Bride*, *The Forbidden Daughter*, *The Sari Shop Widow*, and *The Unexpected Son*. It analyzes way of handling issues related to gender, marriage,

diaspora, and caste, love and compare with similar genre authors for literary strategies.

Literary authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Bharati Mukherjee are similar generation authors who also observed problem related women within Indian diaspora society. Bantwal's writings are popular form of story narrating it also carries significant feminist content while popular in form, carries significant feminist content and sociocultural undertones that contribute meaningfully to South Asian diasporic literature.

Gender and Patriarchy in Bantwal's Fiction

Bantwal's novels often depict women as victims of patriarchal system but another side they also emerge as self-reliant woman with positive perspectives and ready to cope up with societal issues. In the novel *Dowry Bride*, female protagonist Megha, suddenly discovers that her in-laws are planning to kill her because unfulfillment of demanded dowry. In this novel Bantwal has penned down positive attitude of Megha towards her life and abolish stereotype thoughts and tries to escape from situation leaving every notions behind. Gradually she overcomes with support of her husband's cousin and builds her life. This novel highlights unemotional behaviors by husband, evil practices of Dowry killing, memory of past bad incidences and mental dilemma of woman.

Why had her parents thrown her to the wolves by marrying her off to a man they barely knew?" – Shobhan Bantwal, *The Dowry Bride*

This quote express that woman are treated as responsibility, commodities from parent's side in arranged marriage system. It states typical patriarchy way in Indian society where woman's wish are ignored and her fate is decided by family over amount of dowry. "She could not – would not – go back to the man who had tried to kill her. The man her parents had chosen for her."

The above line help dilemma of woman when she is in challenging situation and rather

than accept her fate, she escapes and gradually rebuilds her life. The novel exposes the still-prevalent evil of dowry-related violence in contemporary India (Bantwal, *The Dowry Bride*).

Similarly, *The Forbidden Daughter* discuss sensitive matters like female infanticide and reproductive rights. When Isha came to know about gender of her baby in womb, she was frightened about reaction will be received from her in laws, On other hand she refused for an abortion which was suggest by Dr Karnik himself. Bantwal shares illegal practice of abortion is also supported by doctors within society on gender bias infanticide.

Bantwal states beautiful supportive behavior as contrast to Megha's husband Nikhil supports Isha decision knowing his parents will be angry and will make several judgment.

This supportive action results in her social denial and challenges associated to protect her daughter (Bantwal, *The Forbidden Daughter*).

Bantwal uses these narratives to reveal how Indian society still take women as second gender. This theme is also prominent in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, which recite Draupadi's perspective in the Mahabharata.

South Asian women author focused on woman voice in male dominated society. However, where Divakaruni majorly writes for mythological theme with strong introspection of inner world of human. Her stories weaves challenge within society and way to be catered by reform.

"A girl who let herself get involved with a boy before marriage was a disgrace to her family." – Shobhan Bantwal, *The Unexpected Son*

These lines describes that how women's behavior is associated with patriarchy and forced to maintained rather than thinking about female chastity.

Marriage and Romantic Autonomy

Another prominent theme in Bantwal's work is the tension and complicated circumstances between arranged marriages and self-reliance.

The Dowry Bride censure arranged marriages that supports patriarchy. On the other hand, in *The Sari Shop Widow* portrays Anjali, a widow hold out against conventional wisdom towards remarriage in accordance to tradition and customs. Her eventual romantic relationship is one of choice and mutual respect (Bantwal, *The Sari Shop Widow*).

These stories echo the themes found in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, where women also push back against traditional marriages while carving out their own paths in modern life. Mukherjee's heroines often reshape their identities in the diaspora, while Bantwal's characters remain more rooted in Indian cultural values. Yet, both authors invite readers to take a closer look at arranged marriage – not to dismiss it outright, but to question how it fits into today's evolving world."

Diasporic Identity and Cultural Duality

"While Bantwal's early novels are set in India, her later works – like *The Sari Shop Widow* and *The Full Moon Bride* – delve into the lives of Indian-Americans. In *The Full Moon Bride*, Soorya Das wrestles with questions of cultural identity and the weight of her parents' expectations around marriage. Her journey captures the struggles many second-generation immigrants face as they try to balance family heritage with the desire for personal freedom (Bantwal, *The Full Moon Bride*).

She lived in two worlds: one that demanded she honor her Indian heritage, and another that encouraged her to be bold, assertive, and independent."

– Shobhan Bantwal, *The Full Moon Bride*

This theme of identity of being caught between cultures is also at the preferred theme

of Jhumpa Lahiri's in *The Namesake*. Lahiri's protagonist, Gogol, wrestles with his name, his roots, and how to define himself as a Bengali-American. Though Lahiri writes with quiet introspection and Bantwal favours emotional, plot-driven narratives, both authors shed light on the inner lives of diasporic characters navigating two very different worlds."

Caste and Social Structures

The Unexpected Son offers a powerful depiction of caste, a taboo topic in both Indian and diasporic literature. The main character, Vinita, is shocked to find out that she had a son with a man from a lower caste before they were married.

The narrative examines the enduring grip of casteism even in the lives of the upwardly mobile (Bantwal, *The Unexpected Son*).

This subject is also explored in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, which portrays a tragic love affair between a woman and an untouchable. Roy's depiction is darker and more literary, while Bantwal offers a redemptive conclusion, aligning with her generally optimistic tone. However, both authors criticize caste as an oppressive institution that continues to destroy lives and relationships.

Narrative Style and Literary Appeal

Bantwal's writing is more into storytelling style, which includes emotion and touch of family drama that connect readers to read and understand scenarios of Indian family. Her narrative are written in third person as an observance. She wants her reader to coordinates with third person perspectives and identify the victims. Her intention to write such way is to naturally connect with problem and sufferers protagonist characters. Her writings include keen interest of social problem because of her experience as NGO volunteer and as a journalist. These experiences helped her in describing problem with more clarity.

Bantwal as an author wanted that reader should read and relates the issues easily so her language is easy and included with regional effects. But some critic's states that she dramatizes fiction on other hand readers appreciate this general reading context with social issues. Desai states this as affective politics regarding fiction which comprise flavors of romance, pain, justice, family, agony that connect to heart of human. If fiction is blend of any social problem and emotion associated to human it is always preferred over literary context and bring about change on perspectives. Bantwal's novel can therefore be read not merely as entertainment but as a site for creating gender and cultural awareness.

Comparative Evaluation

Comparing Bantwal to her peers, however, reveals certain patterns. Where Divakaruni employs myth and historical context, Bantwal works within modern, commonly domestic, milieu. Her characters are ordinary women who become heroes through bravery as opposed to supernatural understanding. Contrasting with the reserved, inward characters of Lahiri, Bantwal's are more boisterous and outgoing.

Mukherjee's characters typically find their transformation within the process of assimilating into American culture, whereas Bantwal's remain grounded within Indian traditions though they seek to overcome outdated practices. Her work becomes consequently more hybrid – neither completely Westernized nor strictly traditional.

While Bantwal will not be feted in academic literary journals as much as Lahiri or Roy, her contribution to the construction of diasporic popular fiction cannot be denied. She brings the feminist message into the mainstream by reframing it through the vehicle of mass-market romance, enabling her novels to appeal to various readers who are unaware of South Asian social concerns.

Conclusion

Shobhan Bantwal's novels provide a spectrum of women's lives are affected in South Asian societies. Her fictions aiming literary vision clearly identifies tug between Indian tradition and western culture, importance of love, filial relationship, and self-emancipation. Her writing is balance romantic experiences with revealing social issues of society. She engages real societal pressures and problem need to be understand and addressed.

By contrasting Bantwal with other contemporaries of her time, we observe how she enriches the literary scene in broader with her bestselling yet socially engaged fiction Her writings focused on commercial purpose to reach out maximum readers as compare to other prominent authors like Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee or Arundhati Roy. It helps to connect with non-academic readers in less time of span.

Her contribution is not just in what she has to say but in how she says it—through emotion, drama, and finally, hope. She represents to marginalized women writer community and highlights the oppression culture their dilemma's in simple narratives in modern society as matter of concern. Bantwal's novels are example of simple writing while describing subjects like social conflicts, gender discourse, self-persona.

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