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TRANSFIGURATION OF GIRLS FROM VICTIMS TO RESCUERS

Dr. DARSHITA DAVE

Assistant Professor

V.M.Mehta Muni. Arts & Commerce College, Jamnagar



Dr. DARSHITA DAVE

ABSTRACT

In this modern India one comes across certain intelligent and courageous girls who raise their voices against the patriarchal norms. Such girls fight their battles on their own to change their destiny. They not only transform their lives, but are helpful in transforming others' lives also. They contribute actively in the national development too. These are the girls who celebrate their journey from victimized to liberated and individual selves.

Kashmira Sheth and Kamla Markanaya depict the picture of such girls in their novels. This paper analyses Leela in Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner*, Mira and Pemala in Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*. These girls are successful in awakening new consciousness amongst other girls and society.

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After a period of aggressive deficiencies which can break certain girls mentally we can see that girls succeed in breaking the constraints binding them and developing independent identities. Once they have succeeded in the quest and found their true selves, they are at peace with themselves and with the world. They become people who have their own aims in life, making their own choices, with a sense of responsibility. They become liberated in their thinking and actions, in contrast to their earlier selves, which were similar to the traditional concept of a woman that is submissive, docile, fearful, dependent and suffering in silence.

Once liberated, girls learn to live on an equal footing with men and develop qualities earlier associated with 'manliness' like aggressiveness, ambition, broad mindedness, independence and courage. Through finding their true identities entails a lot of mental agony and struggle. It is this struggle for self-realization that becomes a text of most women writers. The quest for an authentic self is an off recurring theme in the fiction of many women writers. This quest for identity is manifested in their

rebel against tradition and conventions, their efforts to develop their individualities, their efforts to develop a whole and harmonious self, at both emotional and intellectual levels and thus experience real peace and happiness in their lives.

In this modern India one comes across certain intelligent and courageous girls who raise their voices against the patriarchal norms. Such girls fight their battles on their own to change their destiny. They not only transform their lives, but are helpful in transforming others' lives also. They contribute actively in the national development too. These are the girls who celebrate their journey from victimized to liberated and individual selves.

Today it is recognized that to try and improve the position of women one needs to look at the girl child who is a woman of tomorrow. Only when one visualizes a female child with high self esteem not merely in recipient roles, but in active, productive roles with a concern for human dignity will have strong and empowered women. The ultimate goal is to have an active, healthy and confident female child unfettered by socio-cultural

patterns and traditional norms with equal access to knowledge, information and opportunities. To have an empowered woman it is important that one starts with the girl child. The girl child needs to be empowered to enter the mainstream of economic and social activity.

The search for a liberated self other than the one imposed upon women by society and culture begins when the woman starts thinking and questioning the codes of conduct laid down by society, especially a patriarchal one. This thinking and questioning attitude can start right from the woman's childhood, persist through adulthood, that is, marriage and motherhood, and become a mature understanding of one's individuality leading to an integrated, whole personality. Once they have succeeded in the quest, and found their true selves, they are at peace with themselves and with the world. They become people who have their own aims in life, making their own choices, with a sense of responsibility. They become liberated in their thinking, and actions. "Childhood is a very important period in the formation of character and for the emergence of a value structure in the life of a human being." (Aerathu Vincent: 43) Though the girl child was absent for long in Indian literature, we get some memorable portrayals of the girl child in recent Indian English fiction.

In the 20th century, women's writing is considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements. The last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writing of Indian English literature. Today is the generation of those women writers who have money and are mostly Western educated. They describe the whole world of women with simply stunning frankness. Their write-ups give a glimpse of the unexplored female psyche which has no accessibility. The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated women.

The most formative years of the woman's life- when she is growing up remains by and large unexplored. The novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kashmira Sheth believe that childhood experiences are lasting and that they have a crucial role to play in the formation of a healthy personality. The novelists like Shashi

Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Kashmira Sheth are the few Indian English women writers who have portrayed the girl child with deliberation. These novelists have redeemed the gloomy situation by creating some memorable girl characters. Notable among them being Saroja and Lalitha in Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins*, Raka in Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain*, Leela in Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner*, Saru in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, Kalpana in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, Mira in Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, and Monisha in *Voices in the City*. There is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonists.

Indian English women authors like Kamala Markandaya and Kashmira Sheth, have begun to create novels with girls playing a central role in the novels. They are empowered and progressive, imagined through the lens of liberal feminism, they act to expand or even reject traditionally prescribed social roles for Indian girls by insisting that girls and boys are equally valued members of society and deserve equal opportunities particularly in relation to education and self-determination. Rejecting prescriptive traditional constructions of girls as passive, dependent, restricted to the domestic sphere, and less valuable than boys, contemporary Indian English women writers, both celebrate girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girls as part of powerful interconnected webs of family and community relationship. These novelists have also presented the gloomy picture of society that still believes that girls are objects to use for its convenience and pleasure. These novelists have portrayed the realistic picture of some unfortunate girls who cannot protest and raise their voice against the wrong done to them. They fail to assert their individuality. Contemporary Indian English women novelists show the plight of Indian girls who struggle at various levels in their lives.

Karishma Sheth's *Keeping corner*(2007) is a story of a 'new girl' who challenges the traditional boundaries of patriarchy by refusing traditional images of unequal opportunity. The protagonist Leela is compelled by traditional doctrine to 'keep corner' by remaining inside her home for a year after she is widowed at the age of twelve. Even after the

year ends, her subsequent life, as dictated by tradition, will remain a segregated subsistence: she will be a social outcast and considered a burden on her family. But Sheth images a positive resolution for Leela, who refuses to be constrained by social restrictions on Hindu widows and protests against this unfair treatment. Instead of remaining housebound and dependent, Leela completes her education and influences others to see girls and women capable of providing valuable contributions to society. She later becomes active in Gandhi's freedom movement. She is the epitome of the new Indian girl, a role only emphasized by this text's setting on the cusp of independence.

Keeping Corner is a story of Brahmin girl Leela, who lives in a small village Jamlee, in the Indian state of Gujarat in 1918. Leela was engaged to Ramanlal at the age of 2 and she got married at the age of 9. When the novel begins Leela is 12 years old and she is about to leave her parents' house and go to live with her husband as per tradition. She has never been interested in school. She does not care for the chaotic situation in India and Gandhiji's struggle for independence. She is very much a pleasure-loving and carefree girl who enthusiastically looks forward to move to her husband's place. As a child, marriage for her is just about wearing beautiful cloths, wearing new jewellery, eating good food and have fun. But her husband dies and she becomes a widow at the age of 12. With her husband's death Leela's life changes forever. Instead of being showered with gifts and affection, she is forced to shave her head and give away her favourite saris and bangles. Leela is compelled to follow the tradition of 'keeping corner' by remaining inside her house for a year. As per Indian tradition, the subsequent life of Leela will remain the same. Leela will be a social outcaste and considered a burden by her family. As Leela tells her teacher, "A year of keeping corner will never end. It will be as long as a river" (Sheth: 107).

Social and religious requirements that illogically dictate women's behaviour; she rails against her family, dissatisfied with their flimsy insistence that this is simply the way things have always been. While Leela initially believes her social position is nonnegotiable due to her fate and the ferocious strength of society versus her own

apparent impotence, she later comes to understand that her actions can make a difference in changing her life. In reading the newspaper daily, as well as undertaking other reading for her schoolwork, she becomes familiar with the philosophical values and protest work of activists, including Gandhi, who are leading the struggle to emancipate women in India as well as India itself. In turn, Leela then recognizes that her individual actions can affect her entire society. With the help of such as her teacher and her brother Leela not only acts with agency to fulfill her goals, she also realizes that she can contribute to modernizing Indian society.

Significantly, Leela does not convince of herself solely as an individual, but rather sees herself as connected with a societal whole once she begins to understand her position as part of the larger condition of child widows, widows in general, and ultimately women's roles in Indian society. As she becomes familiar with Gandhi's progressive, modern views on women's changing roles in India, Leela begins to recognize as unjust traditional,

In 'Keeping Corner' Kashmira Sheth tries to depict a new Indian girl character in Leela who is shaped by liberal feminist ideals and successfully balance tradition and modernity; she honours tradition by working from within and improving family and community relationships; at the same time she embraces modernity in her fight for gender equality, which she attains by developing herself through education and by making valuable contributions to public society, outside of the domestic sphere. For some readers at least, this model of girlhood is likely to be inspirational.

Middle class girl Leela plays the central text in this text. She is empowered and progressive; imagined through the lens of liberal feminism, she acts to expand or even reject traditionally prescribed social roles for Indian girls by insisting that girls and boys are equally valued members of society and deserve equal opportunities, particularly in relation to education and self-determination. Rejecting perspective traditional construction of girls as passive, dependent, restricted to the domestic sphere, and less valuable than boys, Kashmira Sheth celebrates girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girl as central to the

narrative and by positioning leela as part of powerful interconnected webs of family and community relationships. Leela unanimously succeed in achieving transformation by acting with agency to improve her own life and the life of people about whom she cares and the well- being of her communities.

Mira and Premala, the protagonists of *Some Inner Fury* also are victims of Indian patriarchal society. Girls in the novels of Kamala Markandaya are beyond doubts the victims of social and economic pressures and disparities. However, they raise themselves above all these and cross the barriers of discrimination only for the larger concepts of universal love and concord. The common thread in all her female characters is that the quest for autonomy for the self coupled with nurturance for the family and fellow feeling for the larger community of men and women, a venture in which female characters are confronted with several obstacles emerging mainly from the irregularities in the social system along with economic difficulties. As the girls battle with these forces they develop mature vision of life.

Mira and Premala in *Some Inner Fury* are the girls who give priority to national fulfilment than personal fulfilment. They sacrifice their personal pleasure and love for the noble cause. Like true freedom fighters, they don't even hesitate to sacrifice their lives for the nation. In their venture both of them come across many hurdles, but they successfully pass all the hurdles and successfully achieve their goals. Instead of being angels in the house, they prefer to be individual selves.

In *Some Inner Fury* one comes across three such female characters, Roshan, Mira and Premala. Roshan Merchant is an outspoken, educated woman. She bestows her outstanding qualities upon her less fortunate sisters around her. From a columnist, she becomes the owner of the paper. Her magnetic dynamism appeals even to the conventional Premala. Her quest for identity and autonomy cannot be separated from her desire for national independence. Her foreign education does not distance her from her people, but instils in her the need for personal as well as national freedom. Roshan is a bold woman that is why she can protest

and raise voice against injustice done to Indians. She becomes angry when Indians do not show courage to protest and raise voice against injustice done to them. She says, "Of course, if you are all prepared to accept this- if you don't want even to protest- there is nothing more to be said"(Markandaya: 135)The condition of girls are also same in India, they do not dare to voice against patriarchy and have to remain chained in traditional codes and custom. Roshan, has her own ideas, she leads her life on her own terms. Roshan is a woman who enjoys freedom of choice, which she wants for Indian people also. She believes that everyone has right to choose the way of living and no one can force one to behave in certain pattern. She is a woman who has her own ambition in life, making her own choices, with a sense of responsibility. She becomes liberated in her thoughts and actions. Mira progresses rather painfully to a higher level of perception. It is in the company of Roshan that Mira realizes that there are many gateways to the freedoms and one has immense capacity to achieve freedom of mind. In this context Sriwadkar says,

Mira is not defeated in the pursuit of physical, mental and emotional freedom, but she learns that there are many dimensions to freedom. (38)

Markandaya breathes life in her female characters who with the strength of adoption convert the challenge of life into a pursuit of finer values that make life worth living. In *Some Inner Fury* Markandaya presents girl characters like Mira and Premala and woman character like Roshan as epitome of modern girls who unanimously succeed in achieving transformation by acting with agency to improve their own lives, the lives of people about whom they care and well- being of their communities. Though basically, Kamala Markandaya has projected the traditional image of female characters, it will be injustice to carve her female characters in this image, as she has re-discovered, redefined and asserted her identity and recognition as person, not as possession. Feeling the pulse of the changed time, she has created a new race of girl, who is neither staunch traditionalist nor ultra-modern but that who honours the tradition and welcome modernity to the best of her calibre and

sensibility. She can very intelligently keep pace with the new developments of the fast electronic world. To create such new race, she has taken up the most vitalizing stuff of tradition along with the purest light stuff of modernity. By creating the new image of girls Kamala Markandaya has emerged as a bridge between the tradition and modernity. Markandaya's female characters are in search of something positive. Applauding this quality, Dr. A.V.Krishna Rao observes,

Kamala Markandaya's novels in comparison with those of her contemporary women writers seem to be more fully reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India as she attempts to project the image of the changing traditional society. (Rao:55)

This should not obscure the fact that as with the 'new Indian girl', it is primarily urban, middle-class girls who are most likely to gain the empowered state of new Indian girls, while girls from rural regions, low caste groups and low socioeconomic status are either absent from the texts or portrayed as deficient and reliant on new Indian girl to rescue them. This positions the textual image of other versions of girlhood. Clearly this portrayal of the new Indian girl is incomplete, but it can also provide aspirational versions of gender equality, particularly in the pursuit of educational opportunities for girls, an important focus in contemporary India. The overreaching goal of the new Indian girl character is to improve society in accordance with liberal values and to create an imagined positive outcome according to a hegemonic value system; in other words, her job is to transform social gender roles so that middle-class girl can contribute to nation building activities but to leave relatively undisturbed current class and caste hierarchies.

This chapter has depicted some bold and intelligent girls like Leela, Mira and Premala. These are the girls who are embodiment of the girls who not only get their strength back to fight against the traditional norms and injustice done to girls, but they also help others to fight their battles. These are the girls who bring transformation in their own lives as well as they successfully transform others' lives also. India is a country where a girl is trained to be perfect

woman, in the sense perfect not as a human being or responsible citizen but perfect in household chores, perfect to maintain a family. Leela, Mira and Premala are not girls who remain confined to home and household duties. They are epitome of modern, educated, responsible citizens of a country who think of the welfare of their community, society and nation. They live their lives for a noble purpose to serve the nation and bring some positive change in people's traditional set of mind.

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