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ANNIHILATION OF THE FEMALE SELF-A FEMINISTIC STUDY OF H.E.BATES'S STORY
THE OX

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ABSTRACT

The manner or way of presenting women characters in a literary text is one of the biggest concerns of feminism. Subjugation of women is a very common phenomenon in the patriarchal system of society. In family and society women are supposed to have certain traits which enable them to bear pain, mental and physical. In H.E.Bates's short story '*The Ox*' Mrs. Thurlow gives up all her personal likings for the sake of the family. She has no entertainment, as her sole goal is to make her sons well- established in life. Each second of her life is devoted to the betterment of the lives of her husband and two sons. But most astonishingly she fails to inculcate any feelings for her in their mind. Though her self is brutally tortured the male dominated system prohibits her to recognize any kind of humiliation. This paper tries to locate how her own self is mutilated for the sake of patriarchal satisfaction. It is interesting to see how male relations like husband and son constitute a part of dominating collective male ego. This paper reflects how the female persona gets martyred in the altar of patriarchy.

Key words : feminism, pain, ego, humiliation, tortured, patriarchy.

Introduction

Herbert Ernest Bates (1905-1974) is famous for his presentation of his characters in stories. Henry Miller in his preface to the book '*Seven by Five*' (1963), a collection of stories by Bates has opined that Bates has 'an obsession with pain'. The writer is generally pitiful to his characters. They have a huge inner strength to endure almost everything. And when it is a matter of endurance female characters inevitably come first in the stories. In the story '*The Ox*' Mrs. Thurlow leaves no stone unturned to maintain her family single handedly. Like every woman in the society she gives up all her wishes and desires for the sake of her family. Her only goal is to make her sons established in life. Other three members in the family only enjoy her service. Her female self is crushed under the wheel of patriarchal system.

Discussion

Through a deep psychological penetration Bates presents the character of Mrs. Thurlow. She lives with her husband Mr. Thurlow and two sons in a house on a small hill. She works in many household and farms from morning to evening. She has an awkward habit of pushing her bicycle as if to maintain balance. It also carries a lot of things- clothes, sacks, can, vegetables, old newspaper and many other things. 'She was like a beast of burden'. Round the clock she works for others without thinking of herself. She has 'angular boniness' and she moves with 'eyes on the ground'. Doing various hazardous jobs she has saved some money for her sons and keeps it a secret. Her husband is a fool boasting of a silver plate in his head. He has no idea of his duty towards his family. Mrs. Thurlow has no rest - when her husband and sons are in bed at night she blows out the candle and folds clothes. She has a

target of increasing her saving from fifty-four pounds to a hundred. Even when she dreams, it is the dream of pushing the bicycle and of doing hard works. One of the main concern of feminism is the representation of women's condition in literature. The goal is to uncover patriarchal tensions within texts and interrogate the ways in which basic literary assumptions about such texts are contingent on female subordination. Mrs. Thurlow is just a labourer for her family and others. She has no power to protest against any kind of domination or subjugation. She has been presented as an oppressed model and unfortunately she is compared with an ox. Theorists like Mary Ellman and Kate Millet question this kind of presentation of feminine in literature. Mrs. Thurlow herself makes a world of her own-it is of hard toil. When her husband takes the afternoon nap or her sons visit the church she keeps herself busy at work. Reading outdated newspaper on Sundays is her only entertainment and only medium to connect with the happenings of outer world. But nothing moves her and she has an animal like impassivity. But she is thoughtful of her sons; to make them respectable in the society. Surely it is not emotional feeling; rather a matter of financial establishment and security. So a feeling of contempt for her is born in the heart of her sons. Her husband leaves the house one night stealing the money which she saved for the sons. He is charged for a murder and police took her to the police station for enquiry. But she is reluctant to leave her bicycle. Police informs her that her husband is accused of doing the murder using billhook. When she is said that Mr. Thurlow threatened the man with dire consequences she replies that it was not unlikely of him. It clearly suggests that she has to tolerate this kind of aggressiveness from her husband. Strange enough that she was more concerned of the lost money than her husband. To her the money was the symbol of future of her sons. When for the second time she is called to the police station and informed of the arrest warrant against her husband she expresses no feeling but only asks about the money. It is evident that non-receiving of love, affection and sympathy from her husband for a long time has turned her into such an emotionless being. Any relation in the society depends upon mutual respect

and understanding. The patriarchal system always stresses on the responsibility of women in maintaining relation and it demands unconditional obedience to the male members of the family. The obedience can be earned by threat but love and fellow feelings are different. Mr. Thurlow's attitude towards her wife fails to produce any sympathy in her. After this incident she decides to go to her brother's house four miles away. She does not ride the bicycle but grasping its handles she feels confident and secured. Her brother was a carpenter and a 'man of straight-grained thinking and purpose, who had no patience with slovenliness'. His financial condition was much better than of Mrs. Thurlow. The relation between them was not good as her marriage with Mr. Thurlow was not approved. But her relatives in parental house get shocked hearing the news. She requests her brother to look after her sons for sometime till the things get settled. He agrees and offers her the car what he has bought to run her back. But she refuses it insisting that she has the bicycle. She thinks that her sons have a clear tendency to be a good carpenter and they may one day surpass their maternal uncle one day. They were excited about their journey and the scope of performing skill in the job of carpentry. After their departure she becomes alone and as usual engaged herself in her daily job. She is informed by the police of Mr. Thurlow's arrest and the hope of recovering the money comes to her mind first: 'to her the money was like a huge and irreplaceable section of her life. It was part of herself, bone and flesh, blood and sweat'. In Metford police station she becomes an object of curiosity and ridicule-'eyes looking at her, box files in white rows appearing also to look at her, voices talking to her, an arm touching her...'. Her husband has done the murder and she is facing the humiliation. Male dominated society has always blamed the wives for their incapability to restrain their husbands from performing any nuisance. They are marginalized from the mainstream of the society but they are blamed for the demolition of social order. In police station, in the village, on the streets her honour and dignity is crushed. Flash of the cameras do not take her photo only but it burns her heart. She is never concerned with the court proceedings but it is her sons' future that is worth to

her. In the springtime with much hope she comes to her brother's house to take her sons back. She is told that they the boys are not interested to go back to her. To be sure she wants to hear it from the mouth of her sons. It was a huge shock that her own sons refuse to return to their mother-'she could think of nothing to say in protest or argument or persuasion...give expression to the inner part of herself, the crushed core of optimism and faith.' Hoping against hope she again confirms their opinion and then she moves on with a painful heart with her bicycle; no, it is not to the future but to nowhere. She was almost decimated losing the power to move on-'the mud of the track seemed to suck at her great boots and hold her down. The wheels of the bicycle seemed as if they would not turn, and she could hear the noise of the air dying once again in the tyre.' It is not just the puncture of the tyre but it is her life and her hope which have been punctured by the pin of male chauvinism.

The character of Mrs. Thurlow has been portrayed in a peculiar way by the writer. He has shown some abnormal behavior in her. He is neither critical of Thurlow nor of his behavior. In her article 'Women and Madness: the critical Phallacy' Shoshana Felman has rightly questioned: 'is it by chance that hysteria was originally conceived as an exclusively female complaint, as the lot and prerogative of women? And is it by chance that even today, between women and madness, sociological statistics establish a privileged relation and a definite correlation?' Mrs. Thurlow works for her husband and sons relentlessly without any entertainment. In his book 'Subjection of Women' John Stuart Mill wrote: 'there remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house.' He argued that women's subordination is a barbarous relic of an earlier historical period; far from being the inevitable outcome of natural attributes, it originated in force and now sanctified by custom so as to appear 'natural'. The story is about labour, dejection, hopelessness, refusal and it is none but a woman who has been associated with these.

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