

Women in Conflict Zone : A Critique of Vikas Swarup's Q & A

ARUN GULERIA

VALLABH GOVT. COLLEGE, MANDI

Conflict means a serious disagreement or argument or a clash. Here women in conflict zone does not mean she is in war zone but a zone related with her condition in social and cultural set up. Literature, right since its inception has had umbilical connection with the socio-cultural milieu in which it took birth. Literature, undoubtedly, expresses the society, reflects the society and is acknowledged as the mirror of society. It is mirror of the mind that reflects the 'zeitgeist' i.e. the spirit of the age and society. A significant number of novelists and storywriters have set their narratives in the socio-cultural and political context in which they lived and had dexterously captured the picture of their time in their works. Walter Allen rightly observes:

Contemporary novels are the mirror of the age, but a very special kind of mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it. (18)

Poetry, Stories, Drama, Fiction etc are medium of literature. But the genre of fiction is most noticeably affected by the sociological trends and tries to capture these social trends and conditions within its ambit as far as possible. The novels and the other short narratives in prose are designed and crafted in such a manner so as to reflect 'the race, milieu and the moment'. These narratives tend to form a bond between society and literature and henceforth depict the fears, hopes, passions, prejudices, emotions, beliefs and thoughts of the people living in that society. They are imperative for us not only from literary point of view but also serve as

friends, philosophers and guides. Literature, says Terry Eagleton,

... is 'non-pragmatic' discourse: unlike biology textbooks and notes to the milkman it serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to general state of affairs.(7)

Societies have always been a dominant preoccupation of Indian English novelists who have tried to highlight and expose vices and evils in various forms prevalent in Indian society. The menace of corruption, caste discrimination, class discrimination, the gap between the rich and the poor etc. are the vices which are eating into the vitals of Indian society. They weaken the moral fabric of society, which in turn results in a cancerous growth of evil. Such problems, in different manifestations, are major threats before India which is aspiring to become a global superpower. Empowered and disempowered are two faces of a coin; two faces of a society. One is head and the other tail. One throws a command and the other has to obey. Those discriminated in Indian set up can be categorized as disempowered and can be empowered by making concerted efforts to bring about a change in class, racial, economic, political, as well as religious orientation.

The term Subaltern is closely related to the disempowered. Subaltern issues are inseparable part of the society since categorization and marginalization are rampant in every society. Indian society is in the grip of the menace of a divide between the marginalized and the privileged, the mighty and the weak. Society always remains categorized and subaltern issues are the consequences of these categorizations.

An issue coming under the umbrella of subaltern is that of the discrimination against women. Gender discrimination has been a vital issue not only in India but around the globe. Be it discrimination based on male-female relationships in a family or any other kind of relationship prevalent in the society. Women have to raise their voice for identity and equal status everywhere in every country and society. Martin Luthar depicts the plight of women:

Women are created for no other purpose than to serve men and be their helpers. If women go weary or even die while bearing children, that don't harm anything. Let them bear children to death; they are created for that' (qtd in Wiesner, 13)

Women have been largely seen as the objects of male recreation whose job is to be 'homely' and produce children. They have performed a role considered 'secondary' to the major 'masculine roles. Women in India are the victims of 'Internal colonialism' as well as the external colonialism. The victimization of women in 'Internal colonialism' went on unabatedly in silent acceptance. Postcolonial criticism has also revealed and questioned the patriarchal mechanism in victimizing women by creating the passive images of contemporary women.

Female subjugation is very much highlighted in postcolonial literature. Man-woman relationship is a recurring issue in it. The Indian tradition which is handed down from Aryan's time asserts the role of woman as a perfect daughter, a perfect wife and a perfect mother, subordinate to men who have manipulated culture to dominate them. Her image in the Indian mythologies and folk tales is taken as an 'Ideal'. Her 'voice' and 'power of presentation' is rarely been allotted to her. The traditional order of India has been largely promoting the masculine, the males over the females. In the last few decades, postcolonial studies have developed as a branch of literature to give voice to the long muffled colonized voices, that were constrained to read and study the language and literature of the colonizer. For the first time the students of literature were offered something that they

could relate with something outside the western world. Postcolonial studies have helped in giving expression to the colonized and oppressed people in their own language and on their own terms. Ideologically, it became an emancipatory concept for the people of the colonies for it offered them a chance to venture into the study of those aspects of literature that were indigenous. For challenging hegemonic power structure, voice is quite important for the subaltern. Voicing is a term about the ability to be oneself, to follow one's dreams and aspirations, to forge relationships, to express oneself through words and art.

For writers, voicing is their writing, a kind of responsibility to place themselves and their people in the arena of existence. Voicing is a revolutionary journey from margin to the centre.

The novel *Q & A* by Vikas Swarup deals with empowerment and disempowerment in different shades. This novel is better known for movie based on it *Slum-Dong Millionaire*. In postcolonial literature, subaltern concerns have been quite aptly portrayed in some of the recent Indian English fiction with reference to those groups that have been subordinated in manifold ways. Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* purports that norms are established by those in power and imposed on the 'Other' who has had no voice because of race, class, or gender. He brought the issue of sexual abuse and violence against women to the forefront and thus making them a part of public and political discourse.

Post-colonial theory and Feminist discourse are known for their common features. Both these theories have long been thought of as associative, even complementary. Both these discourses focus on the struggle against oppression and are predominantly political. The Feminist discourse vehemently rejects the deeply entrenched system and its proponents categorically oppose the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority. No doubt, like patriarchy, imperialism is a phallogocentric, supreme ideology and dominates its subjects. It is true that the oppressed women are in many respects akin to the colonized. Thus, the exponents / staunch followers of

post-colonialism react against colonialism in the political sense, whereas feminist theorists reject colonialism of a sexual nature.

Swarup through his female protagonists exposes the Indian patriarchal social system. His female characters, who come from the complex, multi-layered strata of Indian society, reveal their subjugation and struggle for liberation. Swarup feels that a woman, whether she is rich or poor, high caste or lower caste, upper class or lower class, is a marginalized being. Bapsi Sidhwa makes an interesting observation in this context:

Colonialism humiliated the men and they in turn humiliated the women. So whenever the condition of society is weak or humbled, women suffer the most. It has given men the only vent for their frustrations. And that pattern continues with expectations of subservience from the women. (Kanaganayakam, 45-46)

Swarup's women are victims of male aggression, are passive sufferers whose destiny lies in the hands of men, however effeminate they may be. Women in his novels are subalterns who rarely speak. Swarup in this novel is concerned with giving them a voice, a past, a name and finally an identity.

Neelima Kumari, one of the female characters in the novel represents the upper layer of society. She is nicknamed as 'Tragedy Queen,' because of her mind-blowing performance on the silver screen. While talking with the narrator, Ram, who is her domestic servant, Neelima Kumari presented her subaltern concern:

Huah! Have you forgotten what I told you once, that an actor is an actor for life? Do not forget that I will forever be known as the Tragedy Queen. And I didn't become a tragedy queen by reciting lines given to me by a scriptwriter. I lived the life of my characters. Ghalib didn't become a great tragic poet just by writing some line in the book. No. You have to feel pain, experience it, and live in your daily life before you can become a tragedy queen. (260)

Neelima Kumari, a single woman who has achieved enough name, fame and money in her life

time, is portrayed as a serious victim of 'Intimate Partner Violence'. It is often felt that economic power or self-sufficiency can give some respect and status to women and thus they can escape oppression in the male dominated society. But in our society, characterized by patriarchal dominance no body is spared.

Every woman in the novel strives to seek true love, yearns for it, wishes to consummate it and enjoy it. However, given the constraints of stringent patterns of patriarchy, the dreams of the women are never fulfilled. Neelima, for example, lives in an illusion for some time that her journey for love is completed and she has achieved it fully but it is not before long that she realizes that it is her body that is loved not her 'self', her mind, her imagination, her choice and the dignity of being an individual. In fact, she is not accepted with the dignity of a woman and as an individual entity by her male counterpart. She yearned for love in life from her lover but her hopes are smashed in because of his careless, irresponsible treatment. For the sake of love, to avoid the ennui, she subsequently allows her lover in her living place. The following morning, Ram is surprised to discover that his employer Neelima is in a terrible condition. "She has bruises all over her face and a black eye" (259).

Neelima Kumari, however, tries to hide the fact of her mistreatment. "Nothing, Ram, I slipped from my bed and hurt myself. Nothing to worry about" (259). It is a commonplace tendency of the female victim of 'Intimate Partner Violence' to conceal her partner's misdemeanor by denying the reality which invariably leads to the more grave turmoil in future. And Neelima like a stereotypical beloved is not an exception to it. After the initial hazard of Neelima Kumari, Ram notices some subtle changes in her behavior. This was some short of anger was mushrooming inside her. About subaltern behavior when victimize under colonial rule, Fenon remarks:

The cumulative impact of prolonged oppression and repressed urges results in the colonized turning their

anger, fear and frustration inward in ways that result in a high incidence of alcoholism, psychiatric disorders, stress-induced physical ailments, and native against native homicides. (1968: 54)

She becomes more and more introverted and withdrawn. Most probably she also starts drinking to shun off her mental nausea. The addiction to alcohol is a calamitous side-effect of 'Intimate Partner Violence'. After a short interval, Ram again discovers her with a black eye and a cigarette burn on her arm. The increase in the frequency of torture makes her more traumatized. The inner mutilation gradually begins to show its tell-tale effects in her outward. Her anger was turning to revenge. She decided to put an end to her relation with her lover. She had hoped that her relation with her lover would give her comfort, solace and love but her quest for love turns into violence. Her final meeting with her brute 'lover' is horrific, to say the least. In order to quell his personal grudge, he behaves even more brutally with her. "...She is in bed with a deep cut above her left eyebrow and her cheek is swollen" (264). But the repercussion of physical violence upon her private parts like breasts is inexplicable as there are numerous cigarette burn marks all over her chest. The violence reaches to acme. Her plight in the male dominated society is told by her in her own words. She tells Ram:

It is destiny of a woman to suffer in silence. And what he has done to my face is nothing compared to what he has done to the rest of my body. Do you want to really see? Then look'. She unfastens the button of her blouse and snaps open her bra... cigarette burn marks all over her chest, looking like little black craters on the smooth white flesh. (265)

Silence of women is an expression of anger against patriarchal system. Mental, physical and emotional downfall of Neelima Kumari makes the situation more hellish for her. Due to random brutal violence, Neelima takes the ultimate decision to break off the relation. She wants to live with her own confidence. She left her lover who was the true representative of male dominating society. She wants to

live the life of her own. She raises her voice for justice against the injustices perpetrated by the custodians of patriarchy by crossing the threshold.

By drawing the agenda like sex-trading through the tragedy of Nita, Swarup wants to bring forth the savagery exercised in this so-called demarcated profession as it is necessary to realize the well and woe of these socially marginalized women from a humanitarian point of view.

Another leading women protagonist Nita's life story in novel reveal the pathetic picture of sex workers or prostitutes. They are brought into this trade due to poverty and sometime under the influence of sociological system or tradition or custom, set by male dominating society. The novel projects a miniature of how far the cruelty and exploitation have done to a professional whore. This is a site of physical violence only; the mental torture is beyond explication.

It must be noted that in Indian socio-economical milieu, the work like whoring is a legalized as well as a stigmatized job. But the girls who are working as a sex traders, most of the time come reluctantly to this profession; circumstances oblige them to enter it. Swarup portrays a brand new 'Real India' in which a family prostitutes a daughter to continue its age old family tradition.

Nita, a Bedia tribal girl from the Bhand district of Madhya Pradesh, is pushed into the world of professional prostitution primarily to fulfill her customary objection but also for the sake of her family livelihood. It is her communal tradition to serve as a prostitute called the 'Bedni'. She is beautiful but her beauty is a bane to her as she muses: "Now I am in this brothel. This is the price I have to pay for beauty. So don't call me beautiful"(305).

Nita exemplifies the most inexorable and worst form of patriarchal victimization. Her voice is muzzled as she is pushed into the world of whoring related violence; her protests are ignored in a matter-of-fact manner. She is shorn of her identity and becomes a generic entity. When she meets the narrator protagonist, Ram Mohammad

Thomas alias Raju in the brothel for the first time, she tells him that a prostitute does not have a surname.

What is your name?’

‘Nita.’

‘Nita What?’

‘Meaning?’

‘I meant what is your full name?’

Don’t you have a surname?’

....‘you come to brothel, Sahib, not a marriage bureau. Prostitutes don’t have surnames. Like pet cats and dogs, we are only called by our first names. Nita, Rita, Asha, Champa, Meena, Leena, take your pick.’(299)

During his second visit to the brothel house, when Ram proposes to her, she retorts: “who will marry a prostitute? We are supposed to work till our bodies start to sag or till we die of disease, whichever is sooner” (306). The tone and tenor of her conversation reveals her despondency, helplessness and bitterness.

The narrator also provides a snapshot of the cruelty and brutality that a professional prostitute has to silently endure in the name of business; She is considered an object by her ‘customers’ and is thus completely dehumanized. Nita too has suffered violent physical assault. At the Emergency Ward of Singhania Hospital, Ram discovers her in utterly wretched condition: “... She has livid bruises all over her face and her lips are peculiarly twisted, as if her jaw has been dislocated. There is blood on two of her teeth, and her left eye is blackened” (328). In addition to this, “There are cigarette burn marks all over her chest, looking like ugly pockmarks on the smooth brown flesh of her breast”(329).

Nita and Ram wants to make marry. The couple’s dream for a new life is almost shattered, as Shyam, Nita’s pimp cum brother demands a huge amount of money for compensation in lieu of a golden goose like her. A female body has put into a share market for auction and the index gradually touches the point of six lakhs in currency! The urgent requirement of plastic surgery is not for her early recovery, but for running the flesh business flourishingly.

Swarup brings the women condition in limelight in Indian society. He conveys the message of women’s plight. Through his protagonist narrator, Swarup suggests that solution to these problems has to come from within rather than from without. History tells us that different political arrangements over the past number of centuries have failed to solve these problems. Similarly, social revolutions also have failed. The solution lies, Swarup suggests, in cultivating humanity, treating others more humanely and more selflessly and, above all, in always practicing that basic spiritual tenet which says that the ‘Other’ is the extension of the ‘Self’.

References:

- Allen, Walter. *Reading a Novel*. London: Phoenix House Ltd., 1960. Print.
- Chelva, Kanaganayakam. “Interview with Bapsi Sidhwa”. *The Toronto South Asian Review*, (Vol. II, No. 1, 1992): 45-46.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London and New York: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1968. Print.
- Swarup, Vikas. *Q&A*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Wiesner, Merry E. *Women and Gender in early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print.