



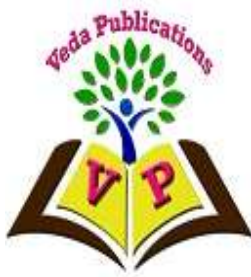
BEYOND THE BIOLOGY: A CRITICISM OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AS MERE BODIES BY INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT



The Indian-English literature, written by women has come down a long way of development. From the devotional, sentimental, aesthetic and nature- oriented literature of Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and other early women writers to the modern Indian women writers from both Twentieth and Twenty- first century- the theme and style of Indian literature has drastically changed. By the late nineteenth century, as under the impact of rapidly growing feminism, the Indian-English literature started including the issues and discussions related to women. The stories of women's lives started becoming a part of narratives. Even, unconventional women characters were also thought of and portrayed. Especially, in the literature written by women, a plethora of concerns related to women came to the forefront. Along with other developments, what is striking to note is that women took the courage to speak about female sexuality in a free manner. The biology of women has always been her major weakness. Because of the delicate constitution and female specific biological experiences, women have suffered exploitation as well as humiliation. In the present paper, I have taken a handful of instances from the writings of women authors in Indian- English literature, who have given voice to the physical and sexual experiences (and exploitations) of women both inside and outside marriage.

Keywords: *Biological Experiences, Sexual Exploitation, Women Writers, Physical Trauma, Emotional Connection.*

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Feminist critics clearly point out that female anatomy is one of the most crucial factors in determining their status as an individual in the world. A woman comes as a direct contrast to man in her physicality. There are specific female experiences like menstruation, pregnancy, breast-feeding the child- which falls exclusively in women's domain. This is where men find an excuse to exclude women from the social life, citing their inability to participate in the active life of the outer world. Since the primary job of a woman is to reproduce and rear children, all the other seemingly unimportant things may be put on hold. In the formation of gender roles, the primary jobs of men and women were separately defined. Men had their share of tougher tasks owing to their masculinity. Women are described as nothing but womb. They are machines of producing children. However, with the gradual change in the perception, women got many rights. They were allowed to study, to come outside their homes and participate in the outside world; even they were allowed to take up a job and work independently.

By the late Nineteenth century, women were as much active in the outside world as men themselves. As an instance one can see the women in Shashi Deshpande's fiction, who live independently, study, work; they are never confined to the domestic circle, or wear any veil. But as a matter of fact, in spite of all the advancements, women still remain at the receiving end where their sexuality comes to the front. Women authors have articulated this general dissatisfaction of women in their literature, time and again. The very first instance of such writings which abruptly comes into mind is "An Introduction" by Kamla Das. She is among the earliest women writers to speak about her own experiences in such an overt manner. It has been a custom among Indians to not to speak about their sexual experiences- even if they spoke, it has always been in a veiled manner. In such an atmosphere of sexual rigidity, it was very brave of Kamla Das to speak in first person about her specific sexual experiences. In "An Introduction" she speaks of the norms that a woman has to follow according to the society. The burden of proper behavior always remains upon individuals. Kamla Das' straight-forward manner of speaking against these biases makes the poem a unique piece in itself; but what is most

striking in her poem, is the way she speaks of physical intimacy between a husband and a wife. It was presented as more like a physical trauma than an activity of pleasure. Kamla Das vividly portrays the horror that a woman has to go through if she is not emotionally involved in the process of love-making;

"...He did not beat me

But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.

I shrank pitifully." (Das, web)

The relationship between a husband and a wife has been excluded from the discussion in public because it is considered to be a strictly private affair. Kamla Das' poem makes it clear that irrespective of the rights that a husband holds over the body of his wife, the emotional relationships are not bound to any such rights. Sexual relations inside marriage can be as much painful as forced exploitation, if a woman is unwilling.

In the novel *The Binding Vine* of Shashi Deshpande a similar echo is found in the story of Mira, the absent, deceased mother-in-law of Urmi. She was a budding poetess who was yoked in a marriage at an early age. Neither her body, nor her soul was prepared for a sexual relationship; but since physical intimacy is the most integral part of a marriage, she, like young Kamla Das, also had to suffer the trauma of an early physical union. Mira was not even able to relate to the general feelings of maternity. She was rather terrified to feel the movements of a baby inside her;

"no, growing painfully within

Like a monster child was born" (83, Deshpande, 1993).

Mira's experience comes as a direct contrast to that of her daughter-in-law Urmi who was in deep mourning after the death of her baby daughter Anu. It is very clearly understood that if a wife is there, she must always be ready with her body and mind to serve her husband. But, in fact the experiences or feelings may differ as according to specific circumstances. Urmi was able to experience the feelings of maternity, maybe because she was willing to have a child, while Mira was not able to feel so. Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence* was also not very happy in her sexual relationship with her



husband, Mohan. Mohan took sexual relations to be purely physical. It was more like a ritual to him because they were husband and wife, and it was expected that they slept together a few times in the week. Jaya felt the thrill of her body fade away gradually as she found her husband very unemotional about the entire activity;

“Years later, long after I had given up all these exercises, the thought had come to me: it was ridiculous, he would have slept with me faithfully twice a week whether I creamed my face or not, whether I brushed my hair a hundred times or not, whether I wanted him to or not- yes, there had been that too” (96, Deshpande, 1989).

Unlike the previous women, Kamla Das or Mira, Jaya was prepared for a sexually active life after marriage. She even took pleasure in it initially, but when it became a monotonous experience, she felt withdrawn from it. Her relationship with Kamat was an escape from the pre-defined confines of behavior that was expected of her, for being a wife.

In marriages, sexual intimacy is regarded as the most necessary aspect. Capturing and controlling a woman's body is considered to be most important. Emotional compatibility is kept aside. The dissatisfaction caused by such marriages is deep. It affects the psychology of women. Emotional relations outside marriages are also developed in such circumstances. Jaya's relationship with Kamat is one such example. However, sexual relationships outside marriages are also similarly in need of emotional connection. In “Sexy”, a short story written by Jhumpa Lahiri, narrates the story Miranda, an American woman who is the mistress of a married Indian man named Dev. Although their relationship was mutual, yet the need for emotional fulfillment is desired in every relationship between man and woman. Irrespective of culture, ethnicity or class-women suffer the psychological trauma if they are caught into dissatisfactory relationships. Dev was already married. He met Miranda a few days before his wife was leaving for India. Miranda was quite attracted towards Dev, but it was Dev who first gave her gestures to start a mutual relationship. Although Dev's relationship with his wife may not have been a really bad one, yet he desired another woman in his

life, probably to utilize the free time that he had got in his wife's absence. Very soon Miranda realizes that Dev was interested in a physical relationship much more than any other thing. When Dev's wife came back from India, he came only once in a week, slept with her and went away. Dev wanted to keep both his wife and his mistress while trying to keep the latter for mere physical needs. There are two strands running parallel in the story- one of Miranda and Dev and another of Laxmi's cousin and her husband. Ironically, Laxmi tells the havoc that was caused in her cousin's life because her cousin's husband had left her for another woman, to Miranda who was herself involved in such a relationship. Miranda was aware that the relationship that they shared was a complex one. She even kept thinking about Dev's wife during their romantic dates. It looks like Dev did not bother about any such emotional complexity. He would spend time with his wife, receiving and entertaining guests, and making excuses to get out of home on Sundays only. He hardly noticed what Miranda was wearing and what preparations she had done rather he would hurry into bed;

“After his wife came back, that was his excuse: on Sundays he drove into Boston and went running along the Charles. The first Sunday she opened the door in a knee-length robe, but Dev didn't even notice it; he carried her over to the bed, wearing sweat pants and sneakers, and entered her without a word” (93, Lahiri).

Once Miranda meets Rohin, the son of Laxmi's cousin, who calls her “sexy”, then she realized how ironical the word is and how ironical a relation may be which is based on such adjectives in women's lives. It reduces a woman into a mere sexual object. The word which she craved for to hear from her lover was prickly and disturbing to hear from a child, who defined it as “loving someone you don't know” (107, *ibid*). Miranda feels the gravity of Rohin's perception, which makes her realize that in fact Dev and she did not know each other, but only each other's body.

Since the body of a woman is considered to be her biggest weakness, a large number of people hold this belief that she must be controlled through her body. Cases of violence are the biggest examples



of such attitude. If a woman is not surrendering, then the foremost option is either to beat her up, or if the matter is graver, then rape her. Extremity of physical violence breaks a woman like nothing else. In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande shows the disaster that a rape may cause in a woman's life. Kalpana, a poor girl, was so brutally raped by her own uncle only because she didn't agree to marry him. She was battling for life in a hospital. In spite of the physical and psychological trauma that she was going through, her mother was much more concerned with keeping everything hidden because it would defame both the girl and her family. Since the virginity of a girl is her most precious asset, losing it would result into her disqualifying for being a wife or a respected member of the society. Rapists make use of this purity myth to exploit women. Physical violence within marriages is also an outcome of such faulty perceptions about women. Women's identity is limited to a mere body. Perceiving a woman as only a sexual entity may be debilitating. Her potentials, creativity, intellect are undermined in favor of female-specific biological responsibilities. However, women have emerged victorious against all the challenges which try to hold them back.

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