

Apocalypse And Explication - A Study on Female Phase In Elaine Showalter's 'Towards Feminist Poetics' - An Indian Point of View

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ABSTRACT: *The paper studies the nature of woman in comparison with man. She is different from man biologically, physically, and psychologically. If a man is general, worldly and universal, she is special, private and introspective. Her values are different from man's. The paper avers that woman's writings are clearly specified and demarked by their themes and the way they narrate or describe the stories or the type of the language they chose for writing. The paper studies the three phases of the woman writers divided and defined by Elaine Showalter. The three phases of woman as a writer which come under gynocritics, are the Feminine phase, the Feminist phase and the Female phase, backed up by illustrations taken from Indian English literature. The paper makes an attempt to draw the conclusion from three phases by analyzing each phase and inclines to support Elaine Showalter's advocating female phase as the genuine experience which is evidenced by themes, the language, the style and the culture which are distinctively woman or mother oriented.*

KEYWORDS: *Apocalypse and Explication, Dalits, Male Tradition, Maya and Gautam, Woman as a Girl*

I. INTRODUCTION

There are two areas of study as far as woman writing is concerned: one is how women writers describe the male-dominated society in their literary works, and what kind of revelation or apocalypse they make about their own role; and the second is to study the way of their expression. In other words, one is to study their content and the other is to study their style and form in their works. Here we are concerned with the first of these two aspects: the content.

Readings into the various works authored by women will give us a feeling that 'much can be said on both sides'. For instance, Queen Victoria who kept up voluminous private letters was against the clamour for women's rights. She denounced the concept of feminism calling it 'the mad, wicked folly of Women's Rights' (Quoted by Grayling A.C. in *Toward the Light of Liberty* P. 212). On the other hand, reading Elaine Showalter's critical works such as *A literature of their own* will provide us a descriptive view of the different phases in the literary output of women, and the way of asserting their rights in literature.

This paper is aimed at describing briefly the feminist writing from the Indian point of view, limiting to a few women writers such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande and others, and it purports to discuss their works from the scanner of Elaine Showalter's critical standpoints.

Although man and woman are declared by the constitution as equal and eligible for equal rights and privileges, in practice, men appear more equal and enjoy more privileges than women. Constitution may impose equality but nature separates them. They are biologically, physically and psychologically different. Man is general, worldly and universal but woman is special, private and introspective. Comparatively, woman is more sensitive than man. She is noted for fragility as Shakespeare says, "Frailty, Thy name is woman". But woman is glorified for patience and compassion.

Virginia Woolf distinguishes woman from man in values. Woolf says "It is probable, however, that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values - to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important". (Quoted by R.S. Sharma in Anita Desai, P.19).

Elaine Showalter discusses two cardinal points- What is the real nature of woman? and What is the appropriate attitude a woman writer has to adopt between the Feminine, the Feminist and the Female writings? What is the type of the theme, the language and

style the woman writer is to assume for her being open to the world to win true judgement about woman's situation in the prevailing circumstances. Showalter also explores the question of man's attitude in academic field in the face of fast moving or changing world.

Further, while man is noted for thoughts, action, achievement and fame and for his sacrifice of his pleasures for power and fame, woman is well-known for her feelings, moods, thought and experience. Anita Desai in an interview affirms, "whereas a man is concerned with action, experience, and achievement; a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion, and sensation... feminine sensibilities." (Anita Desai - 17)

In the history of literature women's writings are clearly specified and demarked by themes and the way they narrate or describe the stories or the type of the language they choose for writing. Their themes are simple and humble like Toru Dutt's or show delightful clarity as evident in the essay, "Towards Feminist Poetics" of Elaine Showalter or woman's outpouring of poignant feelings as in Pearl Buck's The Good Earth or woman's Psyche as in Virginia Woolf's. "A Room of One's own or Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain or Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence or as in Kamala Das's anti-traditional or outspoken (confessional) writing or Namita Gokhale's description of negative and extreme (to the male tradition) attitude in woman.

Woman as a girl receives her instruction for her future life from the point of male tradition. As a result, she looks at everything with the influence of the father or male tradition. Elaine Showalter discusses woman as a reader of male oriented literature in which woman is portrayed as secondary, suppressed or oppressed and treated as a thing of luxury. This is the analysis which Showalter calls as feminist criticism which is concerned with "Woman as a reader" with woman as a consumer of male produced literature, and with the way in which the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the Significance of its sexual codes. I shall call this kind of analysis the 'feminist critique'... "Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male - constructed literary history". (ES - 403)

Elaine Showalter delineates woman as a writer - producer of her own text, in her own language, by her own thoughts which are combined by her own feelings and reactions. She uses the term 'gynocritics' which is derived from the French word 'la gynocritique'. She applies it to mean woman as a writer and critic "... woman as a writer' - with woman as a producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and the structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity, linguistics and the problem of a female language... No term exists in English for such a specialized discourse, and so I have adapted the French term 'la gynocritique': gynocritics". (ES - 403-404)

Showalter maintains that Feministic criticism acquires political overtones as it is often mixed with socialism or Marxism, and men happened to spearhead the Feminist movement and Feminist criticism tend to follow the male oriented tradition and writing. As a result, the cause of woman has never received its due attention and justice and described as it is. There is a self-deception on the part of woman writers following Feminist criticism, when they choose the subjects to suit male oriented society.

Elaine Showalter treats gynocritics as the genuine, original and independent writing through which she comes out with herself. Elaine Showalter says "The Feminist Critic is essentially political and polemical with theoretical affiliations to Marxist Sociology and aesthetics; gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental with connections to other modes of new Feminist research ... Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the nearly visible world of female culture..." (ES - 404)

In her work A Literature of their own, Elaine Showalter divides women's writing into three phases. The first one is the Feminine phase beginning from 1840 to 1880. This period is associated with Bronte Sisters, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. These writers imitated the contemporary male writers and tried to write like male writer or in the pseudonym of male for fear of the male dominated society that discourages a woman to become a writer. The women writers wrote "... to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female culture. The distinguishing sign of this period is the male pseudonym, introduced in England in 1840's, and a national Characteristic of Women Writers..." (ES- 405)

Nevertheless, women wrote in the name of men or imitated male writers, their writings invariably indicated the tone, tenor, structure and subjects with incendiary and anti-traditional ideas characteristic of woman. "The Feminist content of feminine art is typically oblique, displaced, ironic and subversive; one has to read it between the lines, in the missed possibilities of the text". (ES -405)

The Second Phase (1880-1920) which comes under Feminist movement, characterises Woman as a Writer of protest against male chauvinistic canons and male values. Elizabeth Robins, Francis Trollope and others represent the phase. Feminists including male writers championing the cause of woman, rejected the text that depicts a woman as a stereotype and opposed the traditional injustice done to woman. "In the Feminist phase, from about 1880 to 1920, or the writing of the vote, women are historically enabled to reflect the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatise the ordeals of wronged womanhood..." (ES - 405)

The third period which is spanned from 1920's onwards is called Female Phase in which the woman writers stopped both imitation and protest against inequal depiction of woman in male writing. Female writing is a kind of self-discovery of woman as herself and about her own experience of her own feelings, inhibitions and undercurrents and as a female observer. Rebecca West, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Wolf, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Das for instance represented female writings. "In the Female Phase ongoing since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest - two forms of dependency - and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art .." (ES - 405).

Having been inspired by the deliberated view of John Staurt Mill who said in 1869 "Women's literature should emancipate itself from the influences of accepted models, and guide itself by its own impulses". (ES - 406), Elaine Showalter convinced herself in a rational and humanistic way and recommends Female (phase) writing as the genuine and original in the strictest sense for the woman writer to reveal her feelings and thoughts and inhibitions real and true. Both Feminine and Feminist writings are unreal and impractical from the point of limitations in imitation of men's writing and the way or extent to which sometimes it is inaccessible for women to write like men as in the Feminine writing. Feminist writing that expresses outrage at the unequal and unfair treatment meted out to women in men's writing achieves marginal progress in replacing the male traditions, customs and values. It appears that equality between the Dalits and the other castes or between the blacks and whites is more likely possible than between the two opposite sexes.

Apparently, authenticity has been sanctioned to such words of common gender such as poet, author, governor, chairperson, fire fighter, actor to avoid sexism instead of poetess, authoress, woman governor, chairman/ chairwoman, fireman/ woman, actress. But such peripheral and ornamental innovation does not metamorphose the basic traits of woman. Women at higher levels receive salaries on par with men, but at lower levels especially labourer or farmer class, she receives the wages with variation from men. Even organisations expect more output from men and many organisations have their heads as men. Even women employees as a whole like to see a man as their head. Reports indicate that woman is deficient in making quick decisions. "Her mind, with its greater facility with it which connects the elements to be considered makes the decision altogether more

complex than it is for the man, who relies more on calculated formulaic deductive processes". (Anne Moir and David Jessel - 168).

Undoubtedly, there are women who are superior to men in intelligence, in intellect, in muscle power; they rule with an iron rod like Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Mayavathi, Jayalalitha, Marie Curie etc. "No one would deny that some women are more intelligent than most men, nor their superiority, verbal ability which could make them better doctors, priests, legislators and judges than men." (Anne Moir and David Jessel - 163)

Whether daughters, or mothers or wives of the fathers, they all follow the fathers' tradition, set-up, etiquette, education and constitution. "We are both the daughters of the male tradition, of our teachers, our professors, our dissertation advisers and our publishers - a tradition which asks us to be rational, marginal and grateful". (ES - 407)

Male tradition treats a woman as rational when she behaves normal. "Normal" in the sense that she must be submissive and subservient to men. She must be loyal to male tradition because it provides her protection and peace. It helps her realize her dreams. Significantly, it is gladdening and exhilarating, if a woman being a rational in the male tradition, acts as a champion of the cause of man like Mother Theresa who served the destitute irrespective of man or woman, a Naxalite who fights for the suppressed and deprived classes, a politician who is committed actively to public service, an intellectual who surprises the society with her enlightenment.

Some women movements advocate independent life that rejects male dominated tradition and culture. Such life is considered deviation, aberration and affront on the traditional and moral society"... Sisters in a new women's movement which engenders another kind of the Pseudo-success of token womanhood, and the ironic masks of academic debate". (ES - 407)

Harry Blamires raises two queries combined with answers furnished by the women writers in general about whether, a woman writer can write like male writer with distinctive aspect of literature? or whether can the woman writer merge her writing in the mainstream of writing? To the first question, women writers accept the sexual / biological variation and to the second, they demand that their kind of literature must be part of the male oriented literature which has been enjoying social prestige from the time immemorial. "Do women writers achieve equality by producing a literature clearly distinguishable in its own right, or do they achieve it by merging their work indistinguishably in the literary mainstream? In the former case they accept a sexist differentiation. In the latter case they yield to assimilation". (Harry Blamires - A History of Literary Criticism - 377).

Further, men are not only dynamic and aggressive but innovative, artful, schematic inventing new theories sometimes obscure ones to entrench their position as masculine and sometimes superhuman; they mystify the reader with such first time used technical terms which need special definition and explication by the author himself or by their close associates. Men give such impression that they create theories of the higher level which only men of intellect deserve to explicate while women and lower men are ordained to study literature which is deemed as of inferior or mediocre category. Elaine Showalter maintains, "The new sciences of the text based on linguistics, computers, genetic structuralism, deconstructionism, neo-formalism and deformalism, affective stylistics and psycho-aesthetics have offered literary critics" the opportunity to demonstrate that the work they do is as manly and aggressive as Nuclear Physics - not intuitive, expressive and feminine, but strenuous, rigorous, impersonal and write... Literary science, in its manic generation of difficult terminology ... Creates an elite corps of specialists who spend more and more time mastering the theory... we are moving towards a two-tiered system of 'higher' and 'lower' criticism, the higher concerned with the scientific problems of form and structure, the 'lower' concerned with the 'humanistic' problems of content and interpretation". (ES - 406).

From the point of female values as affirmed by Virginia Wolf, the role of woman character can be taken from the early novels of Anita Desai who portrays woman as a sensitive, sometimes, hypersensitive, apolitical, private and credulous, and un-hypocritical. In her novels, the protagonist demands a dream world of her own and finds the man irreconcilable and obstructive force. Compromise with her innate nature is a suicide. Anita Desai describes in her novel, Fire on the Mountain a couple living in a house built on the hill at Carignano. The couple were happy for sometime in the house which was constructed and occupied earlier in 1843 by Anglo-Indians, Colonel Macdongall and his wife, Alec. The wife, Mavis, stabs into her husband's eye for he asks her to prepare Jam for him. He lives with one eye while she hurls herself from the cliff to her death. "His Joy would have been complete if his wife had made him apricot Jam. But she would not, she hated him too much to cook Jam for him. The longer their marriage, the more she hated him and almost daily she made an attempt to murder him. But he survived. When, she had her back turned he would pour out the tea she had brewed for him into a pot of geraniums beside his chair and silently watch them droop and die. He woke to see her the second before she plunged the kitchen knife into him and learnt to sleep with one eye open till he went blind - but that was after Mavis died: slipping on her way to the outdoor kitchen, she plunged down the cliff and split her head open on a rock, and so he lived on safely and died 'peacefully' as they say" (FOM -7)

The Protagonist, Nanda Kaul, in Fire on the Mountain, settles at Carignano to lead solitary life in order to create peace after having been got bored and disgusted with her active social life as a wife of a Vice-Chancellor who later dies. But, the peace she achieves is disrupted with the arrival of her great grand daughter, Rakha, who aged about 12 is an enfant terrible for she is taciturn by nature and does show the signs of adult. To Nanda Kaul she was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry". (FOM - 40)

Both Nanda Kaul and Rakha evince that they are sick at soul; one is by leading a life of long drawn social obligation; another by birth itself. They appear carrying the predicament and the absurdity of human existence though the writer maintains that they are victims of their own and known reasons. "If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great - grand- daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice - she was born to it, simply." (FOM-48).

Nanda Kaul receives a mortal blow with the sudden and sad death of her childhood bosom friend Ms. Illa Das who had been raped and strangulated by Preeti Singh when she tried to prevent him from marrying his daughter to an old man. The title Fire on the Mountain signifies that mountain on which forest is set on fire, represents that unless world is destroyed, woman cannot enjoy innocence, happiness, love and peace with a sense of divinity.

If a woman believes in something or somebody she lays faith in it blindly forever. She refuses either to rethink or shed what irrationally believed. Further, she is more superstitious and more religiously gullible than man. Havelock Ellis says "Women disliked the essentially intellectual process of analysis - "They have the instructive feeling that analysis may possibly destroy the emotional complexes by which they are largely moved and which appeal to them." (Quoted by Anne Moir & David Jessel - 13).

When astrologer tells the prophesy in Anita Desai's Cry The Peacock (1963) that one of the couple (Maya and Gautam) dies in the fourth year of their marriage, Maya gets shocked. The idea of death becomes obsession in her mind. Later, she does not lead normal life. When she informs her husband, Gautam of the prophesy, he slights it and he hints like a Buddha that one must be prepared for any eventuality. She enrages at his callous attitude toward the prophesy. In Anita Desai's novels, woman is a frazil introvert and she hastens the fate to devour her rather than to allow it to take its own course.

Maya becomes a neurotic and questions herself who is to die between herself and Gautam? Since he does not show any concern about the prophesy and about her mental agony that she suffers from her obsession about the forecast, he must die. She leads him to the terrace and throws him to his death. "And then Gautama made a mistake - his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me ... "Gautama". I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him, saw him fall. then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom." (Cry, The Peacock - 208).

The narrator, Jaya, who is also the Protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's novel, That Long Silence (1988), leads a comfortable life as a housewife with two children until the arrest and suspension of her husband from service for his corrupt practices. When her faith upon her husband's character is shattered, she is forced to practise ' the repetitiveness and boredom of woman's life' and subjects herself to "That Long Silence" with a stream of consciousness.

Namita Gokhale in her first novel Paro: Dreams of Passion (1984), presents female phase model theme. She creates a protagonist, Paro who has been violated by luring and lascivious men since her school days. She commits sins for a better or permanent relationship or wedlock but she finds only the end of the relationship or wedlock. Broken relationship or wedlocks finally drive her to become frenzied and to commit suicide. Both Paro and the Narrator, Priya Sharma show the female qualities such as "Possessiveness, Passion, Jealousy and Pride".

An attempt has been made to bring out the aspects of Feminist and Feminine Phases that help us evaluate the distinctive traits between the three stages. Some of Shashi Deshpande's novels indicate invariably the Feminist mode of protest and imitation. In her novel, especially, The Dark Holds No Terror (1980), Woman is the protagonist who defies the male tradition entrenching herself an exemplary character. She surpasses the traditional impasse and psychological conflicts which are ensued in the wake of opposing the established institutional decree and power. Sarita, the protagonist, proves that the birth of girl child is no longer a curse and studies medicine and becomes a successful doctor and gets married to a man of her own choice.

In Feminine writing, women writers imitate not only the male writing but also use male model themes or problems. In God of Small Things (1997), Arundhati Roy deals with three themes - Communism, Syrian Christianity and Casteism. She points out that Indian Communists wage war against class barriers on Economic Status, when the Caste system, casteism and untouchability prevail, depriving the Dalits of their fundamental rights. Both communists and the Syrian Christians practise casteism as they are upper caste converts ideologically and religiously. In Loss of Inheritance, Kiran Desai presents the theme of struggle for separate state. It is the question of Bodos and Bodoland which comprises Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Bengalis who settled in Darjeeling and Kalimpong have been plundered and threatened of their existence. They are thrown into constant fear, alienation and estrangement.

Elaine Showalter says that Feminist Criticism, which is otherwise called "gynocritics", treats woman as a reader who is to interpret the text in an autonomous way and as a creator of her own text with her own language with independent style that reveal her aspirations, susceptibilities, vicissitudes, felicity and travails and foresight. What is essentially necessitated that the problem of woman should need due attention, honour and justice. It is the man who is expected to champion the cause of woman in order to write and criticise on her behalf and fix her in her right place in the annals of human history calling for considerate mind to focus on the quintessential and unique status of woman in the universe. "The task of feminist critics is to find a new language, a new way of reading that can integrate our intelligence and our experience, our reason and our suffering, our scepticism and our vision. This enterprise should not be confined to women; I invite Criticus, Poeticus and Plutarchus to share it with us." (ES - 407)

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