



Representation of Feminism in 21st Century Indian Culture: A study of *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad* by Twinkle Khanna

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Abstract— This paper will aim at analyzing the representation of feminism in Indian Culture in the stories, “The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad”, “Salaam, Noni Appa”, “If the Weather Permits”, and “The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land” from *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad*. Many social, political, and literary movements have constantly focused on “feminism”, and each one of them is unique in its way. During each period, women have faced multiple different problems. The stories which this paper aims at analyzing have focused on more realistic contemporary issues around women. This paper analyses each story of this collection in the framework of feminism and how it has effectively represented 21st century Indian women’s issues.

Keywords— *Feminism, Culture, Representation, Indian Literature, Ecofeminism.*

The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad is a collection of four short stories which break all the taboos imposed on women. The book includes various issues like the preference of a male child over a female child, a woman finding her love in old age, a life of a woman with multiple failed marriages, and a man’s attempt to make sanitary napkins for a cheaper price in India. A common thread which ties all these four stories is the underlying element of feminism and the setting of Indian culture.

Earlier feminist movements largely focused on voting rights, property rights, women’s legal rights, reproductive rights, protection of women and girls from domestic violence and sexual harassment, workplace rights, against misogyny; and against other forms of gender-specific discrimination against women. But today, in the 21st century we could notice, how on Instagram and other social media many women and men, meme creators, comic creators, independent bloggers, vloggers, and celebrities are being more vocal about breaking myths and negative stereotypes around women and embrace womanhood. This shows the shift in the feminist movement from general to specific, more precisely from public to private.

Culture is defined as a group of beliefs, behavior, and the way of life of a group of people. Since India is an ethnically diverse nation, it can be classified as a multicultural country. Though women’s voices are beginning to be heard in the twenty-first century, it is an undeniable fact that the culture is still predominantly dominated by patriarchy. Thus, the culture represented by these dominant patriarchs in literature and other media is one-sided, and even if the issues and women are represented it is only as mere tokenism. So, the representation of women by women is necessary to understand the true status of women in Indian culture.

Twinkle Khanna is one such Indian woman who has tried to represent women through her writing. Being an actress in a male-dominated Bollywood industry she would have faced the dominance of the patriarchy directly, so her writings could be seen as her way of writing back to the patriarchal culture. She began her writing career in the twenty-first century (the supposed period of “development” and “postmodernism”). So, the time period and her privileged position in society also provided her with the space to explore the unexplored realms of

feminism in Indian culture, which was not previously accessed by other women writers.

The concept of “representation” would immediately raise the question of Who is representing? What is represented? and How is it represented? In many dominant discourses, the patriarchy represents their gender biases and stereotype against women. They cleverly manipulate it by claiming to give a rationale with their illogical reasoning which is, in turn, a reflection of the patriarchal biases. As Adrienne Rich mentions, “Until we (women) can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (18). So, it is clear that women’s writing is crucial in constructing and representing women in any culture.

The first story in the collection is the titular story *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad*. This story could be classified as an ecofeminist text. The dynamics between nature and culture gained prominence from romanticism. Julian Steward’s concept of “cultural ecology” is explored diachronically in the story.

The story is about Lakshmi Prasad, a 16-year-old girl living in a rural village that is sandwiched between River Kosi and River Ganga and surrounded by thousands of trees. The village is known for two things, a precious fruit called Jardalu, a sweet and tasty golden mango, and it is the only village where the birth of a girl child is celebrated with joy. The reason for this attitude changes towards women, by the people of this village, is because of Lakshmi Prasad. Earlier, the community in this village was also favoring patriarchal culture by preferring male children over female children, and giving gendered-based advantage to males while considering women as a burden because of women’s economic dependence and lack of opportunity within the culture. Therefore, to secure financial independence for girl children Lakshmi takes up the tool of nature.

As Halberstam argues, “Eve... is a figure who severs once and for all the assumed connection between woman and nature upon which entire patriarchal structures rest” (400). This also resonates with Vandana Shiva’s argument in her book “Staying Alive”, where she mentions how women and nature are oppressed by patriarchy in the name of modern development. Thus, by using nature as a source of liberation in the story, Khanna has given agency to the oppressed.

Lakshmi comes up with the idea of planting ten Jardalu trees when a girl child is born, by the time when the child is 8-year-old the tree would bear fruits, these fruits could be sold and the earned money is used for the

child’s education and future. And on the child’s fifteenth birthday, the girl would tie a sacred red thread around each trunk as a promise to look after them and it is believed that in turn, the trees will look after the girl for the rest of her life, by bearing fruits and creating a better livelihood for her. By making this a ritual she has involved her entire community as well as conserves nature. Thus, the interaction between ecology, culture, and gender is visible in this story.

From these events, it is clear that a woman has culturally reformed and deconstructed the prejudice and stereotype of considering women as a burden. But still, with time after many generations, Lakshmi is forgotten and the song sung for her during the ritual is misunderstood as the song sung for goddess Lakshmi.

The last sapling is planted and the women begin playing their instruments and singing a song about the benevolence of the great Lakshmi who blesses each woman in the village with happiness and prosperity. It is an old song, passed down through generations and the women singing is unaware that the song is not about Goddess Lakshmi (Khanna 21).

Therefore, from this incident, it could be observed how collective memory and history are ruptured over time. This also shows how Indian culture has ignored the significance of women in the represented history.

The deconstruction of gender identity in Indian society is observed in the story *Salaam, Noni Appa*. In Indian culture, widows are expected to follow a certain code of conduct which is almost like an unwritten fact. Some of the things which society expects from the widows are to be immobile in society, be dependent on the in-laws or children, are not allowed to socialize or some are even not allowed to attend their family functions. But it is not the case for the widower. The dominant patriarchy that formulated these ‘norms’ was biased.

The ancient practice of Sati (a woman throwing herself in the pyre of her husband) shows how the treatment of women was different from the treatment of men. Ambedkar in his essay “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” has mentioned, a widow “... must be disposed of, else through intermarriage she will violate the endogamy of the group” (9). This shows the heavy influence of patriarchal ideologies in Indian customs.

Salaam, Noni Appa is a story about two Muslim widow sisters Noni Appa and Binni, who are in their late 60s. Noni is economically weaker than Binni, but without any economic discrepancy, the sisters share a strong bond. They constantly make sure to spend time with each other despite their different lifestyle and likings.

Noni falls in love with Anand, a yoga teacher. A woman generally falling in love at old age is unacceptable in many cultures especially with a man younger than her is just unimaginable within Indian Islam patriarchal culture, as a widow is expected only to be sulking about the loss of her dead husband. With all these biased stigmas in her mind, Noni remains heedless of her feeling.

Noni's daughter Mallika, who lives as a spinster in London convinces Noni into being true to her feelings. This shows how the exposure to different cultures has given Mallika (who also has her roots in Indian culture) an agency to have a strong opinion of her own despite the prejudice in the society. By incorporating the difference in culture and age in the characters of Noni and Mallika, the author has shown the diachronic and spatial progress in culture between India and European countries. It is also completely ignorant to say that European countries are free from patriarchal culture. They also experience patriarchal dominance but they have progressed ahead of us in changing their biased culture.

If the Weather Permits is a story about Elisa Thomas, a woman with five failed marriages. Marriage is another constructed institution where men dominate. Men demand dowry, in Indian culture after marriage a woman is expected to move in with her husband and in-laws, serve them, take up domestic responsibility, and even change their names. This shows the gender bias in marriage.

According to Goffman, men and women engage in a visible display of gender in which a stylized mode of interaction may indicate deference or dominance. This gender performativity is evident in the institution of marriage in Indian culture. Judith Butler in her work "Gender Trouble" argues that gender performance is not something that we are inherited, it is the society that imposes the role of gender. In most of the Indian culture, it is women who wear the thali or other similar ornaments which acts as the marker of marriage. This could be symbolic of how only the female gender is assigned certain expectations and roles to follow after their marriage.

If the Weather Permits dissects the one-sided institution of marriage while making it normal for a woman to walk out of a marriage if she is not comfortable with it rather than tolerating the emotional and domestic violence just for the sake of society. Elisa, the protagonist fearlessly walks out of the marriage if she is not happy in it. This disturbs her orthodox Malayali parents who constantly try to match her with a settled Malayali man.

The parent's urge to marry their daughter within their community is well portrayed in the story. This shows how many cultures in India dislike exogamous marriage (marrying outside the community) and prefer endogamous

marriage (marrying within the community) just so that the value of their community and culture will be passed on. This could be seen as a trap formulated by the patriarchy to pass on their biased ideas.

Bourdieu in his essay, "The Forms of Capital" states that, "the network of relationship is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term" (249). So, the idea of viewing marriage as a source of capital is evident.

Usually, hysterical behavior and madness are associated with women but in the story, Javed and Chacko, husbands of Elisa are shown to be mentally unstable. Despite knowing about the madness Elisa is forced by her parents and in-laws to stay with Chaco. Elisa's father says, "A woman who does not have a man's name behind her is the mad one... Deaf and dumb but a man is a man is a man" (Khanna 98). This dialogue reflects the real reaction of the parents whose daughter walk out of the marriage. This story clearly represents the reality of how the Indian culture forces a woman to stay in marriage despite her dislike towards it.

The final story of the collection is *The Sanitary Man from a Sacred Land*. It is based on the true story of Padma Shri Arunachalam Muruganatham. He invented the low-cost sanitary pad making machine in India. The book illustrates the difficulty faced by Bablu Kewat (fictional name for Arunachalam Muruganatham) during the invention of this machine. One could notice how everyone including his wife abandoned him just because he was working on a sanitary pad. This shows how in Indian culture, even women are made to feel disgusted about a natural biological process of a women's body.

This story highlights the taboo and stigma around a female, female body and female hygiene. In most of the culture, women are made to feel uncomfortable with their body. A woman's body becomes a site of exploitation at various political and social levels. The reaction of the people around Kewat and the way he was bullied shows how female bodies and fluids are considered as 'polluted' and 'unclean'. This struggle of women has not been portrayed from a point of view of men before. Khanna by having a male protagonist could have aimed at showing that not only women undergo cultural oppression rather any subject on women is sidelined.

CONCLUSION

Through this collection *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad*, Twinkle Khanna has explored the various realms of issues faced by women. The arrangement of the story could be seen as a political move. The story *The Sanitary Man from*

a *Sacred Landis* placed towards the end of the collection, it might be to make the text gender inclusive. It could be seen as a representation that there are also men who are not misogynists. By, including a male-centered feminist story in this collection Khanna has broken the cycle of patriarchy oppressing women and women writing back. Rather, she has represented the essence of feminism by illustrating and initiating a conversation about the real issues faced by women in the twenty-first century.

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