

Quest for Identity: A Brief study of Avantika Debnath's The Bridal Pyre

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Abstract- Avantika Debnath, the writer of Indian writing, records her experience of Indian women's condition in the society. To project the psyche of Indian women, the writer use literature to express her views in a realistic way. Her novel The Bridal Pyre came up with the genre of writing about women justice fiction because she wanted to raise her voice for the women who turned deaf and blind to their problems. She feels that there is no shame in fighting for what we deserve. The main theme in this novel is the expectations in marriage, the role of woman in her family life and her struggle to find her own identity. It begins as a domestic story and it turns out to be a women's battle against the evils that exist in our society. The novel deals with the life of Meera, and the problems in her life, testimonial of her patience and at last fighting back to get her own identity. Avantika portrays Meera as a rebel against traditionalism and trying hard to establish her own identity in this modern world. The modern women are educated, engaged with career and are economically independent. In spite of stringent laws which favours women, they were subjected to domestic violence, physical and verbal abuse, denying them to express their feelings and emotions. The society fix patterns for the family which conveys the idea that women should be submissive and dependent on man. It is also agreed by women that all these power patterns are self – protective. This story represents the contemporary modern women's struggle to define their own and to establish her identity. Self- sacrificing women move towards conflicted female characters searching for their own identity. Avantika traces the woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self- realization and from self- denial to self- assertion.

Key words: identity, self-realization, self-assertion, self-protective

Identity plays a major role in every interaction among people. Women have no identity in this patriarchal society. As an unmarried person she is the property of her father, once married she is owned by her husband and after that the right of ownership is transferred to her son. Women are prepared to face one thing that is marriage, irrespective of their education, status and intellect. Quest for identity is the main feature of Indian women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Women writers have moved away from the traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards the conflicted female characters searching for identity.

The Bridal Pyre by Avantika Debnath is divided into two sections. The first section contains eighteen chapters and deals with the reminiscence from childhood to her sufferings after marriage. The second section contains eight chapters where Meera is fighting for her justice with the help of law. The title itself is an oxymoron where 'THE BRIDAL' refers to an auspicious thing which indicates good omen and prosperous future and 'PYRE' refers to an inauspicious thing which indicates ill-omened and unfortunate. Likewise Meera, the protagonist enjoys her life before marriage but after marriage she just lay down upon the pyre and burnt herself.

Avantika Debnath narrates the story of Meera a young Indian girl, whose life takes a disorderly change after her marriage. It is the story of a woman facing a nightmarish life after an arranged marriage. It deals with the life of a modern woman,

the problems thrown at her by marital life, testimonial of her patience and then her fighting back. It starts as a domestic drama and soon it turns into a woman's battle against each and every form of evil that exists in our society.

The protagonist Meera is a character who is basically a compound of various real life women. Meera is a woman who is from an upper middle class Bengali family where marriage is given some amplified importance. Meera is a professionally qualified and well-earning woman who has an arranged marriage with a reasonably decent and respectable man who promises to love her eternally. Her parents arrange a lavish wedding. And like all mothers, Meera's mother also advised her to adjust and be patience. But mothers need to tell their daughters when exactly they should put their foot down, because a one-sided adjustment soon takes the form of subjugation. We don't want that to happen to our woman anymore. Again, there are so many bodies that fight for woman rights, every other day some new law is passed. But when a genuine case requires attention, no one is there to help. And these laws, lawyers, courts, police, they only add to the plight of the victim. We detest paving the way for the woman trying to reach an ascertained destination

According to a very regressive Indian saying, a woman once married should never return to her parents' house and that she shall leave her matrimonial home only in the event of her death. Probably this saying is taken much too literally when a woman escapes to her parents' home in a battered state, after being dragged through hell by her husband and in-laws.

India is a patriarchal society. Women under the patriarchal pressure are subjected to the adverse effect of social ostracism. In this patriarchal system, women were discriminated and subjugated by the male dominated society. Man is considered to be the legal head of the family which weakens the marital relationship between them. The illogical traditions followed by women indirectly are the bondages of pain, distress and torment they suffer which is constructed by the society. Most of the Indian women living in an orthodox and conservative family are afraid to raise their voice against violent dominance in the male dominated society due to their inferiority complex and traditional codes imposed on them. The Indian people also accustomed to their preconceived beliefs. They adopt themselves to their traditional bound conditions of our society.

While studying second standard, Meera started writing poems. Her English teacher appreciated her talent and asked her to continue it. Her parents also encouraged her and follow her dream of becoming a renowned writer. In 2005, Meera started writing a book. As she continued writing during class session, she got scolding from her teacher. But Meera didn't even bother. While working in a corporate field also, Meera continued her writing during break time. After work also she started writing at night. In 2010, Meera completed her novel. It was scripted in 300 pages. Completing a novel is just a half battle and she sent to various publications. But none responded so she deserted the thought of becoming a novelist.

After two years, Meera received her email from White Horse Media. Her work was acknowledged by the team and they asked for her manuscript. Her husband Abhi had no excitement for Meera. Meera and Abhi visited her parent house to get the manuscript. When Meera was busy with her mom in the kitchen, Abhi access her computer and deleted her manuscript which contains 316 pages. Meera turned lifeless on seeing the word deleted. She begged him to bring it back, but of no use. Abhi explained that they belong to the traditional culture where the author with the interviews was not accepted by the society. Meera's five years of hardwork was put to vain by Abhi.

Meera's hopes and dreams are shattered as she starts to live with her obnoxious mother - in-law, greedy and perverted father- in-law, and a spineless, self-centered husband. The image of a loving family that was portrayed to her before marriage, was a farce and the reality is dark and unnerving. The everyday taunts and humiliation, the lies that are second nature to this family, the random insults directed towards Meera's parents are all relatable.

Meera's desperate need for her husband's love and the hopeless hope of seeing him stand up for her is heart-breaking. When Meera was found pregnant, Abhi was not interested so he left the decision to Meera. Meera decides to have that baby. "I want this child to be born" (141). Abhi told Meera that he too needed the child because he considers the child as a lucky sign because he got a job in California. His American dream made him took this decision. But once her mother-in law got infuriated, she pulled her out of the room and pushed down

from staircase. The unborn baby was aborted. Initially, Meera tries to adjust, but once the atrocities escalate to a savage level, she decides to get out. In an effectively crafted scene, Meera leaves her husband's home and decides to get a divorce. She files cases of domestic violence and dowry harassment against her husband and his family. The way the case is handled by the police is realistically depicted.

Meera's parents lodged a complaint for physical violence, dowry, and forcefully keeping their belongings against Abhi and his parents. Meera tried to fight for her justice by using the legal system. She first approached the police station, sought the help of commissioner, moved the case to court, get help from women's organization, to publish an article with the help of journalist, move the case to High Court and finally to the Calcutta High Court. The officers and lawyers got their bribe and turned against Meera. Meera's parents asked her to leave the case but Meera wanted to get justice. "The more they played with me, the more determined I got to pay it back, heavy" (202). Meera struggles to get action taken against her barbaric husband and in-laws. She has no evidence of fresh bruises on her body, and she fails to substantiate that money spent on her husband and in-laws was in fact dowry and not a 'gift of love and affection' given by her father. She has to take leave from her work, travel and pay for litigation expenses to get back her own money. But Meera is known for her audacity. She fought to get back her justice without losing her confidence. She is strong indeed.

Due to diabetes, Abhi's mother suffered a kidney failure and can't use restroom in a normal way. Meera remembered the incident where she was locked up inside her room for hours without using restroom. Abhi's father fell down while crossing and his left hand is seriously injured. Meera remember that her father-in-law used to grab her wrist, whenever he gets chance. Abhi was seriously injured in a bike accident and his backbone got damaged. Neel said to Meera, "Your good deed come back to you, so does the evil ones. As they teach in modern schools, by Newton's law, every action has an equal and opposite reaction" (243). At night, Meera got the news that Abhi's backbone is beyond repair and he can't have his own child. After reading this, Meera called Neel and asked him to prepare papers for her divorce case and to close all the pending cases. Meera told him, "This war has received its closure. All I want now is peace" (245).

The social- cultural modes have given Indian women, a preconceived image and roles towards the Indian society. The empowerment of women in India has been constructed for centuries, which deprives women from basic educational facilities. In the beginning, women were denied political powers. Women were treated worse than domestic animals. But the post - Independence India has made a change in the social and cultural development and has made women to be conscious to define themselves in society and their relationship with the surroundings.

Meera started applying for various jobsites and got a job in Hyderabad. The higher officer appreciated Meera her hard work and for working extended hours. He also explained that the projects are moving to Bangalore and the employees will

be reduced in Hyderabad. So Meera was asked to move to the U.S. office in Dallas, Texas. At first Meera got excited by this offer but she denied this because her father guarded our country for more than three decades and she didn't want to leave this destination. After undergoing various struggles, Meera established her own identity in this world.

Self is the psychological process. It is a dynamic concept which suggests a search for identity. It is the combination of physical and mental quality of a woman which includes her will and action in both individual and social dimensions. Social customs are responsible for discontentment with the self in the contemporary world. The Indian society is portrayed as traditional. Some women characters have the attitude of rejection in life while others have the attitude of acceptance of life.

Avantika concentrates on the protagonist's battle to establish an individual identity. Meera is determined for the meaning of life. Meera encounters a larger society that test her various potentialities and there occurs a change through which she gets her growth. Meera psychologically evolves towards maturity and self-awareness. Meera's character is the reflection of a modern woman in this changing world. Avantika feels that women must emerge as strong willed individuals to assert themselves. Meera breaks her silence and gives us an exceptionally accomplished portrayal of a woman. Meera is ready to face all odds and tries to enjoy life. Thus Meera emerges as an intelligent, attractive and a practical woman with strong willed who is prepared to face life with her real individual self.

WORKS CITED

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