

**A JOURNEY FROM CRISIS TO CLEAR WAYS: A STUDY
OF WOMEN PROTAGONISTS IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF
MAHASWETHA DEVI, MANJULA PADMANABHAN
AND DINA MEHTA**

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CONCLUSION

Women all over the world share some basic instincts but they have been so moulded by social conventions varying from country to country, that the instincts themselves appear to be dissimilar in their exhibition. In fact, the differences that one can see between the problems of women in the East and the West are the super-impositions of conventional habits which have become the proverbial second nature and these extend themselves from the most insignificant physical act to the highest spiritual contemplation.

In fact the relation between literature and society is reciprocal; both serve as cause and effect to each other. A literary creation does not come into existence by itself; its emergence is determined by social situations. Of the literary forms, the play/drama is considered to be the most socially-oriented because it depicts the human relationships in its varied aspects. In other words, the play may be considered a document of social criticism. It tends to reflect the contingent reality in an artistic fashion.

Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta being prominent post-colonial women dramatists writing in English they have inked a special identity for themselves in the galaxy of Indian English literature. Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta are those who have created absolutely different patterns of female characters. Their female protagonists are fighting hard for their rights in

a patriarchal society. Their women protagonists at times are struck between tradition and modernity that often reflect the changing paradigms of the society.

Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta understood drama as a more serious tool of expression and representation which have dealt with certain issues which the men playwrights have failed to do. They have adopted the genre as a more practical means to present serious familial, social cultural and political issues, the heinous crimes and practices of the society in satirical way. Their aim is to bring awareness of certain harsh realities, to protect every individual's basic rights, to live freely, and to respect every individual irrespective of different gender, caste or creed.

These dramatists are conscious of contemporary issues that are blended with the troubled past memories, expectations of better present and a blissful future that are aimed to make an attempt to present a panoramic view of balancing life within the society and family. Their multifarious themes on issues like relationships, motherhood, intricate baffling relationship of men and women, violence as physical, emotional, psychological, and exploitation of women at home and in profession. Their plays mostly revolve around themes, focusing on human injustice, inequality, poverty, illiteracy and gender discrimination. Their plays suggest the themes of voice of the voiceless, political issues, religious and

superstitious practices seasoned with conservative values and traditional restrictions.

The idea of the traditional, oppressed woman persisted in a culture permeated by religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands, the Hindu goddesses Sita and Savitri do serve as a powerful cultural ideals for women. In mythical terms, the dominant feminine prototype is the chaste, patient, self-denying wife, Sita, supported by other figures such as Savitri, Draupadi and Gandhari. When looking at these narratives silence/speech can be a useful guide to interpreting women's responses to patriarchal hegemony.

Tradition has a very strong hold over the Indian society and even a stronger hold over its women folk. Traditional rules and norms bind the Indian women in nearly every quarter. Woman is the preserver of the family and so she makes all kind of sacrifices for the welfare of the family. However the narrow outlook of patriarchy towards women has greatly changed with the passage of time.

The traditional women who had no option nevertheless accepted everything as their lot and survived only to fulfill their dharma to please their husbands and in return endure severe pain and allowed themselves for the cruel submissions in the hands of their man. Though tyrannically subjugated to gender discrimination, tortured in the name of marital relationships in marriage, subjected to child abuse, or brutally raped, or

forced to bear humiliations in the name of widowhood whatever the nomenclature designated these traditional women survived within accepting as their fate and lot. Transgressing these rules was treated as a sin. Chandidasi belonged to this class of traditional slot.

Mahasweta Devi's play *Bayen* is a slap-shot to the patriarchy which had deliberately, vehemently, unethically oppressed the otherwise kind hearted woman Chandidasi in the name of Black-magic. Chandidasi, an innocent rural woman who is an epitome of patience, endurance, subservience, modesty though symbolises the Bharitiyata or Bharatamatha, though symbolises the bharatanari or mother India. The play amplifies the rate of social dishonesty self-centred patriarchal values that has been thwarted by the Indian patriarchy since time immemorial.

Despite having been crushed by male chauvinism for long, women did not give up. There has always been the yearning to discover themselves to find out their face beneath all the facades that have been forced on them. Though they have at times willingly and at other times reluctantly accepted their roles as mothers, wives, daughter and subordinates of men, yet the aspiration to find and discover their identity has not died down. This search for selfhood has kept them on their toes towards their dreams of emancipation.

Manjula Padmanabhan, a modern Indian woman dramatist, who has the gift of exploring the subdued depths of women psychology. She portrays

the psyche of her sensitive emotional and sensuous characters through her plays. Her main concern is not with the society or social forces but the individual psyche and its interaction with social values. She raises her voice against the sufferings, aspirations, and assertions of women in a male dominated society.

Woman like Leela in play Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights out* is though modern in her outlook. She cannot come out of her traditional roles that are being assigned to them by the contemporary society. Hence, these women try to cope with times oscillate between the traditional and modern values and finally coming to rest on a plane adjoining the two concepts.

Mahaswetha Devi's works are perennial source of inspiration and energy that synergies new awakening for a new beginning for the benefit of the society. Though Mahaswetha Devi and Manjula Padmanabhan reveal the suffering caused by the oppression of men, yet they are not against men as such; nor do they advocate a separatist stance. Even though, many of their women opt out of marriage, yet they do long for the company of men and either have love affairs with them or get married again. Their women look for happiness and self-fulfillment again in a world shared by both the sexes. The call is for recognition of woman as an equally important partner in marriage or in any other relationship. Her needs, her freedom, her personality, her individuality should be equally valued.

The existing social set-up with its uneven power-division will continue to bring suffering to women. And as long as one half of humanity suffers one cannot hope for a better world. Both the dramatists envision a world which should be based on equality, sharing and harmony between the two sexes, where the needs, the functions, the virtues of women are valued equally along with those of men.

The solid good qualities of the individualistic woman have been found in India for hundreds if not thousands of years. What is new about the liberated and individualistic woman is the emergence of this phenomenon on an unprecedented scale. What was an exception in the past seems to have become a rule now-a-days. Educated women have become conscious of their rights as human beings. They want to be recognized as human beings and not simply as the adjuncts to the males. They seek to assert their own personality and claim equality with males in all spheres of life. In India, fortunately, the constitution makes no distinction between man and woman on the basis of sex. However, this principle in practice makes these women to pay a heavy price when she asserts herself. The male ego is unable to adjust to the new situations and his vanity seeks to satisfy itself by humiliating and finding the susceptibilities of the New Woman's self.

Dina Mehta works out her feminist themes on a much broader canvas, juxtaposing the woman's question with larger political and existential

issues. The quest for meaning, the search for self in Mehta's women is linked with larger issues than only sexist conflicts. As a result one can see Mehta's women are politically more conscious, and socially very active. The struggle for identity and fulfillment in her women is worked out more on a personal level within the family. Interestingly, the educated, affluent women in the more tradition-bound country India, as depicted by Dina Mehta have similar uneasy, unfortunate experience as the middle-class, working women. Women in the world refuse to remain chained to their subordinate roles and defy the traditional norms in search of emancipation.

While woman like Malini in play Dina Mehta's *Brides Are Not For Burning* is unwilling to confine themselves within the strong folds of patriarchy and always attempt to seek an option to move on in life. She is the woman who is intelligent, has questioning attitude and is not contented with the justice they are asked to be complied of. She does not hesitate to rebel against the patriarchy as they see it not just as a site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of battle to vanquish their oppressors.

They confront the opposite and it compels them to renew themselves in order to evolve to a higher degree of consciousness. The common concern running through these plays is the problem of identity. The inability, sometimes situational and sometimes imposed, to fit oneself in the right

slot in the scheme of things; the individual and society, the individual in society; they form the persistent concerns in the plays.

Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta portray the suffering of women from predestined fate that of being a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter in law and even mother, it is pity to be living among one's own people on one's own land; therefore problems in their life arise out of sense of oneness and being self-possessive. Although, these women writers do not disown their traditional roles and life, they are found being disowned by their own people and own society. The issues of disowning and always being at the receiving end as far as the plight of disowning are concerned, they portray through their women characters.

The three women dramatists Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta have made an attempt to view a pattern - a pattern with a strong message of 'hope through change' and the endings are revealed as the beginning of another. The plays of these dramatists mirror the different faces of feminine treatment. The protagonists tend to travel from crisis through the choices they choose and are willing for self-assertion that indirectly leads them to empower themselves by body and mind. Thus, allowing them not only to prove as individuals who can unhesitatingly validate the basic rights of fellow humans, but also to show concern for the bonds of universal sisterhood. They travel from

crisis to clearways by escalating positivity expecting no royalties but, a life of promise all through. They tend to remain loyal to their own set of principles expecting with the promises in hand given by time and fate.