

Why Retrieve the Transgressor? A Survey of Some Literary Classics

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Abstract:

Whether it was Tagore or Bankim in India, Flaubert in France, Rousseau of Geneva or Russian Tolstoy, the passionate transgressive woman has always caught their fancy. In both Indian and Western works we see a similarity in the pattern of how transgression of a married woman is treated by the authors. Almost in all of them, the resolution happens via the death of the protagonist, mainly suicide chiefly on account of hopelessness with harsh attitude of the society, or a kind of self-repression out of internalised guilt. The free play of desire initially given to the women is finally curtailed by an act of fate, or change of heart of the transgressive women, which is a subject of detailed criticism. This is done in tandem to the personal comfort of the author (mainly the male writers) or out of a sense of appropriation to the society to escape its disapproval (by female authors) is what the paper tries to analyse and depict.

Keywords: Female Transgressor, Death, Reform, Guilt, Social Codes, Appropriation.

Introduction:

Love out of wedlock is not a recent phenomenon; it has existed since the institution of marriage came into force. The courtly love tradition rests on the idea of fancying the married woman but she was distant and elusive and yes, virtuous, hence the love always remained unfulfilled. In the restoration and Victorian era, since the marriage was often an alliance of convenience and a monetary deal, hence loveless, extra marital affair was quite common yet it was this “virtue” that the authors were reluctant to let go off. Therefore, in general what we find in the works of these authors is that they have a tendency to retrieve their transgressive females through some reform, change of heart, death or renunciation. A happy ending is what they could not give to such “heroines”, if heroines they could be called by their standards.

Whether it was Tagore or Bankim in India, Flaubert in France, Rousseau of

Geneva or Russian Tolstoy, the passionate transgressive woman has always caught their fancy. The Helen of Troy whose beauty and tales never tire writers too had run away with her paramour. In both Indian and Western works we see a similarity in the pattern of how transgression of a married woman is treated by the authors. Almost in all of them, the resolution happens via the death of the protagonist, mainly suicide chiefly on account of hopelessness with harsh attitude of the society, or a kind of self-repression out of internalised guilt. The free play of desire initially given to the women is finally curtailed by an act of fate, or change of heart of the transgressive women, which is a subject of detailed criticism. This is done in tandem to the personal comfort of the author (mainly the male writers) or out of a sense of appropriation to the society to escape its disapproval (by female authors).

A kind of escape from life to be free from the confusions created out of a passionate love has been a trope in many western classics like *Julie* (1761) by Rousseau, *Madame Bovary* (1856) by Flaubert, and *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin. All the protagonists of these novels are creatures of passion, who though initially are norm-abiding women of the society, but discontentment with their partners, with their life and with marriage compels them to seek charm elsewhere outside of marriage. They listen to their hearts instead of their heads, and in the pursuit of love lose their lives, all of them, Julie, Emma and Edna commit suicide at the end. In the Indian scenario, though generally the protagonists live on there is no union with the lover at the end. None of them are allowed to have their way by the society or the author.

Material and Method:

Madam Bovary is still remembered as an adulteress and not someone who was

a passionate lover and followed her heart. She is seen as a sinner and not a tragic lover. But Flaubert nowhere in his narration has accused his protagonist of adultery. He does not judge her from moral standards and therefore was also accused of glorifying adultery. Emma Bovary could still be saved as one of the reasons other than betrayal for her suicide was the large amount of debts. Still she had the option of returning back to Charles as he was oblivious of her affairs, but the author chose death for her.

Similar were the charges brought against Kate Chopin for creating a protagonist who was too much given to her sensuality, who went against the socially acclaimed duties of a mother and a wife. But Edna too committed suicide as society made it difficult for her. The *St. Louis Republic* labelled the novel "poison" and "too strong a drink for moral babes"¹. So vehement was the censorship of the society and the male critics that Kate

Chopin had difficulties publishing her other works. It was the last novel she could write and agonised by the criticism and negative response, she got sick and died five years later.

Feminist Ethos states reproduction to be the source of women's oppression", states R.J Kalpana in her book *Feminism and the Individual*. Continuation of the family lineage is the foremost purpose of the institution of marriage. And adultery poses a threat to the purity of this lineage, threat to the ownership that patriarchy has over women. Earlier in India, a woman did not have much respect in the family unless she became a mother, and if she bore a son, her value in the family as the mother of the heir increased.

A study of the Indian texts that have a transgressive female as the protagonist generally show the tendency to reform or retrieve the heroine through a change of heart or a self-surrender to fate either for a larger good or a realization of

the need to become a part of the mainstream again.

Discussion:

Any woman who violates the duties expected of a wife or mother is not respected in the society. Perhaps because of this reason many Indian writers writing in the beginning of the twentieth century chose either a widow or a childless woman as the one who transgresses the traditional roles of women, so that the sting attached with the transgression is lessened. In this regard western authors have been bolder; their married passionate female protagonists are often mothers and this position puts them at the precarious state of neglecting their duties and perhaps so, often the resolution is death as recovery from guilt becomes impossible. Hypocritically this idea of monogamy and faithfulness applies only to women. Sharad Shrivastava in his book, *The 'New Woman' in Indian English Fiction* says- "This notion of bourgeois

marriage and chastity for women has distorted the image of women in literature. It has given rise to two characters in bourgeois literature- 'the wife's paramour and the cuckold'."(10) Since what is forbidden is always alluring, the image of the women in love outside of marriage has fascinated the authors. But a happy destiny to this freedom is what they cannot give as moral dictums of the society loom large over their own conscience or they are afraid to antagonise the society of which they themselves are a part of and often share its prescriptions.

Mary Evans says mothering is natural while fathering has to be learnt. It is unfortunate that not only male conservatives but even female intellectuals are not comfortable with a mother who chooses to have a lover, so deeply ingrained is the moral dictums in the collective consciousness of the society. According to her, "After all, the mother, a married woman, who deliberately chooses

an adulterous relationship rather than her maternal responsibilities, would still today be labelled as a deviant and "unnatural" woman."² Perhaps this is the reason why Tagore and Bankim chose widows and childless women as transgressor, so that society's rage is controlled. They might pity a widow of having lost love in her life and the transgression of the childless women may be less stigmatized, after all the mother did not deviate, it was only a wanton wife.

Bimala of *Home and the world* written by Tagore can be said to be an early example of the transgressive woman in modern Indian novel. Though Bimala is retrieved before the actual transgression in terms of sexuality or crossing the threshold could happen, the tendency had taken birth. The home was no more her world. After being put on the pedestal of a goddess and a symbol of mother India, the confines of the threshold could not contain her spirit and she longed to be an active

participant of the outer world. But her advance in that direction was cut short when Sandeep flees after making her steal from her own house, and thus disrupting her illusions about him being a selfless patriot. Here though Bimala was married for nine years, she was childless.

Talking about *Nashtneer* there too Tagore does not give a happy ending to his protagonist Charulata. When Charulata's husband, Bhupati, realises his wife is in love with Amal (her brother in law with whom she shares her taste for literature and poetry) he regards her with a detached sympathy: "poor helpless girl, poor sad girl". And though Bhupati was not harsh in his approach, Tagore did not allow for reconciliation and happy ending. Bhupati decides to forgive Charu, but she refuses, replying to his offer of togetherness.

Same can be said about Tagore's *Chokherbali* about which Tagore himself says –"I have always regretted the ending."³ In this novel Binodini, a widow,

who is left to herself to have her ways initially fancies a man Mahendra, who is married to Asha. Later she takes on a fondness for Mahendra's friend Madhav who instead likes Asha. However Mahendra is able to persuade her for marriage but when the actual time comes she disappears. Like *Nashtnir*, here too a happy ending was possible but the author denies that.

Premchand's *Sewasadan* too shows how a woman unhappy with her loveless marriage takes on prostitution. But when she realizes that this is creating difficulty in her sister's marriage, she renounces it and takes up the job in *Sewasadan*, an orphanage for the children of prostitutes. While the Urdu original's title 'Husne-e-bazar' focussed on the sexuality of the protagonist, the Hindi title focuses on the redemption. Thus we see that there is a tendency to retrieve the transgressor, either through death or reform. Is death a punishment or a divine retribution?

The opinion voiced by Mary Evans is that she accuses Anna of *Anna Karenina* of failing to act to subvert or resist patriarchy as Anna internalizes their constraints. Both feminist and non-feminist readings find such characters guilty. Their failure is termed both proximate and ultimate since they transgress against the values of a patriarchal society, yet fail to liberate themselves and thus remain compliant prisoners of the patriarchy.⁴ But if we probe, we will find that this failure is imparted by the author who controls the literary destiny of such characters.

Another example that could be included here is Jainendra's *Tyagpatra*, in which the protagonist is married to a man of much older age against her wishes because of poverty. When she engages in an extramarital affair, her husband gets infuriated and chases her out of the house and due to stigma and shame even her brother does not own her and she is left

with no support and shelter and she begins wandering and finally sets down in a slum type area which is not looked upon well in the society. When her nephew to whom she is dear wants to take her back, she refuses. She says-

“Those who belong in society must also maintain it. That is their duty. Only those who are outcasts and prefer to be outcasts are exempt from that duty. Only they have the privilege of experimenting with life. Truth demands these experiments, Pramod, but they can only be carried out by and on those who no longer have much social value. The help I want is strength--to enable me to remain whole beneath the lash of the oppressor, and to take upon myself the burden of his sin in addition to my own, praying forgiveness for the entire world. Why should I seek for respectability? I must find my solace in whatever comes.”⁵

It is questionable why such characters are made to sacrifice and

internalise the guilt when a rescue was possible. Why do they insist on repenting after initially listening to their hearts? Perhaps as is evident from the above speech, getting back to society is what everyone wants. And such retrieval takes away the sting of transgression else it was possible that the sympathy that the readers have for the woman would have taken the form of criticism. No one wants to be a dissenter the whole life, or creating such rebellious characters are against the comfort of the male authors, who though give some agency and assertiveness to their female transgressors, but eventually want them to return home, back to “normalcy”, back to the lap of society.

But not only the male authors it is found even in the writings of women authors of late twentieth century that they ultimately make their individualistic and self-seeking characters ultimately return to the mainstream. Kamala Markandaya’s novel- *Two Virgins* does make the women

characters vocal and expressive about the feminists concerns and raise the woman question but they too are defeated in the quest,. Lalitha in her bid to break free of the dominance of patriarchy ends up on the streets. She feels crippled morally and comes to decide that her liberation was a myth and Saroja her younger sister, taking lesson from the down fall of her sister realizes that it is not worthwhile to protest against a system where the plight of women is akin to animals and she restrains her erotic desires and choses to live within the codes and restraints of the rural society. According to Kamala, though women have every right to be as messy and sexually libertine as men yet they are de-humanised to the same degree as men get in this process. Here too we see that the writers are not able to rise above the moral concerns to create a character that will have her way and still be happy.

Lisa Appignanesi in her article ascribes such tendencies to either

conformation to the social norms or to evoke sympathy for the victims of patriarchy. Commenting upon *Anna Karenina* she says-

Feminist revision of the canon and revising the texts written by men show male characterization of women as fundamentally ambivalent and hence misogynist.

Also is the question raised about intentionality. If the author condemns the transgressing heroine to death does that imply approbation of social conventions and mores, or do they intend to provoke a sense of outrage and compassion for the victims of barbarous moral and social conventions.

It can be either of the two. Shobha De after writing many novels that have women characters who totally defy social prescriptions which are called 'sallies' by SharadShrivastava finally writes *Sultry Days* in which after meandering in defiance, finally the women come back to

mainstream. And she says that finally she wrote a book that her children could read. Thus the desire to be a part of the mainstream is always present. Therefore while creating such transgressing characters; eventually the authors want their characters to be remembered in a good light as hardly the audience remembers a character that does not have positive traits. Also perhaps by making them tragic figures they make them more loved and memorable. Pathos not only takes away the initial sting of their deeds but also scores sympathy for them. Even in a reformist sense perhaps victimisation brings home the feminist cause better, as then the scheme of oppression gets highlighted.

But from a feminist perspective it appears to be the patriarchy having the last laugh. Higgonet says in this regard- "since certain values can be expressed only through their displacement and ultimate sacrifice in the figure of the tragic heroine,

the novelist's critique of society may actually turn out into a tacit confirmation of the existing order."⁶ And this is what certain authors do to bring home their views about the role of women and consequences of adultery.

Judith Armstrong holds another view and says that even beneath the apparent last laugh of patriarchy it is the women's cause that wins. In a criticism of *Anna Karenina* she writes - "the hierarchy appears to win only if we read Anna's story (or any such story) as one of retribution against an isolated individual who tried to pit herself against the system, but in reality the triumph of the 'fallen woman' is proclaimed in the power she exerts over author, reader, and text."⁷ In that sense Anna succeeds to create a place in the reader's heart.

Rousseau said- "To give one's self meaningfully to another, one needs to have the sense of choice and freedom. Passion implies the existence of alternatives and

the sacrifice of the multiplicity of desire to the strength of one dominant sentiment."⁸ Thus it is genuine feeling which also demands certain sacrifices. It would not have been easy even for Anna to leave her son behind, but she could not have done otherwise.

Anna is bound to Vronsky. It is almost as if she represses her love for her son, blinds herself to it, and puts it into abeyance until it surges forth to make her loathe her lover. At the same time, Anna cannot bring herself to love her daughter by Vronsky because the little girl is the very sign of her bondage, her fall into an abject state.⁹

Anna could not have her love and her duty simultaneously and she chose love, she chose individuality over containment, turbulent path of passion over the quiet of domestic monotony, in that respect she is a new woman. But this individuality is what the society is uncomfortable with; hence she too had to

die, though she too could have lived. There was no real problem, Vronsky was willing to marry her, and Karenin would have divorced her if she had asked. But the tragedy lies in non-fulfilment of desire. Hence Anna had to die. For that the flaw had to be in her character, her disposition. She died yet lived on in the readers' hearts. As the reader is more likely to remember and sympathise with tragic figures, this could also be the reason why the literary destiny of such lovable characters often end in death, to the comfort as well as planning of their creator- the author.

Marx says, "If a marriage based on love is moral then a marriage is moral only till love lasts." (*Communist Manifesto*, 508) In the light of this statement we can say that by walking away from a marriage that did not have mutual love at this core, such women did no wrong. If we are concerned about morality, then isn't morality a subjective term and since ages it has been defined by the patriarchal setup

that has denied any sexual existence to women. Asha Choubey in a study of women characters of Nayantara Sahgal's works comments-

Sahgal's women are not hostile to men, but they would certainly not settle for a subordinate position. They are not ready to compromise though they do not hesitate to adjust. Sahgal tries to make plainly clear that no relation is good or bad in itself; it has to be free from all labels. Even extra marital and pre-marital relations are not entirely immoral, if they tend to fulfil the person as individual. That which saps individuals of their individuality is immoral and that which saves them of all frustrations is wholesome and ethical.¹⁰

Self-fulfilment is what many writers have tried to give a reason for the death or reform of the women characters. Death too they have tried to justify as means of self-fulfilment in which they take control of their lives and deny the society a right to govern them. Spiritual self-

fulfilment is the better word which many critics look for to justify whether they are 'new women' or not or are merely 'aberrations'. They must realize their self and explore within for that. To what purpose and of what merit is this self-fulfilment if one has to die for it, if it could not be achieved in this very life. The self is selfish, it has its aspirations, and they can be satiated by having what they want and not by crushing or annihilating that want or putting the self to an end. As Chaubey says if an act is wholesome for the individual, then it is ethical. Ethics is of no use if it cannot provide contentment to the individual.

Dostoevsky has a different take on the nature of crime and punishment specially the crime of passion. He says-

Inasmuch as society is abnormally organized, it is impossible to make the human entity responsible for its consequences. Therefore, the criminal is irresponsible, and at present crime does

not exist. To overcome crime and human guilt, it is necessary to overcome the abnormality of society and its structure.¹¹

According to Dostoevsky it is the faulty structure of the society which is a product of a history of distortions that compel men to commit crime. For any wrong done the society is as much responsible as the culprit that creates the situation for it. Had it been more fair and transparent the crime would not have occurred.

Conclusion:

Thus such women characters who chose turbulence of a passionate love over the quiet of a loveless monotonous marriage should indeed be hailed for their individuality, for the fact that they make a choice which is entirely theirs and for them perhaps for the first time. At times even their death is defiance; a refusal to live the way society would have it, to seek divorce from such a repressing life. But

more often than not it's the author's plan to show what is the predicament of such women who go astray, it is the manifestation of the male angst that would not have a woman, a wife, a mother be the desiring subject instead of an object to be desired. And for female authors it is the depiction of how tragic the reality is indeed for such woman, either because it is the harsh truth or there is the tendency to appropriate the societal norms, to remain

in the ambit of the mainstream out of fear or choice. It's time the writers stopped putting an end to the love stories of such women in death or reform and let the saga go on despite the hardships. If literature is about depicting the truth then even social truth is changing as more and more women are challenging social codes and dictums.

Notes

1. http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Kate_Chopin_novel...
2. Mandelkar, Amy. *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel* Ohio State University Press. e-book. page 38.
3. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chokher_Bali
4. www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/classics/annakarenina
5. Amardeep Singh: A Brief Note About Jainendra Kumar's "The Resignation Letter" www.electrostatic.com/2010/10/brief-note-about-jainendra-kumars.html Oct 20, 2010.
6. Mandelkar, Amy. *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel* Ohio State University Press. e-book. Page 38.
7. Ibid. Page 40.
8. literaturesalon.wordpress.com/.../rousseau-on-love-passion-in-julie

9. www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/classics/.../annakarenina.html
10. See AshaChaubey's comments about the works of NayantaraSehgal in her article "From Silence to Speech: An Assessment on Indian English Fiction" at www.unco.edu/ae-extra/2009/3/choubey.html
11. Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, "The Russian View of Human Guilt and Crime", in *Anna Karenina* (Norton Critical Ed., New York, London) Page 760.

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