

Notion of Chastity: Analyzing Sarojini Sahoo's *The Rape*

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to examine how the socially imposed 'notion of chastity' leads to exploitation of women. Women considered to be the carriers of family culture, have to bear a constant check on their sexual mobility. Just to protect the family honour, they are confined to domestic sphere. For the preservation of tradition, only women have to make sacrifices. The present paper singles out Sarojini Sahoo's short story entitled *The Rape* included in *Waiting for Manna*, the second short story collection in English. The present paper seeks to locate silences regarding the issues of sexuality as depicted in the selected story in light of post-colonial feminist theory. Through her short story, Sahoo challenges the notion of chastity imposed on women causing their exploitation. The selected story exposes how restrictions on women's sexuality reduces them to a mere body and cause their objectification. Thus, *The Rape* emphasizes on the need to rethink such socio-religious norms that consider women's morality essential for the preservation of tradition

Bhavna Sharma

Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of English,
Punjabi University Regional Centre,
Bathinda, Punjab

Keywords:

Introduction

Sarojini Sahoo one of the noted writers of Odisha is a feminist writer. Sahoo did her M.A and PhD degrees in Oriya Literature and earned Bachelor of Law from Utkal University. At present, she teaches at a degree college in Belpahar, Jharsuguda, Odisha. Although born in the small town of Dhenkanal in Odisha, she has attained world-wide recognition as a novelist, short-story writer, a columnist and as an academician. Sarojini Sahoo has penned eight novels and nine anthologies of short stories. Major works of Sahoo have been translated into several languages. She is Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award winner writer. She openly challenges the patriarchal structures of oppression. She is bold enough to bring into light the tabooed issues such as menopause, rape and lesbianism. Her fictional narratives reveal the inner world of women full of pains, sufferings and traumas.

Sarojini Sahoo is one of those women writers who lift the veil of silence on various issues related to suppression of women's sexuality executed in the name of the 'notion of chastity'. She believes that understanding sexual needs of women is a first step towards their enlightenment. Commenting on the need of eradication of the notion of chastity causing subjugation of women, Helene Cixous appeals women writers to underline this issue through their literary creations. She argues: "We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty...Women must write through their bodies...they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse..." (885-86). Thus, Sahoo belongs to that category of women writers who raise their voice for the cause of women leaving all their inhibitions aside.

Aim of the study

The present paper is an attempt to examine how the socially imposed 'notion of chastity' leads to exploitation of women. Women considered to be the carriers of family culture, have to bear a constant check on their sexual mobility. Just to protect the family honour, they are confined to domestic sphere. For the preservation of tradition, only women have to make sacrifices. The present paper singles out Sarojini Sahoo's short story entitled *The Rape* included in *Waiting for Manna*, the second short story collection in English. The present paper seeks to locate silences regarding the issues of sexuality as depicted in the selected story in light of post-colonial feminist theory. Through her short story, Sahoo challenges the notion of chastity imposed on women causing their exploitation. The selected story exposes how restrictions on women's sexuality reduces

them to a mere body and cause their objectification. Thus, *The Rape* emphasizes on the need to rethink such socio-religious norms that consider women's morality essential for the preservation of tradition.

Review of Literature

Many feminist thinkers and scholars have underlined the way imposed morality on women leads to their subjugation. Thus, women become the victim of their own sex. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental work *The Second Sex* has underlined the way women had to bear gender based discrimination as the notion of virginity or chastity was imposed on them while men on the other hand, were left free to lead their life in their own ways. Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft and Helene Cixous too brought into light the double standards of morality prevalent in patriarchal society. Feminist thinkers and writers of Indian origin like Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai too emphasized on the need to eradicate socio-cultural and religious norms confining women to domesticity. Women writers like Amrita Pritam, Ajit Kaur and Krishna Sobti can be associated to the category of courageous women writers who depict the issues related to women's sexuality without bothering about the reactions.

The present paper singles out Sarojini Sahoo's short story entitled *The Rape* included in *Waiting for Manna*, the second short story collection in English. The present paper seeks to locate silences regarding the issues of sexuality as depicted in the selected story in light of post-colonial feminist theory. Defining the notion of chastity, Sahoo states: "The word 'chastity' refers to sexual purity and in Eastern ethics it is always linked with only women and only with her self-denial of sexuality, tolerance, submissiveness and with an idea that there is no greater God than her husband. Never is any question asked or discussed any day on man's chastity" (*Sensible Sensuality* 30). *The Rape* revolves around Suparna, the protagonist and her husband, Jayant. Like an ordinary married couple, both have fights over issues of domestic life. Their family includes two children. They had a normal married life until Suparna tells Jayant an abnormal dream of hers in which she had sex with Dr. Tripathy. After listening to her dream, Jayant starts treating his wife as accountable for adultery. Suparna has to take her daughter to Dr. Tripathy for her treatment as she had chewed a used ampule of distilled water and her tongue was lacerated in several places. Jayant knowingly stays outside doctor's room and asks Suparna whether her meeting with Dr. Tripathy could turn her dream into reality. Suparna is punished for the crime she has not committed.

The text under study exposes how the notion of chastity circumscribes women. They are confined to the sphere of domesticity to protect the family honour. They are denied the right to express their sexual desires. Commenting in this context, Sahoo writes: "In the case of sexuality, the active role of a woman has always been denied-a woman should not be open to sexual desires" (*Sensible Sensuality* 6). A mere mention of her dream and not of any real incident makes Suparna a guilty in the eyes of her

husband. Sahoo describes Jayant's reaction after listening Suparna's dream: "'I wish I could too,' Jayant guffawed. 'Not to you, to somebody else.' A ghost of smile lingered on Jayant's face, but Suparna noticed it was cloudy. That lasted maybe a minute and then Jayant was his jovial old self again, but she sensed it was a put-on" (*The Rape* 105). Considering the relationship of husband-wife a transparent one, she shares with Jayant whatever happened in her dream in good faith without bothering about the consequences. She forgets that the patriarchal institution of marriage not only deprives the right over her body but also denies her the right to expression. This incident disturbs the meticulously achieved equilibrium of their married life.

The selected short story throws light on the attitude of Jayant who being a husband has prerogative to control the life of his wife. In patriarchal society, husband keeps a check on wife's sexual mobility. Simone de Beauvoir's observation regarding the socially sanctioned ownership of husband over wife's body seems apt here: "...he wants single and exclusive ownership of this flesh he is making his own" (*The Second Sex* 459). Patriarchal society provides superior position to husband while on the other hand, wife is not supposed to question her husband. In this context, Sahoo writes: "I think misogyny is a critical part of sexism and is always used with religion, culture and ethics, having a double standard, where the same rules have never been applied for masculine subjects" (*Sensible Sensuality* 118). The stereotypical images of ideal womanhood promoted with the help of socio-cultural and religious norms become a permanent part of female psyche and women strive to follow them unquestioningly.

A woman in every role of her life has to bear sexual colonization. Considered to be vulnerable to sexual assault, their sexuality is restricted by keeping a check on their dressing sense and outdoor activities. Being the carriers of the honour of their whole family, they need protection from the male gaze because any attack on their chastity brings disgrace for the whole clan. Elaborating the role of patriarchy in controlling sexuality of women, Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov in introduction to *from Gender to Nation* write:

Thus, while our women are to be revered as mothers, all women's bodies must be controlled. This is articulated in terms of "state fatherhood": the nation is defined as a family, motherhood and reproduction are supervised by the "father", or in terms of political jurisdiction: reproduction and sexual relations are political acts and must be put firmly under the control of the state and its moral and cultural institutions (church and family) (11).

Thus, Suparna's act of infidelity done even in a dream is punishable. Jayant has every right even to control the subconscious of his wife. The entry of another male even through a dream is not tolerable. Thus, Suparna as a wife is supposed not to think of another man in her life because it is like breaking inherent rules. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir's

statement regarding woman's erotic life is worth mentioning: "... she has no right to any sexual activity apart from marriage" (*The Second Sex* 454). Jayant is not ready to forgive Suparna though she tries hard to justify: "What! You don't think I'm free to dream? Can I control what I dream" (*The Rape* 105)?

Although Suparna is an educated woman yet her access to education fails to get her liberation from conventionalities of patriarchal system in which she is bound to live. She has to accept the stereotypical roles of wife and mother at the cost of her urge for uncontrollable freedom. She becomes a victim of sexist thinking of patriarchy that provides a few options for women as described by Sahoo: "The patriarchy always tries to induce the women with three unauthentic attitudes. These are the attitude of being a 'devi' or goddess... a devoted mother, and a pure or Sati woman. These ideas are good to hear but in my opinion, they are the tools of sexual politics that patriarchy has been trying to play with women for ages" (*Sensible Sensuality* 103). Instead of rewarding Suparna for her contribution to the tedious task of house management at the cost of her own wishes, she is made to feel guilty without any reason.

Woman treated as an object is denied the exercise of her free will. Suparna gets Jayant's approval only when she follows socially accepted roles. Her act of transgression in the form of saying no to her husband's bodily hunger is not acceptable. Dead-tired Suparna's denial to Jayant's sexual need at night proves to be an attack on male ego. It arouses his feeling of suspicion and he asks with a snort of laughter: "So you met your Dr. Tripathy today, eh?" "And the dream came true, did it, huh?" (*The Rape* 111)? Suparna is shocked to hear what Jayant said. She is unable to react. Her silence seems to speak a lot. Sahoo describes Suparna's disturbed state of mind: "Suparna startled. It was like a stinging slap. Did Jayant meant what he said? Or was it just a sick joke? Whatever it was, it did not lessen the sense of humiliation that began to overwhelm her. It seemed to her as if she has been raped by Jayant" (*The Rape* 112).

Through her short story, Sahoo challenges the Indian notions of femininity described and defined in terms of ideologies of seclusion, notions of protectionism and relational politics causing exploitation of women. Commenting on the importance given to women's morality, Mary Wollstonecraft in her monumental work *A Vindication*

of *The Rights of Woman*, also underscores the moral standards of patriarchal mindset of her society: "If the honour of a woman, as it is absurdly called, be safe, she may neglect every social duty...." (Wollstonecraft 66). The selected story exposes how restrictions on women's sexuality reduces them to a mere body and cause their objectification.

Conclusion

Thus, *The Rape* emphasizes on the need to rethink such socio-religious norms that consider women's morality essential for the preservation of tradition. The process of social transformation is not an easy task as bell hooks finds a link between all forms of oppression and believes that social structures of patriarchy cause oppression: "Since all forms of oppression are linked in our society because they are supported by similar institutional and social structures, one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact. Challenging sexist oppression is a crucial step in the struggle to eliminate all forms of oppression" (*Feminist Theory* 37). It seems as if Sahoo believes in 'personal is political'. Commenting on the need to place value on bodily needs of women, she argues: "I believe in the theory: "a woman's body, a woman's right", which means women should control their own bodies and people should take them seriously" (*Sensible Sensuality* 17). Writers like Sahoo contribute in their own way to the emancipation of women by supporting women's right over their bodies.

References

1. Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of Medusa." *The Women and Language Debate: A Sourcebook*. Ed. Camille Roman, Suzaane Juhasz and Cristanne Miller. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994. Print.
2. De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and ed. H.M Parshley. London: Vintage Books, 1997. Print.
3. Hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre*. London: Pluto Press, 2000. Print.
4. Ivekovic, Rada and Mostov, Julie. Eds. *From Nation to Gender*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2004. Print.
5. Sahoo, Sarojini. *Waiting for Manna*. Gujarat: Indian Age Communication, 2008. Print.
6. ---. *Sensible Sensuality: A Collection of Essays on Sexuality, Femininity and Literature*. Delhi: Authors Press, 2010. Print.
7. Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*. 1792. UK: Vintage, 2015. Print.