

Luna as a Collective Voice of the Subjugated Women: A Study

Abstract

Luna by Shiv Kumar Batalvi is an engrossing study of a passionate woman who is caught in the web of male-oriented society. The society has lop-sided views of marriage, love, sex and chastity. The heroine, Luna represents the anguish and the suffering that women have undergone in societies where female oriented values are subservient to the androcentric or male oriented ones. The publication of *Luna*, a poetic drama, in 1965 brought Shiv Kumar the honour of being the youngest recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award.

This work was dedicated to then PM of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. It advocates the cause of the upliftment of women in Indian society. With the publication of this work, he became the first modern Punjabi poet to voice the plight of women.

Keywords: Lop-Sided, Anguish, Subservient, Androcentric.

Introduction

Based on "Kissa Puran Bhagat" by Qadir Yar, Shiv's *Luna* made a radical departure by shifting the focus from Puran Bhagat to the maligned character of Luna. The play shows the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society. The character of Luna, the woman who was condemned as lecherous and pernicious down the ages has been resurrected and rehabilitated. Set in the ancient times, we see the characters of the legend enact and articulate the moral customs and standards in vogue at that juncture.

Aim of the Study

The paper aims to study text *Luna* from a feminist perspective. It tries to show how the author, Shiv Kumar Batalvi has made an effort to project Luna as an archetypal symbol of suffering womanhood that has been more sinned against than sinning.

In the history of human civilization, in its development and propagation, woman has been as important factor as man, but has always been looked down upon as an inferior being. Women constitute half of the human race, but they have been forced to occupy a secondary place since the overthrow of the matriarchal system. In the patriarchal system, a woman's role was to cater to male's sexual desires, bear his children and perform house hold duties. With the importance attached to the male child, her very existence was a big question mark.

In the words of Simone de Beauvoir,

"It is an act of free generosity on the part of the father to accept the female child, woman gains entrance into such societies only through a kind of grace bestowed upon her, not legitimately like the male."¹ The practice of polygamy made her a replaceable commodity.

The north Indian society of the ancient and medieval times, in which Shiv Kumar's *Luna* is historically ensconced, believed in the subjugation of women. It followed the patrilineal mode of descent. Manu, the great Hindu law-giver held that a woman must never be independent:

"In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons."²

So, the primary role of a woman was to be a good wife and a good mother. Chastity and modesty were considered as her chief accomplishments. Romantic love was not allowed as it led to sensual license and also threatened the stability of society. Marriage in the cultural framework was only for procreation and a wife's role was to be the husband's slave.

Qadir Yar was a poet with a moral purpose and while writing about a Hindu classical legend in *Qissa Puran Bhagat*, he did not lose sight of his moral vision; a requisite of the times he lived in.



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But not so with Shiv. His *Luna* was written in the post Independence Era when patriarchal system was disintegrating, Women's Liberation and the concept of New Woman were much talked about. Fatalism was being challenged, women wanted more choice, more control. Shiv himself too had a very liberal view, a mature thought process resulting from his vast knowledge of the latest theories of Psychology, Sociology etc. Added to this was his own wanderlust and way-wardness. He was a worshipper of beauty since his childhood and had a soft corner for the fair sex. Being involved in amorous affairs with numerous women, he very well understood the subtle nuances of love.

In the words of a critic:

"The antinomial feelings of joy and despair, possession and deprivation and conquest and defeat which the medieval poets of love narratives had articulated through their compositions were experienced by the poet himself in all their singularity and intensity."³

For Shiv Kumar "the great events in a person's life were birth, coitus and death. In fact, coitus had precedence over birth and death because they only framed that stage of puberty in which coitus could be blissful if the counterpart coincided with anima/animus and miserable if it resulted from marriage through kinship"⁴

Hence *Luna* suffers as she is not married to her animus. For the poet, woman is much more than a lump of flesh always at the beck and call of a man; rather she is a being with a distinct individuality of her own who should be given her due place in society. Thus, he chose the title of the play as *Luna* and not Puran Bhagat.

Throughout the ages, the legend of Puran Bhagat had been told from the egocentric male point of view, without any curiosity about knowing the woman.

The story revolves around Salwan, the King of Sialkot and his two wives Iccharan, the first and *Luna*, an untouchable, the second. He had a son Puran from his first wife, who was considered inauspicious for the father and consequently confined to a cell for twelve years. In this duration, the father married a low caste young girl *Luna*- fit to be her daughter. When *Luna* sees Puran as he comes out of his cell, she is infatuated with him and wants to have illicit relations. She tries to win him over, first through cajoling and then coercion but Puran doesn't succumb to her charms. So he earns her wrath. She accuses him of having attempted to outrage her modesty. The King is infuriated and orders that his limbs be mutilated and the body be thrown into a well. Puran, being of an ascetic nature, is pained to see this degradation in humanity and does nothing to defend himself.

His mutilated body lay in a well for twelve years until his cries are heard by Guru Gorakh Nath who restores his limbs and makes him his disciple. Through intense meditation, Puran Bhagat, as he is now called, acquires miraculous powers and his fame spreads far and wide. During one of his religious

expeditions, he passes through Sialkot where Salwan, the King and *Luna*, the queen come to seek his blessings and for the boon of a son. He grants them the wish and also forgives them. He restores the eyesight of his mother Iccharan who had gone blind in lamentation of her son's mutilation. Salwan requests him to return to the palace and accept the crown but Puran Bhagat refuses.

So, it is evident that Qadir Yar and also the later poets never allowed *Luna* to raise her finger against the prevalent social customs. All her dreams, desires shattered when she was forced to marry Salwan. It was she who was wronged but was projected as a pernicious woman who, unashamedly, tried to lure her innocent step-son into an incestuous relation. The story is composed with a moralistic end and proves valid the view point which earlier writers had about womankind. *Luna* is presented as the representative of her gender and attributed with various adjectives like: pernicious ("Hansiari rann") 'object of lust (Kam di Gandal)', 'Gateway to hell' ("narak da dvar") 'poisonous pill' (Zahar di puri)" etc.⁵ Lacking in psychological insight, these writers never tried to understand her pain and agony.

Shiv Kumar's *Luna* focuses on the psycho-sexual tangle instead of morality and ethics of the yore. To this, he has added new motifs of poverty, sexual incompatibility, age-gap, mis-alliance, male domination and female revolt.

In the words of O.P Sharma

"The poet launches through *Luna* a protagonist of the eternal woman as well as the fiery new woman of the milieu, as *Luna* asserts, defies and even indicts the cult of man and man-made inflictions in the name of love, sex and progeny."⁶

To serve his purpose, Shiv Kumar has employed only that segment of the legend which centers upon *Luna* and Puran. He ends the play with the amputation scene. Another divergence is the presentation of Puran as a young man of eighteen instead of twelve and also the decrease in *Luna*'s age to make them almost of the same age-group. Iccharan is shown going to her father's place after Salwan's marriage with *Luna*, for he felt that no self-respecting woman can swallow the indignity of sharing her husband. Another change is the presentation of *Luna* as the daughter of a poor low caste cobbler. This motif of poverty heightens the social tragedy of *Luna*. We also see other minor characters like Ira and Mathri; who act as *Luna*'s alter-egos, Varman and Kunti through whom Salwan lays bare his inner-self.

These changes or additions have been helpful in explicitly showing the gulf between the traditional significance of the legend and the new meaning presented to it.

Shiv's *Luna* who is married to a man with whom she has no sexual compatibility. She is much more than a mere lump of flesh which can be used for sexual gratification. She is a girl with a distinct individuality of her own who wants her due place in the society; the society which has wronged her.

A feminist to the core, Shiv Kumar agrees with Simone De Beauvoir when she states:

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine."⁷

Women should conform to certain rules set up by the society. But all do not conform. Toril Moi, a feminist critic, states:

"---- patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for femininity are natural; thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled both 'unfeminine' and 'unnatural.'"⁸ Luna is the archetype of the suffering woman who is neglected and treated with contempt and repression. But, in her the repression results in an urge to hit back at the social constructs. She shows defiance and disobedience in the form of illicit love for the step-son. In other words, she refuses to be 'feminine' or natural.

The book comprises of eight Acts in all. Act I of the play sees Salwan trying to convince Varman his friend, the king of Chamba in order to marry Luna. Salwan makes a subtle difference between two kinds of women; the serpent woman of passion and the snake maiden of dreams. Iccharan, for him is the serpent woman of passion devoid of all colour, warmth and beauty. On the other hand, Luna is the personification of the snake maiden of his dreams. If analysed psychoanalytically, she represents the pleasure principle which is trying to get the better of his reality principle which is represented by Iccharan.

"The inner dream woman of King Salwan is the lurking phantom haunting the covers of his psyche and thus disturbing his conjugal life with Iccharan whom he finds frigid."⁹

The beginning of Act III finds Luna lamenting her fate on being forced to marry an old man. The age gap hurts her. She says:

"The warmth of my fire is dying fast
The match my father has found for me is
not a match for me. (P. 85)
She calls for breaking all the bonds of
oppression.

"Why should anybody weigh our fires
warmth against a handful of rice?" (P. 86)

Ira and Mathri rebuke her and advice her to accept the situation but she is uncontrollable.

Luna, here presents a pathetic portrait of a woman caught in a male oriented set up. A facet of that segment of history is presented when polygamous kings maintained harems for their depraved sexual needs. Beautiful virgins were taken as wives to serve their lord masters by fulfilling their sexual urges. In his study of Indian society, V.P.S. Raghuvanshi observes: "The Hindu social ideals did not view marriage as a contract under the

perceptorship of cupid.. The principle of free selection of partners irrespective of class was not operative in Indian society"¹⁰

Luna finds herself caught in the same situation, finds herself delivered to someone who exercises a right over her. And the perpetrator of this crime is again a male- her father. She says-

"My virtuous father has committed a sin
He has joined me to a withered flower
Whose fragrance has all been used by
Iccharan (P. 108)

The fire within is uncontrollable and the King unable to satisfy her sexual urge; this resulted in frustration and anguish. Consequently, she falls for Puran, as he is not her 'biological' son and she and Puran belong to the same age group; hence a perfect match.

Her logic is
"I of Puran's age
am Puran's mother:
I am older than him by just a kiss.
How can I be a mother to him?
He did not live in my womb (P. 108)

Batalvi sides with Freud and psychoanalysis when he shows that sexual gratification is necessary- it being the sine qua non for every successful marriage.

"Aside from the ecstatic experience of mutual enjoyment at the moment of climax, there is the feeling of belonging together that is shared. This feeling is precious to both husband and wife."¹¹ (P. 37)

This feeling has been denied to Luna; as was to other women of those times. It is thus quite natural for her to seek an alternative.

Infidelity is woman's sole defense against domestic slavery. When she is "sexually unsatisfied, doomed to male crudeness, 'condemned to male ugliness', she finds consolation in a young lover."¹²

Luna, the modern woman is definitely not ashamed when she demands 'fire' i.e. Puran 'for the fire buck' (P. 107) i.e. herself. And Batalavi's sympathies are with her. She questions the double standards of the society-

"Should a father ravish his daughter
This world is not scandalized
But if Luna desires Puran
Why should the world's tongue wag
And condemn her as a whore? (P. 108)

The poet agrees with Simone de Beauvoir when in her seminal work, *The Second Sex* she says:

"Marriage is obscene in principle in so far as it transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge; it gives an instrumental and therefore degrading character to the two bodies in dooming them to know each other in their general aspects as bodies, not persons."¹³

We see all rights reserved for the male Salwan and all duties for Incharan and Luna. He has wronged both the women. Incharan's marriage fails

and Luna's marriage is a failure from the very start Incharan says,

"Man may be full of a hundred vices,
He is yet a god in this land" (P. 97)

In such a set up where man was no less than god woman was quite naturally, tutored to be submissive, to develop feminine characteristics like sweetness, humility, modesty etc. According to feminists, this gender structure is cultural is character.

In the end, Puran too advocates freedom for women. He hopes and prays that his sacrifice will entail a revolution in the thought process of the age, and allows himself to be mutilated. Critical of this barbaric "creed of flesh", he decides to sacrifice his life

"so that never again a Salwan should
marry a daughter
Nor a father
Devour his own daughter's flesh

.....
None should here buy flesh
With money as his passions food" (P. 153)

When Puran is mutilated, Luna cries uncontrollably. Due to the social norms, she has again lost someone very dear to her.

Conclusion

By presenting the pathos of a woman who is denied sexual and emotional gratification in a society where she confiscates her right to choose her partner to the people who are indifferent to her desires, Shiv Kumar Batalvi has brilliantly reflected "The common yearning of womanhood". This poetic play shows the inherent hollowness of the patriarchal system. It provides us a glimpse to the world of women where subservience to the rules of men is supposed to be their religion. An act of assertion is seen to be an act of rebellion.

This play will have an enduring significance for the way it deals with the issues of freedom and rights of women and also for the impeccable language he executes these themes with.

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