

Portrayal of Women Select Short Stories of Omprakash Valmiki

Paper Submission: 15/10/2021, Date of Acceptance: 23/10/2021, Date of Publication: 24/10/2021

Abstract

In the history of Dalit Hindi literature Omprakash Valmiki(1950-2013) was an well known name. He was born at Barla in the Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh in an untouchable Chuhra family. His autobiographical novel *Joothan*"(1997) and its profound appeal to the readers have reached his name and fame as a writer to the peak. Amma and Other Stories is an English translation of fifteen stories of Omprakash Valmiki. The stories depicts the pain, anguish, humiliation, social discrimination of the lower caste people during his times by the hands of the upper caste people .Being a Dalit he had seen and felt the misery,humiliation, deprivation etc from very close quarters. The selected stories was basically dealt with the struggle, exploitation,humiliation, discrimination of the Dalit community .Valmiki describes the position of women in the Dalit society as well as upper class women in the class and caste ridden society in our country.His stories also focuses the sexual harassment of Dalit women in work places, mental dilemma of the women in the family, patriarchal dominance due to economic dependency, helplessness of women regarding earning livelihood etc. Amma, the protagonist of the story '*Amma*', asserts her own struggle to maintain her family and aims to provide education for her next generation to make themselves eligible to be a clerk or peon at least so they would not do the job of a sweeper with canister and broom. The story '*Homeless*' portrays the helplessness of Mano and her husband , Sukhia in regard to building a house of Pucca bricks. Sexual harassment is also a key issue of the story. *Biram's wife* and *Eclipse* relates the anxiety of a upper caste women who is still not able to give birth a child and the desire to make sex with a Dalit man to get herself pregnant. The story *Beast* depicts the plight of an unnamed Bahuji and her abrupt disclosure regarding the male person to whom she is acquainted with. The paper will explore the authentic portrayal of the predicament of women of both the upper class as well the lower class Dalit one.

Keywords Women, Dalit, Predicament,, discrimination pain, humiliation.

Introduction

Literature has rightly been called the 'mirror' of society as it truly reflects the picture of contemporary society. Since the beginning of civilization women had been treated as a 2nd category under the patriarchal system in the class and caste ridden society in India.The women have made a significant contribution in the family. From early dawn to midnight they have maintained their responsibility and duty to bring up the children along with other domestic affairs. They have become victims of the caste system. Sometime the lustful man wanted to enjoy the bodies of the Dalit woman despite of being Dalit, the so called untouchables.

Selected stories particularly dealt with the suffering of the Dalit women inside the home and outside, at the workplace. Women have to face various difficulties in their way of life. Generally they belonged to the illiterate, poverty ridden families and did not have the liberty to take their own decision in regard to their aspirations. They were not well informed about their rights and not able make any complaint against the so called upper caste .They are compelled to work in order to maintain their livelihood by enduring such violence and mental torture. Valmiki through his stories wanted to portray the unheard voices of the so called women Amma and other Stories consists of 15 short stories particularly dealt with the plight ,pain discrimination of the untouchable, the lower castes people in the caste system in India. Apart from Dalit background the selected stories '*Amma*', '*Eclipse*', '*Biram's Wife*', '*Homeless*' depicts the predicament and sufferings of the women in the Indian society. The story '*Amma*' tells the painful and struggling story of Amma,the protagonist, who had been working from house to house as a sweeper with broom and canister.She was named Sukru's wife, after her marriage according to the name of her husband Sukru, a safai karmachari in the municipality and she had been entitled

Somnath Mahato

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Kharagpur College,
Kharagpur, West
Bengal, India

Shibu's mother after the birth of her elder son. She is now 70 years old and entitled to clean the lavatory along with other ancillary work of the upper classes. The work places were generally termed as 'tikkana'. She had been working in the 'thikana' of Chopra family for a long time and quite naturally she knows something about the secret of the illegal relationship of Mrs. Chopra. One day she saw Mrs. Chopra with Vinod, a frequent visitor of the house during the absence of Mr. Chopra, in a 'compromising situation'. One day Vinod tried to assault her sexually while Mrs. Chopra was in the bath room. But she was a dignified lady and try to live her life with honour in spite of a being a Dalit sweeper. She protested and complained to her mistress abruptly. "Bhainji, tell this bastard that not every woman is a slut." (185)

Despite of being low born and needy she could not surrender her body to the lustful man who tried to assault her sexually. She was a woman of tolerance and never disclosed the incident of molestation to anyone. Knowing well a huge loss to the family regarding profitable 'Chopra Thikana' She compelled to sell it to Hardei very cheaply. Hardei belongs to the same category of sweepers and is quite hard and harsh in her attitude. ".....And that Chopra ! I knew how to handle such women. Here, take this lote....from tomorrow Chpre is minesalli !..Imagine a mother of two still, trying to seek love elsewhere." (186)

Valmiki portrays here the upper class women and the Dalit sweepers and the molestation of working class women in the work place.

She has endured hundreds of hardships to provide education for her children and to live with dignity in this society far away from the world of humiliation and deprivations.

"Get a bit of education so that you may be a peon in the office, if not clerk. You will at least be free from this dirty work, which does not get you two square meals a day properly not any respect." (188)

She expressed her normal desire to uplift her next generation from the harsh treatment caused by the caste system since her knowledge in the society.

"That is how life goes ...no one even lets you sit near him as if they will catch a contagious disease." (189)

A deep feelings of love and affection was depicted to her daughter Kiranlata because she has to depart from the very house of her father after her marriage and go to her husband's house.

She was such strong minded and never thought her children as a substitute despite her illness and suffering.

"No, I shall not push my children into this filth. I would make them work as labourer but I shall never hand them a broom." (189)

Being an honest woman she was very puzzled when she heard that his son did not follow any moral standards and they were being led astray. Hearing the news of her son's illegal earnings she burst into tears.

"I have not been able to make a good person out of you, for which I myself guilty. From tomorrow start cooking separately ..I could not share your ill earned bread." (191)

With a heavy heart she advised his son "Bette Bishan, I sent you and your children to school in order that you feel ashamedthat's why you were educated. I tried to take all of you away from the broom and the basket. After me not single daughter and daughter in law of the house has gone to the thikanas.....so that you might all learn to live with dignity and not do things that might make you feel ashamed...." (194)

This kind of self determination is shown when a person gets so much pain and humiliation in the path of a man's life. Amma's intense desire is that her next generation began anew life by being educated away from broom and basket and they will never feel ashamed that they are from the Dalit community. She shows her steel hardened determination to visualize the future for her new generation.

"If for that joy I have to work hard ,I shall continue doings so till my last breath."(195)

'Homeless' is an another interesting story about the plight of a Dalit wage earner couple Sukhia and Mano.They have left their village to work at the kiln of Mukhtar Singh on the basis of daily wages.Their little ambition is to make a small Pucca house of red bricks and live life happily. Mahesh and Kisni ,another couple ,worked also thereon the same basis married six month ago.By making Mahesh an alcohol addict, Subhe Singh ,son of Mukhtar Singh continuously fulfilled his sexual lust over Kisni .That day when Kisni was feeling ill Subhe singh ordered to bring Mano in order to fulfil his sexual lust.

"Send for Mano to the office .Kisni is not feeling well today."(203)

Contractor Asghar got a rude remark when he tried to stop him doing so.Jasdev , another co worker of the kiln ,got an inhuman treatment when he tried to work on behalf of Mano.

Mano, though a worker and lead tough life but she never wanted to be Kisni, the devadasi of Subhe singh .She has her own aims and ambitions tinged with dignity.

"She Did not wish to be Kisni . She was filled with an invincible desire to live a life of dignity.She wanted a home built with pucca bricks where she could dream about her family and children.(204)

Sukhia knows everything about the hidden intention of Subhe Singh and he never wanted let mano become Kisni. Mano, a typical woman of hard hearted endured the inner turmoil silently.A feeling of insecurity engulfed her regarding honour and virginity. Finally she asks herself "Is this the punishment for being born a woman."(205)

The author also presented the evils of caste system through the mouth of Sukhia. Mano was preparing rotis for hungry and thirsty Jasdev who belonged to the upper caste .Sukhia reminded her "A batman will take food cooked by you!Have you lost your wits?"(205)

Tinged with typical womanly feelings and forgetting the class barrier she expressed her brotherly affection to jasdev. "Your brother said you were a batman ..so you won't eat food prepared by me .If that is so I shall not press you ...It's your will...I am a woman ...If there is someone nearby who is hungry ...no morsel of food will go down my throatand then , you work with us day and night ...because of me you got beaten ...How then did this batman come between us...?"(206)

Subhe Singh tried his level best to seduce them by making new excuses. There was a tussle between them in regard to the seduction and as a punishment their labour is not paid by showing various excuses. Finally they feel helpless and left the place with broken hearts to an unknown destination that would may fulfill their little dream of a small house of pucca bricks.

Women have their own limitations.They just carry the instructions as well as orders of their husbands. They did not have the liberty to interfere but to tolerate everything a midst the patriarchy and caste system.

Beside the Dalit woman Valmiki depicts the pangs and predicament of the woman belonging to upper castes. In '*Eclipse*' and '*Biram's wife*', the protagonist of the story, remain unproductive for a long time after her marriage. She is now a matter of mockery in the village and many makes sarcastic remarks in regard to her infertility. She, despite being a wife of a upper caste family silently endured the pain due to her empty womb. After enduring a long period of mental anguish she proposed to her husband boldly to go to the city for doctor's check up and find out who was at fault.

"Even you hold me guilty .Lets once go to the doctor in the city .I am told doctors can tell who is at fault..."(104)

She may have thought that her husband would think deeply about the matter of infertility and consider that it could be done.But in return she had to digest abuses and extreme humiliation from her husband.

“Saali, trying to lay the blame on me; I shall cut you up in small pieces and bury them ...Get out of my sight...”(104)

It was a traditional ritual of the upper class people to distribute grains during the time of Solar Eclipse to the people of lower castes .Ramesar , a lower class young man used to work at the house of Chaudhary during time of his father's illness.With ecstatic joy he determined to collect more grains by covering many houses.

Being desperate and forgetting the class barrier Biram 's wife compelled Ramesar to have a sex with her that could fulfill her desire to become a mother and obviously to silence the lips of the backbiter .

“Holding her hand tight against her breasts the bahu whispered to him,:Do not worry about grains .Just once I need a son .. In return I shall give you whatever you ask for...”(110)

Further She assures his safety when she found Ramesar is trembling with fear and hesitation.

Do not say anything .No one will come to know of it .Take pity on me.(110)

Under some circumstances even a upper caste woman make compromise with the lower castes . She totally forgets that Ramesar is untouchable , a polluted one but that person would liberate her from being called unproductive .

The story '*Biram's Wife*' is the end portion of the previous Story '*Eclipse*', quite unusual in the field of short stories as the stories of the protagonist carried forward to the next story .After few months later of the eclipse Biram's wife was pregnant and the news was overwhelming to the villagers.Due to the death of his wife Chaudhari gave the responsibility to the experienced midwife Bhagwanti for the care of his pregnant daughter in law.Biram's wife had the natural soft feeling towards the lower caste people.Valmiki provides the mentality of Biram towards the Dalit.The author focuses the attitude and mentality of the upper caste man towards the so called Dalit people.

“Biram had glared at his wife , saying what have you to do with them that you see so soft towards them? The drum , the villager,the sudra and the women .You can control them only by beating them...Don't meddle with outside mutters .Mind your own business.” (118)

But she knows all about the baby in her womb and she has no choice but to make sexual intercourse with Ramesar, the Dalit in order to freed herself from being called barren.

“...I want deliverance from the pain of being barren.”(123)

'*The Beast*' , another story , is about the pain and suffering of an unnamed Bahuji. Jagesar, the faithful servant of the Chaudhri, had the responsibility to escort Bahuji to her mother's home.

On the way of the journey Jagesar was terribly stunned when he heard the disclosure of Bahuji's mental agony.Valmiki has perfectly portrayed a picture of a tormented woman.According to the protagonist of the story:

“I am not going to my mother's place of my own will.I have been turned out of home by force.For all times to come....”(158)

The author also vividly portrayed the ugly side of the patriarchy system and the helpless condition of the woman.Birju's wife i.e. Bahuji had endured the sufferings for a period of past few months in Chaudhri's house.Expecting cordial support from her husband in such a situation She tried several times to share her pain to Birju but he was remain indifferent to her sufferings. She got harsh treatment from the family:

“If you utter just one word against my father, I shall break your bones .You will lie lame and helpless in bed all your life...If you are a women,then behave like a woman.”(159)

She also discloses her mental agony to jagesar regarding hidden beast like qualities of her family members. Valmiki presents here the helpless condition of mother in law of Bahuji. Mother in law counseled her to accept the on-goings

which means dying daily for her. It seems to her to live in this house means to suffer hell every day:

"This seems customary in the house. A woman is just an article to use. Traditional relationship have no meaning here, bahu. If you wish to live in peace, compromise"(159).

"Every moment of my life that I have spent has been hellish."(159)

Getting sympathy from the servant Jagesar she pointed out all her irritations regarding the family members to him.

"Chaudhri, my father in law ...in stead of father in law, he wanted to be my husband. When I opposed I was beaten. Different tortures were inflicted ... when I did not yield, I was thrown out....you were given orders...go and leave her..."(159)

To the neighbors Chaudhri was a lord like man. He was well admired and respected by the people of the area. This seems quite unbelievable to Jagesar that such a person could do despicable crime. She tells him about the disappearance of Satbir's Kisni and her death. Actually she was in Chaudhri's possession and that innocent girl was molested by same person in the haveli of Chaudhri since her disappearance. The arrival of Saroj, daughter of Chaudhri to her mother's house changed the scenario. Kisni was killed and thrown into the pond so the secret might not be revealed. The woman has to remain silent even after knowing everything about the oppression.

Bahuji also reveals the cruel and inhuman treatment about her life prior to marriage in her mother's house which is generally considered the most safe and secure place of a woman.

"The mother's place, for me, is like a blind wellto which I do not wish to go ...The doors of my mother's place are already closed to me".(161)

She also expressed her story of unheard cry to the readers at her mother's house. Like a wild beast her own maternal uncle molested her sexually. Her mother was well informed about the heinous act of his brother but she feels so helpless that she told me to accept such barbarism because there was a fear in her mother's mind regarding losing the food and shelter given by him.

I was not even ten years old when this innocent body had been ruined by my maternal uncle ...I wailed and cried a lotbut there was no one to heed me..."(162)

She also discloses the secret of her lengthy miserable life which puzzled and made Jagesar dumb found. She is just like an article to be sold in the market and after use to be thrown out in the sewer. According to Bahuji

"In the name I was married to Birju ...the truth is that the maternal uncle had borrowed a sum of five thousand rupees from the Chaudhri. When the Chaudhri didn't succeed in accomplishing his misdeeds he threw me out ..." (162)

Jagesar's realization about Chaudhri and his despicable deeds filled his mind 'with hatred and anger'. Chaudhri is the wild beast in the guise of a man for whom he had devoted his whole life unconditionally. He finally repented for his misdeeds by wielding lathis to the innocent people for the sake of Chaudhri. He assured Bahuji that he would never leave her in this situation particularly in the unmetalled path of solitary jungle. To Bahuji this place is a better one in comparison with her mother's home.

'Mother....mother's home had got ruined long back. The solitary jungle is safer than the havelis. At least, if the wolves come, they will not come in another guise..(163)

Objective of the Study The objective of the study is that the readers can come to know the plight of the depressed class women and how the male dominated society treats the women. The stories of the Om Prakash Valmiki show the condition of the lower strata as well as the upper class women of the society.

Conclusion

Valmiki's stories particularly tells the contempt, humiliation, discrimination, molestation and predicament of the Dalit community. He has portrayed the vivid pictures of women from Dalit to dominant high castes who are oppressed in different ways and different times. His authentic portrayal of high caste women suffering at the hands of male members of their family is also noteworthy. He exposes the reader the long accumulated burning pains of the women that were enclosed in the four walls through his writings. Along with this the above mentioned stories highlight their long cherished small hopes and aspirations. His stories are also a kind of protest against patriarchal dominance and the so called caste system which has been going on since Aryan civilization.

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