

Women in Ghachar Ghochar by Vivek Shanbhag: Exploring the Violence of Indian Patriarchy

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Abstract

In Indian patriarchal society, the women are expected to adopt the archetypal roles as housewives whose life is limited to only childbearing and household chores. In Ghachar Ghochar, a similar notion has been expressed through the characters and narrative designed by Shanbhag. The novella represents the clash between the traditional moral values and modernity as well as explores the moral decline of the family members who have found financial gain overnight and begin to be corroded with dirty business ethics and corruption. In the present paper, I am going to focus on the domestic violence and patriarchal control that the women in the novel have to deal with on the hands of their patriarchs. In our society, the women have been modelled as housewives whose life is designed only for childbearing and household chores snatching away any possible choices or their individual voice or desire. I will explore the subjugation of women and their placement in the dynamics of the home and the world along with the exploitation and oppression they are faced with.

Keywords: Home, Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Housewifization and Women.

Introduction:

Women, throughout history, have been expected to be docile and submissive to their patriarch throughout her life, be it to her father, her mother, husband or in-laws. The roots of oppression lie in the very early period of one's life, for instance, In a middle-class Indian family, the boy is supposedly trained to become a leader whereas the girls are tamed to become followers, restricting her to the freedoms that her brother savours, the girls who rebel and argue are morally policed and considered a shame. The very structure of the household establishes the powerful hold of patriarchy within its members, the gender roles are well understood and once these established gender roles are disrupted, the functionality of the family is also threatened. The above said is explicitly evident in Mohan Rakesh's play *Aadhey Adhure*, where Savitri has taken up the role as the breadwinner of the family disrupting the balance which has resulted in dysfunctionality in her marriage as well as her family.

Frederick Engels in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* studies the rise of class society and how it led to the rise of inequality and oppression of women. Before the advent of class society, the women occupied the central position trusted with the duty of gathering and growing crops in the hunter-gatherer society. The duty bestowed upon her was primal for the survival of the group, therefore; no systematic inequality existed between the men and the women. However, with the rise in private property, the monogamous families flourished as a means to pass down the property from one generation to another as a consequence the women were trapped in the household. Engels writes –

'In the old communistic household, which comprised many couples and their children, the task entrusted to the women of managing the household was as much a public and socially necessary industry as the procuring of food by the men.

With the patriarchal family, and still, more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production.'

The advancement in the methods of agriculture lead to the deprivation of the social status that was conferred upon the women, the men consider women to be physically weak and unfit for extensive manual labour. However, the truth behind this sexual division of labour is that the men are trained to operate machinery while the women are left aside because of their naturalised ideological assumptions about gender roles stating that women are meant to take only domestic responsibilities.

In Indian patriarchal society, the women have been moulded as housewives whose life is designed only for childbearing and household chores. I will, further, explore the placement of women in the dynamics of the home and the world along with analyzing the paradigm of exploitation and oppression they are faced with.

The Novella:

Written originally in Kannada by Vivek Shanbhag and translated by Srinath Perur in English, the psychological fiction drama depicts the evolution of an impoverished Bangalore based family who has attained newfound wealth and social upliftment. The narrator, who is left unnamed to create an identity of 'everyman', sits at a coffee shop and reflects upon the events of his life leading him from 'rags to riches' and the consequences that this need found wealth had led to. The narrator in order to escape the chaos of the turbulent domestic affairs, retreat to the café house where he spends his time there churning through the memories.

The work represents the clash between modernity and traditional values of culture, moral decline of the family, materialistic and financial prosperity that comes with business corroded with corruption along with the martial tensions and dysfunctionality of the family, domestic violence and patriarchal control.

The Home and the World:

Adhering to the patriarchal notion of the constructions of gender roles, the men and women in the novella perform their job in respect to the home and the world, home being the inner territory whereas, the world is the exterior space. The women, Amma, Malati and Anita are caged within the four walls of their home representing the iron bars of patriarchy, expected to perform the roles of a housewife, washing, cooking, taking care of the house while the men are working outside. The role of the patriarch shifts from Appa to his younger brother after the success of Sona Masala, as a result, he is regarded above everyone else at home and met with utter devotion and submission by the women of the house. The narrator says –

‘He receives all the domestic privileges accorded to the earning male of the family. The first sound in the morning indicating he’s awake, and tea is made. When it’s sensed that he’s finished bathing, the dosa pan goes on the stove. He can fling his clothes in the bathroom or in a corner of his bedroom or anywhere at all in the house, and they’ll materialize washed and ironed in his room.’

Therefore, this collective behaviour of the women around him confirms the ideals of labour that the women are expected to undertake in the process of housewifization to satisfy the patriarch.

The kitchen is guarded by Amma as her territory that she controls; she prepares meal, tea for everyone and decides upon all the decisions involving the kitchen. She is often seen managing the kitchen, deciding upon what is to be cooked, and serves everyone enjoying the monopoly of proprietorship that she has gained over the years. Though the narrator states that the reason behind Amma’s attachment with the kitchen is that *‘it’s all she knows’*. Amma is known for her association with the kitchen and has been given the nickname *‘annadaate’* because of her role of feeding everybody and has been excessively praised for it. This *‘Benevolent Sexism’* that Amma deals with is not new but has been extremely normalized to the extent of being taken as praise because of the positive tone which in reality is the sexist and stereotypical view that observes women in a restrictive role. The narrator says – *‘At times when she kept us waiting for meals, we might call out: ‘O annadaate, please annadaate, won’t you give us some food?’’*

Anita appears to be rather different from Amma because of her dislike for cooking; however, she appears to be highly enthusiastic to perform the duties that she has seen her mother perform for her father. The narrator narrates Anita’s account of the everyday routine of her mother–

Her mother, she recounted with some pride, would be up before it was dawn so that breakfast for everyone and a lunchbox for her father could be ready before it was eight.

This naturalized *‘housewifization’* leads to conflict between them after she gets acquainted with the narrator’s position in the family business. She is disappointed to learn that

the narrator had no role in running the business and did not have a personal income and it is Chikappa's money that the entire family squanders and orbits around.

In the entire novel, the women are seen to represent the household, not even once there is any incident of their engagement in the world outside the periphery of home; they are completely distant from the family business with no question of their involvement.

Violence upon Women:

An unknown woman who alleges to be an acquaintance of Chikappa is caught lurking around the house trying to seek glimpses of Chikappa and is met with extreme atrocities, abuse and insults by Amma and Malati who aggressively tries to prevent this meeting. They assume her to be a disreputable woman and humiliate her by flinging the box of Masoor Dal to the floor that she had brought for Chikappa and driving her away. We can conclude from this incident that women are as responsible as men in the circulation of patriarchal values and the women who perpetuate this belief have themselves been a victim of patriarchy. However, only Anita, who is an outsider to the family, favoured the unknown women which led to chaos in the family.

Every time the women begin to disrupt the ideological foundation of the family, they begin to be countered with threats such as Anita who idealizes righteous attitude and is intolerant of the position of her husband in the company, his lack of ambition in life as well as the illegal and corrupted ways that the company functions. The title 'Ghachar Ghochar' is an absurd phrase that was coined by Anita's family to signify something as 'tangled beyond repair' and it appears like Anita herself got tangled in while trying to dismantle the patriarchal ethos of the family.

The metaphor of ants present in the novel, infesting the old house and disrupting the peace and harmony of the family members to the point they finally resort to killing them mercilessly signifies the fate that any outside threat to the family or the invasion or attempt of any outsider to dismantle the harmony of the family will be met with. The narrator narrates the family's gruesome way of tackling the ants –

'We had no compunction towards our enemies and took to increasingly desperate and violent means of dealing with them. We'd flatten them with our hands or feet or books wherever we saw them. If we noticed that they'd laid siege to a snack, we might trap them in a circle drawn with water and take away whatever they were eating. Then watch them scurry about in confusion before wiping them off with a wet cloth. I took pleasure in seeing them shrivel into black points when burning coals were rolled over a group of them. When they attacked an unwashed vessel or cup they'd soon be mercilessly drowned. I suppose initially we did these things only when we were alone, but in time we began to be openly cruel to ants. We saw them as demons come to swallow our home and became a family that took satisfaction in the destruction of ants.'

In an incident, Anita disapproved of the narrator squishing an ant that was crawling on the windowsill. The incident signifies the disapproval of Anita regarding the business tactics used by the family in flourishing the Sona Masala business by corruption and heinous methods

used for safeguarding their wealth. Anita being an outsider appears as a threat to the harmony of the family as well as the success of Sona Masala when she fails to understand the principles that the company runs on, she declares after a heated argument –

‘Would you have kept quiet if that happened to a woman from your family?... One day I should go to the police and tell them everything I know about this family’s affairs ... Let the dirt come out into the open.’

The disappearance of Anita at the end appears mysterious and questionable, there are numerous hints about domestic violence in the entire novel that might help to speculate the end that Anita might have met with. Chitra, who worked for a women’s welfare organization would narrate the haunting stories of domestic violence to the narrator. Projecting the violence women are met with within the cages of patriarchy, she would state –

‘How could you break her arm simply because the tea was not to your taste?’ Or, ‘Do you kill your wife because she forgot to leave the key with the neighbour?’

Apart from this, the coming together of the family at the end in absence of Anita when they sat down for a cup of tea discussing the cases of domestic violence foreshadows the possible fate Anita might have encountered; it signifies the threat is overcome. The mysterious circumstance in which Manjunath’s wife died, Chikappa’s theory of the murder and Amma’s sympathy with the killer together justifies that Chikappa might have got her murdered by his henchmen for the security of Sona Masala. Moreover, Chikappa appears to be capable of committing such a sin adhering to the way he talks about methods and tactics that are employed by people to escape from being caught as well as himself declare his engagement in such acts concerning his business –

‘These things are not as big a deal today. I haven’t brought it up before – but do you know how much I pay as protection money on behalf of Sona Masala? Everyone else does it too. You never know when you might need these people. It’s practically a collective responsibility of businessmen now to ensure these people are looked after ...’

In the end, Vincent tells the narrator that he has blood on his hand confirms this belief that Anita has been killed and everyone in the family along with the narrator is responsible for her death. The threat to the balance of the family has been taken care of by destroying the element that threatens it, Anita is most likely killed by henchmen employed by the almighty Chipakka for menacing their family business and raising her voice against the harsh and heinous methods of Chipakka’s business.

Conclusion:

The novel is a remarkable tale of the metamorphosis of a joint family from ‘rags to riches’ and very well represents the power dynamics that are present in the Indian households structured by the assigned gender roles. The women of the family believe that their patriarch

must be defended and protected at all cost, budding from their selfish interest of social and financial security. The work represents the economic and social realities and warns against them, even though Anita tries to challenge the ethics of patriarchal values that the family believes in but to dismantle it she herself becomes a victim. This subjugation of women will continue as long as women take part in it and submissively mould themselves into the idealized archetypes of the patriarchs.

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She is interested in the areas of Postcolonial Literature, Gender Studies and Diaspora Writings along with Tribal history and culture. During her Masters, she has actively participated in curricular as well as co-curricular activities like workshops, conferences, film club, and production in short fiction films etc and has interest in creative and experimental writing, photography, cinema, travelling etc. She has cleared UGC NET for Assistant Professor in English in June 2019 and wants to further pursue her career in research or academics.