

Kanta Bharti's *Reit ki Macchali* as a Memoir and Trauma-narrative in the Hindi Literary Space – a Brief Analogy.

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Abstract

The novel *Reit Ki Macchali* (The Sandfish) by Kanta Bharti, the first wife of Dharmveer Bharti is an atrocity narrative dealing with individual trauma and acts as a witness of the oppressive social/family structures that call for and assert agency and advocacy. It is less a victim narrative than a survivor tale that demand what Schaffer and Smith term an “ethics of recognition” by altering the configurations of public sphere itself, intervening in the very notion of the social and the political through the archive of trauma. In the course of their groundbreaking work on narratives and human rights, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith suggest that personal and collective storytelling can become a means for people to “claim new identities and assert their participation in the public sphere”.

Dharmveer Bharti, the chief editor of the popular Hindi magazine, *Dharmyug*, Sub-Editor of the magazines viz., *Abhyudaya* and *Sangam* was one of the great litterateur of his time; a renowned figure in the literary and social circles who enjoyed a positioning in superlative amongst the Hindi litterateurs. Full of conceit, haughtiness and pride, his utmost desire to be worshipped and admired causes unimaginable anguish and pain in the lives of those who are closely associated to him esp. his wife. Reading Kanta Bharti's *Reit ki Macchali* is an exploration into certain realities that are inhumane, harsh, distinct and unpredictable bringing before us a grim picture of unrestrained callousness that a writer of the stature of Dharmveer Bharti could cause around him. The novel reflects the tragedy of Kanta Bharti's life, her obsequious servitude and inhuman torture which causes her to live an exile inside her home. It is the documentation of the life and reactions of a forsaken woman who is a victim of her husband's lechery. That Kanta Bharti's *Reit ki Macchali* was not read and appreciated is proof enough of the bias that the class of intellectual elites engendered.

Key Words: Testimonio, Feminism, Grief, Power, Memoir, Trauma, Staging

In “The Spirit of Place” Lawrence observes, “It is hard to hear a new voice, as hard as it is listen to an unknown language. The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything because a new experience displaces many old experiences. And it is like trying to use muscles that have been perhaps never been used, or that have been going stiff for ages. It hurts horribly.” Indeed, it hurts terribly to read Kanta Bharti’s *Reit Ki Macchali* (The Sandfish) as it renders a sense of stolid grief that refuses to melt or go away. Grief as a private condition causes the story to remain as a register of trauma and its realistic representation that the narrator went through. Trauma serves as a useful critical-conceptual category analyzing women’s writing and experience. The understanding of trauma cannot be restricted to the psychology of the individual sufferer because it involves relevant social and cultural processes (Suarez-Orozco and Robben).

Kuntal, the first wife of Dharmveer Bharti suffers ‘insidious trauma’ which Root refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but do violence to the soul and spirit. Existence and persistence of trauma depends on the impact of the event and its response to the wound. While external wounding is easily identified, the wounding on the inside (the situation becomes more vulnerable when the victim subject belong to the marginalized group) is rarely seen or addressed properly. This internal wounding is characterized as being the unspoken or unspeakable event. Due to patriarchal structures, “*Women are more likely than men to be exposed to trauma that is sustained, repeated and more damaging in type and severity* (Sanchez- Hucles and Hudgins P.1151-52).

The story moving as a reminiscence of a painful life transforms the book as ‘socially significant’ voicing aloud the injustices done to Kanta Bharti, (Kuntal in the novel) the first wife of Dharmveer Bharti (Shobhan in the novel); reflecting upon the atrocities/injustices inflicted upon her by her writer-husband of great renown. Every atrocity narrative functions as a witness to someone else’s suffering. Women’s atrocity narratives often position the narrator as a witness, where the narrative functions as a testimony to suffering. Here, however, the position of “witness” gets quite complicated. The author of the book Kanta Bharti presents her memoir, her personal autobiography as a personal account of Kuntal. This is required for the purpose of

‘Staging’ which is the paratextual setting of the narrative, and includes framing statements by the author. Staging often incorporates authenticating devices. Critics have noted that a central problem with the testimonial narrative is its “truth value” Biographical information is given to us, references to personal settings, personalities, character, and contexts of interaction lend an air of reality to a context that is an otherwise alien situation, the private suffering of abused women. (Nayar, P. 33) The author dedicates her book to Sand that never makes a house. This is inevitably a part of author’s personal interaction with the character and the ensuing narrative.

Kuntal in the story though submissive and tradition-bound; dares to break the family-codes to marry Shobhan going against the will of her parents. Whether it was the aura of intellectualism surrounding the Professor or the repeated pursuance and influence of Mrs. Anand, the wife of Shobhan’s friend that acted towards her acceptance of the proposal is not clear. Though Kuntal conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social and familial codes yet there is a lack of confidence and far-sightedness in her ; being physically imprisoned with an underlying need to be emotionally and intellectually dependent on a superior force. Eventually, this marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph. She has no courage or strength left in her to compete for the conjugal bed with Meenal, the second woman. Her emotional dependence on the Professor constantly stops her from doing anything that he would disapprove of. Shobhan enjoys the best of both the worlds. His wife Kuntal fulfils his everyday needs, keeps his house tidy and cares for the child while Meenal satisfies his physical and mental urges. Performing efficiently her “expressive role” of providing emotional support and warmth to her child, suffering acute physical pain and agony; Kuntal carries out his written works, proofing his writings etc. that he asks her to do. She keeps the ‘codes’ of conduct and is harassed for her submissiveness by both the Professor and his mistress.

For the framing sections of the atrocity narrative to be effective, staging requires a “fuller representation” of the trauma. “Fuller representation” is the affective narrative of abuse and trauma. This involves a detailed representation of the emotional content of the traumatic experience for the sake of the audience. Shobhan’s power operates from within and Kuntal complies with his needs/ desires even before he speaks about them. Her submissive nature

doesn't require from him to be coerced into control as she has inured herself in his environment of social demands and expectations so that his image remains untarnished often accompanying him and his beloved to social gatherings where her presence is required as his wedded wife. No struggle is shown howsoever pain, anger and disillusionment she feels at her husband's infidelity. Her marriage becomes a namesake and he uses her as a tag to hide his affair with Meenal. His male egotism expects her to conform to his demands considering the inequality of their relations as something obvious, natural and rightful. He fearlessly does a known betrayal asking both the women to share his bed at the same time. The stolen togetherness soon becomes an open affair and both Shobhan and Meenal have no guilt that the innocent wife has become a silent sufferer, a scapegoat. Shobhan compels Kuntal to silently approve of his relationship with Meenal, rather accept her completely as his mate forcing Kuntal to write letters of compassion to Meenal. When Kuntal repeatedly finds them together on bed, he asks Kuntal to sleep by them as well suggesting for a three-some experience of it which is represented in detail by Kanta Bharti as she comments, "But what could get hidden inside that cover? The truth was so large and heavy that no bed sheet could hide it." The register of truth is psychological, experiential and irreducibly affective. She delivers experiences to which her body has been the sole witness. This makes the memoir a highly personal narrative by talking of individual experiences in the public domain, breaking down the barrier between private and public.

Kuntal fears that she would be left alone to die in hospital during child-birth as Shobhan is with ailing Meenal most of the time, ignoring the complications of his pregnant wife. Inside her home, Kuntal is forced to live a life of exile. The insecurity resulting due to the intervention of Meenal and the anguish of emotional separation from her husband inflicts trauma and pain causing her to become unconscious repeatedly in the hospital-bed. In due course, Kuntal's immense capability of compromise and forbearance makes him feel defeated and he takes recourse to violence and physical abuse to get rid of her. For a long period of time Kanta hovers uncertainly at the edge of leaving their world or staying back for the sake of her daughter. "I had with me only the grief of my defeat," Kanta Bharti writes as she is forced by her husband to leave his house upon the insistence of the second woman. The psycho analytics may posit an argument in favour of the writer Dharmveer Bharti by saying that an individual's mental processes are largely unconscious,

human behaviour is motivated by sexuality that may deter one to observe absolute social conformity. This psycho analysis stands in opposition to gender-rights that the feminist theory adheres to. Here, an able, ambitious, egoist male considers it quite natural to neglect his married wife for his artistic skills get honed through another woman. The humanistic essence for womanhood that a writer of the stature of Dharmveer Bharti would have inwardly sensed is amiss when it comes to his treatment to his first wife.

The text interrogates the stand that literary and social elites adhere to protecting the reputation of a powerful litterateur who they expect can, simultaneously protect and escalate the literary identity of his fellow-litterateur. "Theirs is a relation of advantage", Bharti writes, "of gaining literary benefits, awards, recognitions, publications etc. standing by each-other turning a blind-eye to the injustices done and blunders committed so that the facade is maintained conveniently." "You are an author, a member of the community of litterateurs. We all litterateurs have a share in your liabilities." It is with this spirit that the community operates for the sake of making their lives easy and away from unwanted and bothersome liabilities. Kanta Bharti mentions the writer- husband's clever, manipulative efforts to indulge his friends into a literary, informal conversation and then would use their arguments in his deliverances in seminars and formal gatherings much to the annoyance and amazement of his friends. Plagiarism at the level of speech, lecture and debate would leave his friends clueless at the unhesitant boldness of Dharmveer Bharti. He used to feel humiliation when compared to John Keats by his fellow litterateurs and would consider it a personal misfortune to be born in India. Had he been in Europe, People would never have considered Jean Paul Sartre as better or greater than him, used to be his usual rant. Useless, vulgar, fantasizing, associating oneself to grandeur Dharmveer Bharti insisted on believing that his friends of the literary circle are jealous of his fame in case somebody mentioned about his emoluments through writing business. He reserves the right to decide for others, manipulates by mis- utilizing his literary position. His extra marital- affair with Meenal was a huge success as she boasted his ego and was an equal participant in the braggery. Most of his friends neither support nor acknowledge Kuntal's commitment and love for the fear of losing Sobhan's goodwill. Her desertion by Shobhan makes her as a huge misfit in the Shobhan's world of intellectuals. As per them, she was the one who could not stand up to the

expectations of a renowned author. The elite intellectuals never questioned Shobhan rather sympathized with him for the chaos in his life due to Kuntal. His dramatist friend Rajhans sees nothing wrong in Shobhan's decision to leave Kuntal as he himself forsook his wife Priya, branding her a lunatic so that a divorce could be easily sought. Kanta Bharti writes about it, "Before writing a play, he had performed it well." Addressing their role as a social class, Jean Paul Sartre said that intellectuals are the moral conscience of their age; that their moral and ethical responsibilities are to observe the socio-political moment, and to freely speak to their society in accordance with their consciences. "The Sandfish" vehemently exposes the lack of conscience in those intellectual elites who quite straightforwardly look down upon her with scorn. "Ever a coward" Kanta Bharti has this to say about her husband as Dharmveer Bharti looks away unable to withstand the purity that gets reflected in the eyes of his daughter, whose mother he has forsaken for another woman.

Edward Said rightly puts it, "... someone able to speak the truth, a courageous and angry individual for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task. The real or "true" intellectual is therefore always an outsider, living in self-imposed exile, and on the margins of society. He or she speaks to, as well as for, a public, necessarily in public, and is properly on the side of the dispossessed, the un-represented and the forgotten. The public sphere, as influentially theorized by Habermas and his followers, is the space of rational, logical debate preliminary to informed consent and democratic social order. This notion automatically excludes sentiment and affections. This means women who wish to articulate their sentiments, about "domestic" and "private" concerns like the family, their children or their siblings. Any woman's appropriation of public space must necessarily constitute a counterpublic based on 'rejected' aspects such as sentiments. If 'public' constitutes a "social totality" and a space that comes into being through the circulation of texts, then the term "counterpublic" describes those groups, cultures, or individuals who do not belong to or whose texts have been marginalized from this "totality" and mainstream public. This public is a counterpublic, a space generated by the dissemination of women's atrocity narratives. (Nayar P. 36). Kanta Bharti's novel could be regarded as a significant achievement as she proves herself as a writer-fighter who deals with tremendous stress, agony, anguish resulting from social pressures

and material circumstances. The social conditioning that she had had would have hindered her voice. But as Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) combine a social constructionist perspective with a psychoanalytical approach to suggest that femininity was not only a constraint on women's creativity but also, simultaneously, a source of creative tension. This up surging creative tension would have resulted in a testimonio which would have surfaced only after its writer would have set aside fears and anxieties that her woman experience might be regarded as trivial and private; about her anxieties as a creative artist. A striking feature of atrocity narratives by women is that they are not mere victim stories. True, they foreground oppression and enormous suffering – physical, emotional, psychological, economic- but they do not restrict themselves to this foregrounding. Most Memoirs conclude with triumphalism (at least of the spirit), a sense of individual identity, freedom and purpose. (Nayar, P.35).

Kanta Bharti emerges as a novelist of inner life engaged in delving deep into the souls of her characters while her impressions record the feminine consciousness of a woman. She blooms into a “New Woman” where she displays marvelous strength of mind in overcoming her dejection. Kanta discovers her potential for writing only after her separation from Dharmveer Bharti. Though being a writer of repute the writer-husband was neither interested nor had the faculty to encourage his wife to enhance her writing-skills. The language, expression, styles and forms she adopts come from her female experience as it is an exploration of both the expression and suppression of her creativity being a distinct, biographical and personal testimony. She was mostly denied access to literary circles that declined her writing; did not acknowledge her book, restricted its circulation and production which is a sure-sign of male-bias, the dominance of writers in the world of creation and production. The entire Hindi literary world denied the prestige that Kanta Bharti deserved by through literary involvement.

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