



Subversion From Within

Three Rebels from Literature

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THE search into indigenous literature provides us with three ways of women's assertion, traditional ideas and subversion of characters. These are:

- Examining traditional literature for examples(error) which contain germs of feminist thought
- Looking at examples where a traditional theme has been subverted and a new perspective given
- Finding literature with modern social themes of a traditional society illustrating women's struggle against male domination and unjust subjugation of women.

I propose to give one example for each of the above-mentioned categories. Each piece highlights a woman (mythical or actual) and her own way of dealing with patriarchy. There's by and large an individual protest against society's injustices, but they all provide inspiration, courage and feeling of self-worth to women of later times.

Jabala, the Matriarch

The first example is from the Upanishads. It is the story of Jabala, a woman who had a son named Satyakama. When Satyakama came of age, he had to seek a Guru, who alone could initiate him into a formal system of learning. So, he went to Gautama, a sage who conducted an interview of sorts, which was very strangely similar to modern educational

interviews. He asked Satyakama, "Who is your father? What is your *Gotram*?" Satyakama did not have an answer to either of these questions. He did not know who his father was or which *Gotram* he belonged to. He went back to his mother and asked her, "Who is my father? What is my *Gotram*?" "Who wants to know all this?" Jabala asked. Satyakama said, "Gautama, the sage, for these are the prerequisites for becoming his disciple."

Jabala then told him, "Go and tell him you do not know who your father is or which *Gotram* you belong to. All that you know is that you are son of Jabala and therefore you are Jabala Satyakama". Her words implied that the only identity he had or he required on any occasion was to know who his mother was.

The story goes on to conclude that Satyakama went back to Gautama and gave this answer and was accepted as a disciple. The sage did not insist on the young man giving his father's name to be eligible to be his disciple. Jabala doesn't cower in shame when her son confronts her with the question who his father was. She tells her son in a forthright and bold language, "Son, when I was young, I used to work for many people, then you were conceived and born. I do not know who your father is. It does not matter. What is important is that you are my son, son of Jabala. That is the only identity you

require. Tell everyone who asks you whose son you are, that you are Jabala's son, Satyakama - Jabala Satyakama." In one sweep she brushed aside the need for a father to claim one's identity. She also dismisses the idea of a two-parent family.

Even in matrilineal societies in Kerala, the identity is traced through a *tarawad* (Family House) name, not the name of the mother. Shifting one's origins to the mother who carries the child in her womb and nourishes it through her own blood and with her life from the formative stage onwards asserts the importance of the mother, her function as the creator of the entire human race, her womb being the chrysalis in which human beings are moulded is a very positive example of female assertion I can think of.

Ahalya, the Stone

The second woman who comes to mind is Ahalya, wife of sage Gautama who was seduced by Indra (the god of thunderbolt) in the guise of Gautama and was consequently cursed by her husband to be reduced to a stone. The sage gave her a release from the curse also — after serving her time as a stone for many years, Rama (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu) would come her way and touch her with his feet at which time she would regain her womanhood. This is the gist of the story as it is given in the *Ramayana*. K.B Sreedevi, a well-

known short story writer and novelist in Malayalam has used this story as a reference point and written a short story *Silaroopini* (Stone-woman). Here, she has linked the original story to a later event, i.e. Rama forsaking his pregnant wife, Sita, in the forest and sage Valmiki giving her protection. Rama forsaking Sita in the forest is the theme of *Uttararamayana* (a sequel to the original *Ramayana*). But Ahalya's appearance in this part of the story is Sreedevi's creation. Ahalya remembers Rama and his compassion for her while he redeemed her from stonehood to womanhood. She openly admires him and compares him to her own husband who lacked the quality of compassion. It is openly hinted that she found her husband wanting as a "true" man. This is quite uncommon for an Indian woman for whom the husband (*pati*) is supposed to represent a *devta* (god), and so beyond any criticism. This is a big step forward. Ahalya gives shape to her own perception of an "ideal man"—a gentle, compassionate loving human being, quite the opposite of the accepted ideal of manhood, who is an aggressive, macho man.

Sreedevi's Ahalya is different from the mythical heroine, Ahalya. She is more critical and not subservient and self-abnegating. The story is taken to another level when Ahalya hears that Rama, her ideal man, had forsaken his wife on flimsy grounds. She once again turns into a stone, this time of her own free will and not as a result of an external intervention. I see in this act of hers a silent protest. She, who was redeemed from stonehood to womanhood by a compassionate man, feels betrayed at his behaviour to his faithful wife. Disillusioned, she does not see any purpose for retaining any human form; instead she prefers to be a stone.

There is a subtle questioning of our usual notions as — a stone has

no feelings, it is a block of unfeeling mass whereas a human being endowed with a heart and emotions has feelings. So, we assume it is better to be a human being than a stone. Sreedevi makes her Ahalya project a view that when a human being acts without feelings towards fellow human beings, he/she becomes in effect a stone. Ahalya's strain of thought was, "I was cursed because I was unfaithful to my husband; what about Sita who was faithful to her husband? Why was she abandoned?" The conclusion she arrives at is that men would always be unjust and unfair to women while fulfilling their own self-centred, selfish objectives and ambitions. She wanted to abdicate such a world and thereby assert her solidarity with another suffering woman. This is also a case

of literature using the mythical story to subvert traditional patriarchal values and reinforce a pro woman vision.

Paptikuty, the Outcaste

The third voice is that of a woman from the twentieth century. It is the heroine of a Malayalam novel *Brashtu* written by Matampu Kunhukuttan and translated by me under the title *Outcaste*. Kunhukuttan's novel is based on an actual event that took place in Kerala in the early twentieth century (1920s). A Namboodiri woman, Kuriyedathu Tatri, spurned and slighted by her own husband, has liaisons with important men from the upper castes - Namboodiris, Kshatriyas, and Nairs. At the time of her trial for outcasting her in Vedic style, she quotes the names of illicit



lovers and argues that as partners in sin they should also be outcasted. As a result seven members from 64 prominent families in Kerala were outcasted. It created quite a furore in Kerala and paved the way for social reforms. Matampu has used this story and created a novel which has turned out to be a social and political document of the times. Here the original story, or the event as it took place, has not been given the importance it deserves from a feminist perspective. However, in writing this book, about 30 years back, Matampu has highlighted an event which has great importance in the women's struggle to retain self-respect and dignity. Unlike in the other two instances, here **it(error) only is should come** is a man who has come forward to relate this woman's story,

revealing great empathy and understanding for the woman. The woman's voice is heard through a man's writing. In literary terms, it has a new significance - the alternate women's voice can be projected by a man, thus merging the man's voice with that of the woman and giving it a new timbre. Even though the woman protagonist had carried out her revenge on the Namboodiris, particularly their male folk, a male Namboodiri like Matampu could find meaning in her actions and support her. These three cases show an interesting range - from a mythical story to subversion of a mythical story and then to a story based on an actual event. From an unknown author or group of authors to a woman author and finally to a man author. The woman's voice has travelled long and

not in vain. From assertion of womanhood, to protest against injustices to womanhood through withdrawal, to protest through revenge. Jabala of the Upanishads is very sure of herself; she never apologises or justifies her status. Ahalya of the epics is not able to protest when she was punished the first time. But, when the same injustice was perpetuated on another woman, she protests, through her silent withdrawal from life. But, Paptikutty, the heroine of the modern novel, and real life character takes life into her hands and wreaks revenge on the wrongdoers without assistance from anyone. Her protest is vehement, shattering the very strongholds of society and religion. Her act is so public that the society which ignores and humiliates women has no other choice but to sit up and take note. □

Women Bhakt Poets



*"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy."*

Mirabai

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