

Exploring the “New-Woman” in the Nationalist Movement Era: A Discussion of two Hindi short stories - Homvati Devi’s ‘Apna Ghar’ (1933) and Mahadevi Varma’s ‘Lachhma’ (1941)

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Abstract:

The late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries mark an important period in the development of the modern short story genre. It first originated in America, in the form of Edgar Allen Poe’s work ‘Ms. Found in a Bottle’(1833), and soon gained prominence all over Europe, as well as Asia. In India, the advent of the printing press and the spread of education, made it easier for this genre to reach a large number of people. Writers from different parts of the subcontinent started experimenting with it and produced stories in different regional languages. They took the aid of periodicals and journals to get their works published.

The rise of the modern short story coincided with the upsurge of the Nationalist Movement in India. This genre provided several writers with an outlet, to express their nationalist sentiments and discuss about the relevant social and political issues of the time. Many women writers too, contributed to this discussion, by engaging in important concerns like women’s education, patriarchal oppression, marriage, divorce, justice, etc. They further, endorsed the idea of a “new-woman”, who was the epitome of “Atma-shakti” (self-reliance), confidence and autonomy. This paper

aims to explore this concept of the “new-woman”; through a comprehensive discussion of two phenomenal short stories of Hindi literature – Homvati Devi’s ‘Apna Ghar’ and Mahadevi Varma’s ‘Lachhma’. By comparing the two stories, it also seeks to understand the condition of women, in general and the relevance of these issues in contemporary times.

Keywords: Short story, nationalist movement, new woman, Hindi literature, Homvati Devi, Mahadevi Varma

In India, the short story in its earliest form as tales and myths, was quite popular since ancient times. In the late nineteenth- early twentieth centuries, the short story developed into a modern form- from anecdotes, tales and fables to a complete modern fiction. This form, as prolific scholar Sisir Kumar Das puts it, “developed with its own distinctiveness identified by the presence of a conscious narrative, foregrounding a particular incident or a situation, or a moment of emotional intensity” (p. 302). Gradually, it started to establish its roots all over the

country. Different regions began to use distinct nomenclatures for the 'short story', such as- "Katha, Akhyan, Upakhyan, Afsana, and Dastan" (Das 303). With the aid of the printing press, the short story made its way to various journals and periodicals published in different regional languages. It further helped the writers of this genre to reach a widespread audience.

In the history of Hindi literature, the very first short story named, 'Indumati' by Kishori Lal Goswami, appeared around the year 1900. It was published in the first Hindi magazine of India called 'Sarasvati', which later flourished under the editorship of Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi. A significant figure of the 'Adhunikal' of Hindi literature; Dwivedi became a proponent of using 'Khari Boli' in prose writing and encouraged several writers to do the same. His major contributions in the fields of Hindi poetry and prose during this period, led to its recognition as the 'Dwivedi Yug' (1900-1920). It was this period that truly marked the rise of the modern short story genre.

The late nineteenth-early twentieth century saw a sudden surge of the nationalist movement in India. A nationalist sentiment pervaded the air and inspired many Hindi writers to indulge in the socio-political issues of that time. Munshi Premchand was one of the key short story and prose writers from this period. He is known to have ushered in an era of realism in Hindi prose literature. Writer Bhisham Sahni (as quoted by Sisir

Kumar Das in his work, A history of Indian Literature: 1911-1956), pointed out that due to Premchand, the Hindi short story " moved out of the narrow sphere of personal relations and entered the larger sphere of social life, of social problems and of the destiny of the people as a whole" (Das 269). The discussion of the social issues on the backdrop of nationalism, was also reflected in the works of eminent writers like Jainendra Kumar, Phanishwar Nath Renu, Satchinanda Vatsyayan, Dharamvir Bharati, Yash Pal, Jagdamba Prasad Dikshit and Rahi Masoom Raza. Women writers like Sudha Chauhan, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Homvati Devi, Mahadevi Varma, and Kamla Chaudhry also contributed to this discussion. These women writers addressed pressing issues like freedom and justice, marriage, divorce, sexuality and women's education, which were prevalent during the nationalist movement.

Critics Susie J. Tharu and K. Lalita have explicitly discussed the contribution of women in the Nationalist Movement of India, in their work, Women's writing in India: 600 B.C. to the present (volume 2). According to them, the movement was "enthusiastically carried forward, expanded and transformed by women. They had hardly begun to read and write before they were editing and publishing in journals." (p. 167) They have further pointed out that women writers talked about the "ideas of freedom and justice and infused them with their aspirations,

in their writings; even as they responded to the call of the nation". (p. 169) The movement was also accompanied by a Swadeshi national education programme which focussed on the physical, moral and scientific education of the Indians. Women's writing at this point of time, emphasized on the concept of 'Atmashakti' (self-reliance) and "reassertion of national dignity, honour and confidence in women." (p. 172) The nationalist imagination gave rise to a powerful female figure- the 'new woman', who "keeping with the Victorian ideals of domestic virtue, was patient and long suffering. She was also self-confident and autonomous at the same time; conscious of her power and the strength she could find in tradition" (pp. 172-3).

Among the women writers of Hindi literature, Homvati Devi (1906-1951) and Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987) were two prominent figures who experimented in the genre of fiction. For my discussion, I have chosen their widely read short stories; 'Apna ghar' (1933) and 'Lachhma' (1941), respectively. Both these works deal with the different social issues concerning women, which were prevalent at that time. The theme of these two stories differ; yet they are somewhat similar in their portrayal of the social condition of women, irrespective of their caste, class or geographical location.

Homvati Devi was among the first women writers of Hindi fiction. She wrote periodicals, poetry and short stories that mainly depicted the social injustice

imposed on middle-class women and their battle against it. To reiterate this point, K. Lalita and S. Tharu described her writing as being "marked by an eye for detail and a feel for the everyday pains, the unexpected joys, and the searing humiliations that a middle-class woman experienced" (p. 438). Her stories provide a sentimental, yet realistic account of the laws and institutions of the society that restrict women and how they strive to deal with them. They are known for creating the image of a 'new woman', who, despite her social limitations, finds the courage to voice her resistance and stand up for herself.

Homvati Devi wrote four story collections titled Dharohar, Swapanbhang, Apna ghar and Gotekitopi. Her works gave birth to a new era in Hindi literature, thus, making her a pioneer amongst Hindi short story writers. Her short story 'Apna ghar' (1933) was originally published in the collection Yatharthaur Kalpana. It is a sentimental story of a middle-class woman named Uma, in the clutches of a Hindu society. It depicts the pain of a widow, who along with her son, has been denied the right to her own house, due to a dispute regarding her husband's insurance, which has not been settled.

Mahadevi Varma was a poet, painter, feminist, naturalist, and philosopher. She was an important figure in the 'Chhayavad movement' in Hindi poetry. 'Gillu', 'Neelkanth', 'Mere bachpanke din' are some of her well known works. Her works mainly

emphasize on the relevance of a woman's experience and the need for her to assert her identity with pride. In the words of Karine Schromer (as quoted by K. Lalita and S. Tharu): "This emphasis on the validity of women's experience, and the need for women to take pride in being who they are, was central to Mahadevi Varma's own thinking . . . it was implicit in her whole approach to educating young girls and women" (p. 461).

Mahadevi Varma's short story 'Lachhma' (1941) is one of her remarkable works, which was originally published in the collection *Ateetkechalchitra* (Live images of the past). An emotional tale like Homvati Devi's 'Apna ghar'; 'Lachhma' is the story of a lower-class woman (bearing the same name as its title), living in the hilly regions with her father, mother, mad husband and her ascetic brother's children. Through her character, Varma presents an epitome of the 'new woman' who is self-confident and autonomous; who remains strong, rebellious and hardworking, despite the hardships she has faced in her life.

The stories, 'Apna ghar' by Homvati Devi and 'Lachhma' by Mahadevi Varma, are similar in their depiction of the plight of a woman living in the nationalist movement era, but differ in their themes. The protagonists in both the stories belong to two very different strata of the society; yet, the experiences shared by them as a woman, remains the same. Both Uma and Lachhma are victims of oppression under

the dominant patriarchal system; both are oppressed by the male members of their marital home. Uma is denied the property rights of her own house by her in-laws, after her husband's death. Even her own cousin remains indifferent towards her and her son Neelam, completely neglecting their needs. Her cousin's wife and children too, torture them. It reaches a saturation point, where Neelam has to plead to Uma, "Amma, let us not live here anymore. Let's go home to father." (p. 441) Yet, helpless Uma has no choice, but to surrender to the circumstances for their survival.

Similarly, Lachhma is oppressed by her mad husband's brothers who deny her property rights and physically abuse her when she tries to rebel against them. One such example of their brutality can be seen in the story, when she is mercilessly thrashed by her in-laws and thrown unconscious into a pit, presumed to be dead: "When all the tortures inflicted on her failed to make Lachhma relinquish her rights, she was beaten so severely that she fell unconscious. Thinking she was dead, they threw her into a pit." (p. 462) It is then, due to Lachhma's strong willpower and her longing for survival, that makes her regain consciousness and gives her enough strength to walk all the way to another village, despite suffering unbearable pain.

Despite the oppression that Uma and Lachhma go through, they do not neglect their duties toward their families. They do everything it takes to protect their family and cater to their needs. They

are the epitome of the ideal Victorian woman, who is the “angel” of her home; giving their family the utmost priority in their life. They are devotional women who never back out from performing their duty as a mother, no matter how much difficulty they have to face, even if it's for their own survival. Uma is oppressed and tortured to an extent, that she sometimes vents all her anger and frustration on her own son Neelam. She would either thrash him or curse him silently; “I wish he were dead; then I would be free. I should have put him on the pyre with his father and not had any bonds.” (p. 439) But at the same time, when it comes to taking care of Neelam's needs and wishes, she tries her best to fulfil them.

Lachhma, on the other hand, can be considered even a greater mother than Uma. She doesn't have children of her own, yet she becomes a mother to her deceased sister-in-law's children. She belongs from the lower class and is the sole bread-earner of the family, since her father's eyes are weak, mother's arm is broken and her brother has become an ascetic after his wife's death. Despite being financially weak and having no one to support her, she takes on the duty of raising her sister-in-law's infants: “Her body may be broken with toil, her fate severe, yet Lachhma has a whole and healthy heart, on the strength of which she took on this bittersweet duty.” (p. 463) Often while performing these duties, she would neglect her own needs. She would sacrifice her own comfort and

safety, only to ensure that they were properly fed.

Keeping up with the expectations of the twentieth century Indian society, Homvati Devi and Mahadevi Varma were successful in depicting the ideal Victorian “angel” woman, in the form of Uma and Lachhma, respectively. But, with the sudden surge of the nationalist movement, this idea went through tremendous change. It gave rise to a ‘new woman’ who was shaped according to the Victorian ideal, but at the same time, she was also self-confident and autonomous. This was possible because of the women's education programme, which enabled the women to become a part of the freedom struggle and become the real guardians of the nation's spiritual essence. In ‘Apna ghar’ and ‘Lachhma’, we see an undercurrent of women's education which gained significance during the nationalist movement. Education plays an important role in the lives of both Uma and Lachhma, but neither of them are able to avail the opportunity when it comes to it. Uma is an educated woman; yet she is unable to put it to any use because she is duty bound towards her son, she has to depend on her cousin for each morsel of food, and most of her time is spent in either doing household work or taking care of her son. She even considers taking up a job, but is unable to do so, due to her responsibility towards her son: “She would have preferred to toil as a labourer or be a teacher to little children to feed herself and her ill-starred child. She was

constrained to stay alive only because she felt bound to him like one does to a curse.” (pp. 438-9)

Lachhma, on the other hand, is uneducated but has a keen interest in reading and painting. She is even offered an opportunity by the narrator of the story, but she denies it because she has to feed her family, for which she believes that only doing labour in the forest could help and not education: “With an unforced smile she says reading and writing are of no use in the forest. Here, one must know how to climb trees, how to pluck leaves and chop wood... Her next birth will definitely permit her to stay with me and to study, without neglecting her duty.” (pp. 463-4) So, she eventually gives up her desire to learn painting, reading and writing.

In some sense, both the stories ‘Apna ghar’ and ‘Lachhma’ revolve around the concept of the ‘new-woman’, that emerged during the nationalist movement era in India. But their individual approach towards this concept is entirely different. Through Uma, Homvati Devi does not celebrate the ‘new-woman’, as much as Mahadevi Varma tries to do with Lachhma. Uma fits more into the mould of the ideal Victorian woman, who is a devoted mother and a patient and suffering woman; but she is not able to gather enough self-confidence in herself, so that she can change the life of her family on her own. She is clasped in the hands of the patriarchal society, from which she cannot find an easy escape, despite her

wealthy background and education. Therefore, her condition forces the reader to sympathize with her condition.

Mahadevi Varma does not aim for the same, in the case of Lachhma. In Lachhma, she creates a self-confident, hardworking and head-strong woman; who finds her happiness in the simple pleasures of life and knows how to survive in the cruel patriarchal world, even with the least of resources. In comparison to Homvati Devi, Mahadevi Varma attempts to celebrate the emerging ‘new-woman’, that Lachhma eventually becomes during the course of her life. The readers by the end of the story do not end up sympathizing with her but instead, appreciate her courage and willpower that she displays throughout the story.

Both the stories, ‘Apna ghar’ by Homvati Devi and ‘Lachhma’ by Mahadevi Varma thus, prove to be successful in defining the ‘new woman’ in their own unique way. By creating two different yet relatable protagonists - a patient and devoted mother like Uma and a confident and rebellious woman like Lachhma, they have tried to familiarise the readers with the plight of women, trapped in the shackles of the patriarchal society. Through this attempt, they not only seek to inspire the readers; but also coax them to understand its relevance in today’s time.

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