

Indian Version of Feminism as Reflected in Sat Pagla Sathe (A Gujarati Novel)

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Abstract: *Feminism aims to overcome traditional roles within the construction of gender. It is not limited to women alone. It is also not about a female-dominated society but about equality and self-determination. The idea is to fight against domination, discrimination and subordination. Indian women have a unique way of seeking equal status for them. They are not defiant. They do not rebel vehemently or produce discord. They do not outrightly reject the traditional and cultural values. Rather, they accept their responsibilities, follow some worthy customs, demonstrate understanding and create space for themselves. They believe in generating concord. Purna, the protagonist of the novel Sat Pagla Sathe, is the best example of this ideology. She truthfully reflects the Indian version of feminism. Having radical thoughts about the place of women in the society, she fights back the male-domination in her own way. She commands respect in doing so.*

Keyword: *Feminism, Indian, Values*

Feminism is a movement started for the liberation of women in the western countries and reached different corners of the world. The prime concern of the movement is to abolish patriarchy and stop the exploitation of women in every possible manner.

Sex is a biological identity and gender is a social construct. Gender as a cultural ideology is created by the patriarchal society to maintain power politics based on the basis of 'self' and 'other'. The women are marginalised as the other or the second sex. Feminism fights back this idea.

Yuthika Mishra notes that feminism deals "... with the various material and non-material inequalities and hierarchies that have affected women's lives across time and space, such as those related to class, gender, 'race', caste, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, education, age or health. Women have, since ages, challenged or fought these inequalities through different types of politics and activism in the public sphere and through individual actions and forms of resistance in the so called 'private sphere'." (87)

Feminism fights back male domination. But it does not lead to female domination. It strives for equality – equal rights for both male and female members of the society. Anna-Sophia ten Brink notes, "Feminism aims to overcome traditional, single roles within the construction of gender and is thus not limited to women alone. It is also not about a female-dominated society, because domination is nothing wanted, but about equality and self-determination. All humans, independently

of their gender, sex and body should have the same rights and freedoms." (cf. Stokowski 2016, 160f) (4)

The feminist voice is raised against the atrocities and exploitation practised on women since ages. Mudasir Ahmad Gori writes, "The idea is to fight against domination, discrimination and subordination. It is through this movement they question the conventional and traditional attitude of society. ... The word feminism tantamount to sexual equality combined with a commitment to exterminate sexual ascendancy and to transform the society. They are against the sexual discrimination and sexual segregation of women at workplaces and in domestic life. They question the superiority of man and his polygamous nature at the expense of the subordination of women."

Having the same ultimate aim, the Indian and Western feminisms have different forms and different manifestations. Due to some well-researched and valid reasons, both of them have distinct features. As observed by Dr. Prakanshi, "Both Indian and Western feminisms share a common goal of achieving gender equality and challenging patriarchal structures. However, they differ in their approaches and priorities shaped by their unique historical, cultural and socio-political contexts. Western feminism often emphasizes individual rights and legal reforms while Indian feminism focuses on addressing the intersection of gender with caste, religion and economic inequality." (5)

Literature is the mirror of society. It reflects whatever comes in front of it. The literature in

general and the novels in particular became voice of feminism all over the world. India was no exception. Indian women writers raised questions, suggested re-assessment and re-thinking, formulated a consciousness leading to a constructive and healthy change in society. The characters in their novels have often become mouthpieces to voice the writer's own self, thoughts, attitudes, ideologies, experiences and problems.

This paper presents the Indian version of feminism reflected in a prominent novel written in a vernacular language. Sat Pagla Sathe (1989) is a representative Gujarati novel written by Meera Bhatt with a feminist perspective. Sat Pagla Sathe, literally meaning seven steps together, refers to marriage in the Indian context. The author presents the so-called Euro-centric concept of feminism in the indigenous setting. She gives her own version of feminism relevant to the Indian culture. The most remarkable aspect of this novel is that the feminist concerns are put forward and pursued not only by the female protagonist but also by her male counterpart. Purna's ideas are presented through her diary and her conversations with Asim, her husband. Asim's thoughts are revealed through Purna's diary and his conversations with his family members.

Purna, the protagonist, is a modern woman having unconventional notions about gender-roles, marriage and family systems. She denies to follow the conservative standards and demands for an equal status for women in the society. She rejects the male and female stereo-types established by the orthodox society. Anna-Sophia ten Brink writes: "In a patriarchally dominated society, gender positions construct the female role as weak, dark, emotional, domestic, inferior, and passive while the male role is depicted as strong, enlightened, rational, superior, and active. However, this construction is neither natural nor veritable." (3) Purna does not believe in any such notions. Rather, she is not in favour this kind of gender discrimination.

The Indian society considers a daughter-in-law to be a beautiful exhibit of richness and status. She is an added comfort to the family. અત્યાર સુધીની પરંપરા એમ જોતી આવેલી કે વહુ ઘરમાં આવી એટલે એક 'સાધન' ઘરમાં ઉમેરાયું. જેમ સ્ટીલનું કબાટ આવ્યું, રેડિયો, ટીવી, ફ્રીઝ વસાવ્યાં તેથી ઘરની સગવડ-શોભા વધ્યાં, એમ જ વહુ ઘરમાં

આવી તો સગવડ-શોભા-પ્રતિષ્ઠા વધારવાનું એક સૌથી સુંદર સાધન ઉમેરાયું. (29) Nobody ever thought that the daughter-in-law is a human being having her own wishes and requirements. એ વહુ એક જીવતીજાગતી વ્યક્તિ છે. એને પણ એની પોતાની સ્વતંત્ર જરૂરિયાતો, અરમાનો હોય, એનું પણ પોતાનું એક નિરાળું વિશ્વ હોય એવું કોઈના ચિંતનમાં સ્થાન જ નહીં. (29) A woman's need for time and space is always ignored. Her choice and voice are never paid attention to. She is not allowed to take any decision or do anything on her own but to follow. She is expected to eradicate her own identity. She is taught to be meek, timid and vulnerable. Her male counterpart always suppresses her.

She does not agree with the idea of surrender or submission of a woman in marriage. She believes that the spouses have equal importance and freedom of thought and action. None should be vulnerable or docile. The wife should have an equal prospect to flourish. She should be given an opportunity to desire and select. None should govern her. She should be given some space for her in her family as well as in the society.

She is a clear-headed woman having certain expectations from her life and life partner. She strongly believes that a woman is not an object owned by a man who can use it according to his will. A woman is an individual having her own wishes, demands, objectives. She is born to fulfil a purpose. સ્ત્રી એ કોઈ ચીજ નથી, સાધન નથી કે એનો કોઈ ધણી હોય, માલિક હોય, સ્વામી હોય, જે એને ફાવે તેમ વાપરી શકે, ઉપયોગ કરી શકે. સ્ત્રી એક વ્યક્તિ છે, ચેતન તત્વ છે, એક સ્વતંત્ર હસ્તી છે. એની પોતાની પણ એક આગવી દુનિયા છે, એની પોતાની ઈચ્છાઓ છે, માગણીઓ છે, એક્ષાઓ છે, હેતુ છે. પોતાના જીવનનો કોઈ ઉદ્દેશ લઈને જીવન સિદ્ધ કરવા એ જન્મી છે. (13)

Ramamoorthy writes: "One of the primal and seminal concerns of feminism is to declare that a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the "other"; she is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation." (115) Purna very clearly and firmly

asserts this. She lives and acts as an individual. She establishes 'Janpad' and 'Anayas' for the purpose of self-fulfilment.

Purna deals with patriarchy in her own unique way. She demonstrates tremendous clarity of thought. She protests against the age-old orthodox mentality. She does not bear any hatred for men. She does not oppose or reject men. She only challenges the patriarchal values and male-domination. She does not surrender to traditions but employs profound understanding of human psychology and values. She makes convincing arguments loaded with intellectual deliberation as well as faith in the Indian value system.

She outrightly rejects the Indian metaphor used for a married couple where the husband is a tree and the wife is a creeper. To her, the spouses are two different trees being and growing with each other, enjoying the company of each other, but having separate identities from each other. અમારી સહયાત્રા, સહવાસ, સહયોગ આ બધું જ હશે, તેમ છતાંય અમે બંને પોતપોતાની ભૂમિ પર ઊગેલાં, ઊભેલાં બે સ્વતંત્ર વૃક્ષ હઈશું... વૃક્ષ-વેલીનો સંબંધ નહીં, પણ સ્વતંત્ર વૃક્ષ!... (11) She clarifies her expectations from this ultimate relationship. She indicates that there should be no sense of dependence in marriage. Rather, there should be celebration of co-existence generating harmony and concord; making peace with the self as well as with the society.

Purna's views on freedom are outstanding. She thinks that it cannot be demanded or granted; it can only be possessed. She, therefore, negates the idea of 'giving' liberty to women. Women must exert their right to be free.

Asim argues that the intellect of a woman should not burn someone. At this point, Purna says that a man must learn to love this new rebellious, assertive, intelligent, independent and powerful facet of a woman's personality. સ્ત્રીનું આ પ્રખર રૂપ નવું, અડવું અને અજાણ્યું લાગશે, પણ આ નવા રૂપને ચાહતાં શીખવું પડશે. (23)

સ્ત્રીઓને આ સ્નેહ, ત્યાગ, બલિદાન વગેરે ગુણોના હારડા પહેરાવાય છે, તેની સાથે હું જરા પણ સંમત નથી. સ્ત્રીના આ કોઈ પ્રકૃતિદત્ત ગુણો નથી....આ બધું તો સાંસ્કૃતિક છે. એક ચોક્કસ પ્રકારની સમાજરચના ખીલવવી હતી અને તેમાં સ્ત્રીને એક

ખીલે બાંધવી જરૂરી લાગી એટલે આ બધા ગુણોનું આરોપણ થયું... (21) Purna bluntly opposes the idea of women having the innate qualities like love, mercy, sacrifice etc. She thinks that this is not natural but cultural. In order to develop a particular type of social system called family, these qualities are imposed on a woman. Purna also talks about sharing the household duties. She believes that each member of the family must perform certain duties and contribute to the end goal of family-raising.

Purna never denies her duties as a mother and a home-maker. She does not want any escape from that. Rather, she thinks that the motherhood is a matter of pride for women. But she asserts that the motherhood is not the ultimate truth of a woman's life. અસીમ, રખે તું એમ માની લેતો કે સ્વાતંત્ર્ય અને સમાનતાવાદને વંટોળિયે ચઢી અમે માતૃત્વની પ્રકૃતિદત્ત જવાબદારી પણ પુરુષના શિરે નાખવા માગીએ છીએ. પ્રકૃતિએ નારીદેહને માતૃત્વ ધારણ કરવા યોગ્ય બનાવ્યો, તેને હું નારીજાતિનું ગૌરવ માનું છું. માતૃત્વ એ નારી જાતિનો અબાધિત અધિકાર છે, એક અનુપમ સૌભાગ્ય છે, પરંતુ એ જ કાંઈ નારીજીવનની અંતિમ વસ્તુ, ચરમ લક્ષ્ય નથી. (23)

Asim is a broad-minded man. He considers a woman to be a thermal house providing energy to the family. He understands and accepts Purna's longing for equality. He explains his thoughts regarding marriage. He believes that the growth of one is the responsibility of the other. Submission subjugates one of them which is unacceptable. Devotion should be mutual leading to mutual enrichment. They should support their individual identities. જીવનમાં મૈત્રી અને સખ્ય સમાનતાની ભૂમિકા પર જ સ્થાપાઈ શકે. એકપક્ષીય શરણતાને આધારે કદી સખ્ય સ્થાપાઈ ના શકે. અમારા દાંપત્યજીવનનો આદર્શ સમર્પણ નથી, સખ્ય છે, મૈત્રી છે, જેમાં બેઉનો પરિપૂર્ણ સ્વાતંત્ર્ય, પરિપૂર્ણ સમર્પણ અને બેઉનો પરિપૂર્ણ વિકાસ ગૃહિત છે. (35) Purna and Asim firmly believe in the idea of companionship. They earnestly try to achieve the same. Asim loves and respects her; allows her to speak and act freely; shares his thoughts and

feelings with her and involves her in decision-making.

Asim articulates the influence of patriarchy on the conjugal relationship. He says that the two persons become one in marriage – two bodies and one soul. But in our patriarchal society, that one soul is that of a man in which a woman's soul is dissolved. The husband remains whole and intact whereas the wife melts, disappears, becomes a non-entity. She works hard to achieve the ideal of being one with her husband. This is our Indian culture. પતિ-પત્નીનો સંબંધ એટલો બધો નિકટનો છે કે આપણે માની બેસીએ છીએ કે બેઉ અભિન્ન છે. 'બે દેહ અને એક આત્મા'નો આદર્શ આપણે ત્યાં ખૂબ ગવાયો છે. પણ પુરુષ-પ્રધાન વાતાવરણમાં આ સર્વસ્વીકૃત બાબત બની ગઈ છે કે 'એક આત્મા' એટલે 'પુરુષનો આત્મા' જેમાં સ્ત્રીનું સ્વત્વ ઓગળી ગયું હોય. ભારતીય સંસ્કૃતિમાં પતિ-પત્નીનું એક થવું એટલે પત્નીનું પતિમાં વિલીન થવું. પતિ આખો ને અક્ષુષ્ણ રહે. પત્ની શૂન્યવત્, બની અભિન્ન બની જવાની સાધના કરે. (34-35)

Asim presents his views on this 'one soul' theory with utmost clarity: પણ આવું એકપક્ષીય ઓગળી જવું તે સમર્પણ નથી. એકત્વ નથી અને તે સ્ત્રીને માટે તો ઇચ્છનીય કે હિતકારી નથી જ. પરંતુ પતિ માટે પણ હિતકારી નથી. પતિ-પત્નીનું સખ્યમૂલક એકત્વ એટલે એકબીજાને સમજવાની, સમજીને અનુકૂળ થવાની અને અનુકૂળ થઈ એકમેકને સમૃદ્ધ કરવાની સાધના! (35) He thinks that this kind of one-sided surrender or forced oneness is not advisable for anyone. It is not devotion. Both the spouses must understand each other, adjust with each other and enrich each other in order to be one with each other. He feels that both of them should have liberty to develop their hobbies different from each other. There is nothing wrong in Asim going to an astronomers' meet and Purna going to a concert.

... એક પૂર્ણ વ્યક્તિત્વ બીજામાં લીન થઈ લોપામુદ્રા થઈ જાય તે લગભગ અશક્ય છે. એવું કરવું કાંઈ જરૂરી પણ નથી. બે હૃદયનું અક્ષરશઃ એક થવું

એટલે પરસ્પર અપાર વિશ્વાસ, અગાધ સ્નેહ, નિઃશેષ ખુલ્લાપણું અને એકમેક વિશેની ઊંડી સમજણ. એકતા એટલે ડિટ્ટો ટુ ડિટ્ટો એકસરખાપણું નહીં. (36)

She firmly believes that one personality cannot be merged completely into the other in marriage. It is not at all required. Two hearts become one when they cultivate trust, love, frankness and understanding. They do not have to lose their identities for that.

In order to fulfil the ideal of conjugal bliss, one has to patiently nurture the relationship. Married life cannot be lived individually. One has to aspire for the co-existence. દાંપત્યજીવન કેવળ પોતાના જ સંદર્ભમાં નથી જીવી શકાતું....દાંપત્યને તો સેવવું પડે છે. એની ભીતરના ગર્ભસ્થ સહજીવનને પાંખો ફૂટે તે માટે ધીરજ સેવવી પડે છે. (37)

Purna does not believe in running away from the responsibilities in the name of women liberation. According to her, liberty does not mean to run away from the family or society; to escape responsibility; to defy rules/norms; to be self-centred or to stop bothering about others. It does not mean to ignore values. On the contrary, she seeks fulfilment in holding the family together and creating a meaningful companionship with her husband.

Asim gives a fresh perspective about marital love. પ્રેમની કસોટી જ આ છે કે તમારા થાકી તમારા જીવનસાથીની સંપન્નતા કેટલી વધી! (43)

According to him, the spouse should be enriched by the love of the other. They should complement each other. Asim accepts that he and Purna were extremely intimate to each other. In spite of that, they were individuals having distinct identities. અમે બંને એકમેક સાથે અત્યંત અંતરંગ પણ હતાં અને તેમ છતાંય અમારું સ્વત્વ, નિજપણું કાયમ હતું. (93)

Purna convinces Asim to raise their children without being gender-biased. She does not want to make her daughter conscious about her gender at very young age. She wants her daughter to be independent, self-reliant and able to live alone. She wishes that her daughter may live with a man but not as his dependent. તે એકલી પણ જીવી શકે, પુરુષની સાથે પણ જીવી શકે, પરંતુ પુરુષને ભરોસે નહીં જીવે. ભરોસો એના આત્મરામનો! (52)

Purna believes that a couple should test their love and recharge their bond during the course of time. They should pay heed to the disharmony and nurture the relationship with new energy and enthusiasm. સંબંધને પણ વચ્ચે વચ્ચે ટકોરા મારી લેવાની જરૂર હોય છે... કશું ક્યાંક તરડાઈ જતું નથી ને? થોડો બોદો અવાજ કેમ સંભળાય છે? જમીન નિત્ય માવજત માંગે છે, તેમ સંબંધને પણ નિત નવી માવજત જોઈએ, નવું ખાતર, નવું પાણી, નવો પ્રકાશ! ... ક્યાંક આપણે ચૂક્યાં. આપણું દાંપત્યજીવન ચાળીસી વટાવી ગયું, અન્યોન્ય માટે અનિવાર્ય ન રહ્યાં અને વાસીપણું દાખલ થઈ ગયું...

(64) At certain point of life, Purna realizes that their relationship has become stale; they do not remain essential for each other. They have started taking each other for granted as very commonly observed in the Indian society.

Though a rebellion, Purna has deep faith in the inherent human values. She is full of love and hope. She does not allow any issues to disturb her family life. She is modest enough to let things go. She surrenders out of love and respect. She forgives Asim for his infidelity just because she profoundly loves him. દુનિયાનું કોઈ બંધન મને બાંધી શકે તેમ નથી, સિવાય પ્રેમનું બંધન. (64)

Purna accepts the intrinsic Indian values with deep understanding and conviction. She also accepts her tender feminine feelings. She does not go away from home or relationships. She does not rebel against the family values. She does not reject any responsibilities. She does not opt for separation from the husband or the family. On the contrary, she ardently wishes to preserve relationships.

Asim comments about Purna's personality: એ સ્વતંત્ર જરૂર હતી, પરંતુ સ્વતંત્રતાનો ઝંડો લઈને એ નહોતી ફરતી...પૂર્ણ ક્યારેય આક્રમક કે આગ્રહી તો નથી રહી, આલોક! તેમ છતાંય, એનું વ્યક્તિત્વ એટલું બધું ઠોસ, સઘન હતું કે સહેજે તે વિસરાવી દેવાય તેમ નહોતું...(3૨) Her personality is so solid and strong that it cannot be ignored. She shows no defiance or aggression but assertion.

Unlike the western feminists, Purna is not ambitious and still creates a space for herself in the society. She is not self-centred. She has profound

respect for humanity. She does not have individualistic approach or longing for liberty at the cost of human values. She shows no rigidity. Rather, she displays dynamic and progressive mind-set. She speaks with great conviction. She is a woman of action. She is full of hope and confidence to bring change. She is not a helpless, meek or submissive sufferer. She is not defiant. But she does not follow traditions blindly.

There is no loud revolt, gloomy isolation or screaming self-pity in this novel. There is no sentimental play or melodrama at work. There are no larger-than-life characters or no imaginary incidents. The novel presents real-life situations and characters.

Bala observes for Shashi Deshpande, "Shashi Deshpande makes her heroine choose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory nor of defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposing ideals and conflicting selves which is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude." (12-13) This is true for Meera Bhatt too. In her novel, she makes Purna generate accord with her own self as well as with her husband and society. Purna does not leave her house or family but creates space for herself and her ideas.

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