



Research Paper

Man-Woman Relationship in the Select Writings of Mamta Kalia

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Abstract

Mamta Kalia is a versatile writer with many novels, short story collections and poems. Her poems in English have been brought out in collections like *Tribute to Papa* (1970) Poems 78 and Poems 79. She was born on November 2, 1940, in Vrindavan and has an M.A. in English Literature. She has been continuously writing since 1960 and has written extensively in newspapers and magazines apart from short stories, poems, novels and plays. But the focus of her writings has mostly been women and their environment. A very significant aspect of her writings has been man-woman relationship. A few of her English poems and short stories have been selected in this study to reveal the struggle her women characters undergo to cope with the relationships be it with husband or father and sometimes to break up the patriarchal set-up and its traditions, which the Indian middle class upholds with such pride.

Keywords: patriarchy, women, relationship, man, middle-class.

Mamta Kalia's writings mirror the angst of 20th century urban middle class Indian women. She has won many awards and accolades for her bold and path-breaking work in Hindi Literature. She is known for taking up issues related to the sensibilities of modern women, man-woman relationships and women's struggle for survival in post-modern India, especially in a patriarchal set up. In her poetry and novels, the common thread is the transformation of a woman after marriage. According to Kalia, marriage equals silence, discrimination and coping with problems mostly without support.

In an interview with Shruti Singh, she says "life of a woman is very difficult, especially for modern women, where there are so many responsibilities for her." (Singh, 8) Kalia, herself a married woman, expresses disgust with the patriarchal set-up of Indian society which does nothing except suffocate and subjugate the young women placed in its grip. In the words of Asha Viswas:

"A number of contemporary women... experience private oppression in marriage and daily life. While marriage is an emotional servicing of men, 'Dailiness' is a way to control women's energies. The women poets recognize how the institution of marriage is coded according to masculine or feminine associations, how discourses function by excluding, expelling or neglecting women. While the husband is the subject, an 'I' to function in the patriarchal system, the wife has to acquire the traits of passivity and passive sexuality." (Viswas, 122)

The poet's disillusionment with marriage is revealed in many poems of hers. The most significant of which is "After eight years of marriage." In the poem, the woman visiting the house of her parents after marriage along with her two sons finds it arduous to answer a simple question regarding her happiness as a married woman. In reality, she wants to share with her parents the ups and downs and upheavals which almost cost her, her life:

*"I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night once
And struggled hard from hurting myself." (Poems 78, 26)*

But being an Indian married woman she realizes that not only her children's but also her old parents' happiness depends on her. She wants to cry out, rebel and express her anger and pain but cannot do so for the fear of hurting those who are close to her. Being imprisoned within herself seems to be her fate. "Crying in bed all night" (26) with the intention to hurt herself indicates a deep sense of despair and anguish with a suggestion that there was no one to comfort her. The husband figure is missing and it is easy to imagine him as the perpetrator of this pain and the resulting low self-esteem.

What Mamta Kalia reveals in her poetry and short stories, is a whole alien inner world of married women that few enter or get access to. In that world, a woman is completely alone in her suffering, keeping the pain, rebellion, anger, and even hatred within the boundaries of her heart. For Indian women, it is a 'Laxman

Rekha' of their own making. They understand that crossing the line means more tragedy and suffering not only for themselves but for their loved ones and hence the choice is taken away from them. The last line of the poem sums it up beautifully:

*"So I swallowed everything,
And smiled a smile of great content." (26)*

In some of Kalia's short stories also the pathetic state of a woman after marriage appears as a theme. The story 'Raiwali' revolves around Kalindi the heroine who has not only lost her name but also her identity after marriage. In a patriarchal set up she is no more than a maid of the house whereas her husband, as her master, not only mishandles her but also indulges in extramarital affairs. The ultimate cruelty occurs when she is not allowed to go to her parent's home after her mother's death as she cannot be spared from her responsibilities of household chores in her brother-in-law's marriage. When she tries to assert herself, her husband threatens to throw her out of the house and she succumbs. In Nabaneeta Dev Sen's words:

"For an Indian woman, a sense of shame is one of the ultimate values. She is supposed to walk, talk, look, smile, eat drink, laugh, and weep all in a modest fashion, in a reserved manner...Her mental space is curtailed by depriving her of education, and information." (Sen, 13)

In Mamta Kalia's story *The Vocal Woman*, Shikha, the heroine declares when asked to explain her full name Deepshikha, that –

"My parents have given me a wrong name, I am neither the self-effacing lamp nor a low burning light. I am a blazing flame! I am Agnishikha." (Kalia)

But the same girl who makes this bold declaration and attracts her husband Kapil by her sheer brilliance realizes that being married means living a "life of consent." Her world consists of "monotony," and "bored beauties" who fill their world with cosmetics and clothes. Shikha feels concerned, contempt, and a bit of shame for these housewives and finally accepts that these women have no desire to change as they don't understand the game of "rest" and "arrest." (Kalia)

In Shikha's life "dusting, cleaning and mopping" (Kalia) clash with the need for a "pen, paper and a book." (Kalia) Mamta Kalia's heroine rebels and decides to punish the people around her with silence but cannot do so for long. The desire of her husband and mother-in-law to have a woman in their home who will silently accept the treatment meted out to her makes her wish to have 'talklets' like toilets where "you voice out your fury, flush down your words and come out clean and composed." (Kalia)

After two children and many years of married life, Shikha still feels "alienated" at home where she has never been allowed to voice her opinions. She wonders, "will she become a glimmering taper instead of a flashbulb!" (Kalia) Shikha's opinion of her husband, who, she thought was 'unique' changes drastically as she realizes that "He wanted a Gandhari as a wife who should be deaf and dumb in addition to being blind." (Kalia) The ultimate realization of the futility of her existence comes when her son hits her hard and no one supports her. Mamta Kalia through the married life of Shikha aptly points a finger at the entire patriarchal system which works silently and cruelly to 'gag' a woman's voice and crush her individuality. But the modern woman understands this conspiracy and Kalia's women may remain silent but they do not succumb. In the story, Shikha knows that *"For the present, her mouth is jammed but this is not silence. Her words will carry on the fight."* (Kalia)

Although Mamta Kalia had a love marriage with Ravindra Kalia and it was a more liberal relationship, in her memoir *Ravi Katha* a lot remains unsaid and at times one feels that the unsaid may be more significant than the said. On one hand, we have two notable writers co-existing together on almost equal terms, on the other hand, we have Mamta Kalia working throughout her life on three fronts – her job, home and her profession as a writer. She never had the luxury of being a writer solely nor did she seem to have a space of her own. This difference based on gender is a part of Kalia's make-up as she takes up a cudgel for all women who feel exploited in the marriage system. While the man creates moving away from chaos, the woman creates amidst the chaos. The desire to jump into Ganga and do away with life may have been momentary but it is there nonetheless as an indication of the inner struggle and angst which is a part of every woman's existence, being trapped in a patriarchal set-up. Ranu Uniyal points out:

Much of Mamta Kalia's writing focuses on man-woman relationships. Not only does she speak of the struggle and anxiety of a working woman but she also brings out the inherent challenges and tensions in a world fraught with the anxiety of assertion and the pain of rejection. (Uniyal, 20)

Even as a daughter Kalia's heroine rebels against her father and rejects the male model set by him. In the poem 'Tribute to Papa' she rejects all the perceived notions and models of patriarchy saying:

"I give two donkey claps for greatness"

And three for Rani Laxmibai” (Kalia, 10)

She even thinks of “disowning” her father and calling him by his name.

The fundamental clash between a woman who is the daughter and the man who happens to be the father is seen in the last lines -

“Everything about you clashes with nearly everything about me...

What if my tummy starts showing gradually

And I refuse to have it curetted.” (Kalia, 10)

Kalia’s women often do not believe in breaking the mould completely but they do make a significant dent in the wall of patriarchy by using words and voicing their contempt for the hypocrisy of its ideals harshly. The daughter’s assurance to her father is a slap to patriarchy:

“But I’ll be careful, Papa,

Or I know you’ll think of suicide.” (Kalia, 10)

Radha Chakravarty’s comment on Anita Desai’s novels, fits Kalia’s novels too, as she writes – “The protagonists...frequently attempt to ‘fight the current’ only to discover the complex relationship between freedom and responsibility.” (Chakravarty, 66)

Being a traditional wife and mother does not come naturally to Kalia’s heroines and she does not try to fit them into maternal roles. The heroine of “Sapnoki home delivery” leaves her husband and son to build a life of her own. She refuses to be emotionally blackmailed by either of them and makes a successful career for herself.

Known for her sharp, satirical dialogues, her sensitive portrayal of the psyche of a female and her realistic description of middle-class life in India, Mamta Kalia is a writer who defies definition. She writes about almost everything alive and pulsating with life. Her spectrum of life is vast and so are the characters with their commonalities and individual differences. Mamta Kalia’s women are ambitious, submissive, compromising, bold, silent and outspoken by turns. They may remain silent but do not surrender. Their silence is sometimes more vocal than actual speech. Her stories explore the anomalies in Indian social structure and take the reader along in a flux of feelings and emotions. Her poems comment sharply on various situations befalling a woman, especially after marriage. In the poem “Sheer Good Luck,” she writes ironically;

“Nothing ever happened to me

except two children

and two miscarriages.”(11)

In the poem “compulsion,” the protagonist rebels against the physical parameters set for a woman where she has to appear beautiful:

“I want to throw away

All my cosmetics

I want to reveal

My real age.”(12)

In the poem “Against Robert Frost” Kalia hits hard at the hypocritical reality of the middle class and the male’s selfish craving for drinks and sex:

“I haven’t even seen an apple for many

Months

Whatever we save we keep for beer

And contraceptives.”(21)

Mamta Kalia portrays various shades of man-woman relationship and makes her women protest and rebel against the injustice meted out to them. As a writer she realizes that “gender is ultimately meaningful only in the context of a network of larger global and local issues.” (Chakravarty, 194) Therefore she places her heroines in various situations where they fight from within the system rather than from outside of it. Their struggle against patriarchy becomes a universal example of an individual’s struggle for freedom, equality and self-worth.

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