

Review

Celebration of a girl's journey from 'interior colonized' to liberated self: Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner*

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In twenty first century with changes in many facets of life books for children also have changed from simple stories that are rich in morals and traditions to those that reflect the new changing society. Children's literature from India is not yet recognized around the world, but it is certainly spreading its wings. Writers of children's literature produce books, both traditional and contemporary, that reflect Indian reality in content, style, visuals and production. Childhood is a very important period in the formation of character and for the emergence of a value structure in the life of a human being. This paper is focused on the presentation of a new girl by a children novelist Kashmira Sheth. *Keeping Corner* is the powerful and enchanting novel juxtaposes Leela's journey to self-determination with the parallel struggle of her family and community to follow Gandhi on the road to independence from British rule. The setting of the novel is before 1947 when India was struggling for independence from the colonizers. Freedom fighters like Gandhiji were struggling for getting 'Purna Swaraj' in India. In this research paper, it is discussed how the girls also faced 'interior colonization' from the patriarchy before independence. They were victims of different traditional evils like child marriage and child widowhood. The girls like Leela fight against the traditional customs and inequality of gender and tries to get 'purna Swaraj'. Gandhi's pursuit of freedom from colonial control is consistently shown to inspire Leela's own pursuit of freedom from patriarchal constraints. Gandhi is struggling for freedom of the nation and Leela is struggling for liberation of self and women in general.

Key words: Interior colonization, oppression, patriarchy, gender equality, new Indian girl.

INTRODUCTION

*The death shrouds and the shadow falls, trapping me.
I want to run free like a newborn calf on a grassy plain.
Tied, I am tied with a chidri to the nail of widowhood
Nail driven, in the soil of my life (Sheth, 2007 p 157).*

The search for a liberated self other than the one imposed upon women by society and culture begins when the woman starts thinking and questioning the codes of conduct laid down by society, especially a patriarchal one. This thinking and questioning attitude can start right from the woman's childhood, persist

through adulthood, that is, marriage and motherhood, and become a mature understanding of one's individuality leading to an integrated, whole personality. Once they have succeeded in the quest, and found their true selves, they are at peace with themselves and with the world. They become people who have their own aims in life, making their own choices, with a sense of responsibility. They become liberated in their thinking, and actions. "Childhood is a very important period in the formation of character and for the emergence of a value structure in the life of a human being" (Aerathu, 2005 p. 43).

Though the girl child was absent for long in Indian literature, we get some memorable portrayals of the girl child in recent Indian English fiction.

Children's literature in India tries to highlight young girls' capacity to represent a healthy new beginning. 'The New Indian Girl' presented in contemporary Indian English children's literature proves to be an epitome of modern and post-colonized India where gender equality is beginning to find its place. In contemporary Indian children's literature feminist ideology is observable in the widespread presence of girl characters and the pursuit of gender equality. In contemporary Indian children's literature there are many stories in which girls are the protagonists and they initiate different actions. The children novels like *Suchitra and Rag Picker*, *Blue Jasmine*, *Koyal dark Mango Sweet*, *Keeping Corner* portray different picture of girls in India. The girl characters in these novels are not passive like they used to be in traditional Indian literature. Most of the novels by women can be considered a form of feminist children's literature. However, while a work of feminist children's literature can be defined as one in which the protagonist triumphs over gender-related conflicts, a prevalent narrative patterns in many of these novels, it can be considered a form that is premised on a feminist ideology espousing, that all people should be treated equally, regardless of gender, race, class or religion.

From the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales* to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, India is a land of oral traditions. Grandparents handed down stories to their grandchildren and they retold many of those to their children. In fact, most of the Indian books which are seen in the market today are retold versions of these stories. However, since independence, India has transformed through a series of changes in outlook, achievement and ideals, which have been reflected in literature-even children's literature (www.Chillibreeze.com). Books for children have changed from simple stories that are rich in morals and traditions to those that reflect the new changing society. Children's literature from India is not yet recognized around the world, but it is certainly spreading its wings. Writers of children's literature produce books, both traditional and contemporary, that reflect Indian reality in content, style, visuals and production.

About the author

Kashmira Sheth is a children's novelist. She is the author of six books, two of them are picture books, titled as *My Dadima Wears a Sari* and *Monsoon Afternoon*. She has written three books which are meant for teens, *Blue Jasmine*, *Koyal Dark*, *Mango Sweet* and *Keeping Corner*. She is awarded with many awards like, 2007 Parent's Choice Award Gold Winner, 2008 Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts, Booklist Top Ten Historical

Fiction for Youth, CCBC choice 2008, IRA Notable Books for A Global Society (International Reading Association), 2008 Friends of American Writers Award. *Keeping Corner* was published in 2007. Her latest novel is *Boys without Names*. In Kashmira's novels feminist ideology is visible, she represents girl characters as protagonists who fight for their rights, raise question against traditional patriarchy and triumph over gender related conflicts.

DEPICTION OF A NEW INDIAN GIRL

Keeping Corner is a story of Brahmin girl Leela, who lives in a small village Jamlee, in the Indian state of Gujarat in 1918. Leela was engaged to Ramanlal at the age of 2 and she got married at the age of 9. When the novel begins Leela is 12 years old and she is about to leave her parents' house and go to live with her husband as per tradition. She has never been interested in school. She does not care for the chaotic situation in India and Gandhiji's struggle for independence. She is very much a pleasure-loving and carefree girl who enthusiastically looks forward to move to her husband's place. As a child, marriage for her is just about wearing beautiful cloths, wearing new jewellery, eating good food and having fun but her husband dies and she becomes a widow at the age of 12. With her husband's death, Leela's life changes forever. Instead of being showered with gifts and affection, she is forced to shave her head and give away her favourite saris and bangles. Leela is compelled to follow the tradition of 'keeping corner' by remaining inside her house for a year. As per Indian tradition, the subsequent life of Leela will remain the same. Leela will be a social outcaste and considered a burden by her family. As Leela tells her teacher, "A year of keeping corner will never end. It will be as long as a river" (Sheth, 2007 p 107).

The custom of child marriage of girls became very common by the epic period. Leela also has heard people saying,

Daughters are someone else's treasure and the sooner you part with them the better off you are; daughter look good only in their in-law's house, and the younger you marry your daughter the quicker you are done with your obligations (Sheth, 2007 p 9).

A more tragic disaster brought about by the early marriage system was that this led to many girls becoming widows even before they reached to puberty. The plight of widow was very poor. Widows were ill-treated and ignored. They were excluded from any good rituals. Regarding personal morality the society maintained a double standard for men and women. After becoming a widow Leela is also ill-treated by the society. She is ignored and excluded from the rituals. She is considered to be the bringer of misfortune. Society tries to make a

widow feel that she is inferior to everyone in the world and even a widow does not have confidence to face the challenges that she will come across as a widow. After the completion of a year of keeping corner when Leela steps out from her house for the first time to pluck some flowers, she hears voice of a band. At that time across the street someone shouts,

Aye Leela, are you crazy? Go, go in the house. No one wants to see the face of a widow before getting married...Hurry, run in before the groom sees you. It would be a bad omen. (Sheth, 2007 p. 210).

Leela questions this custom and asks her kaki,

Tell me how can I bring bad luck? I am just a girl named Leela. What powers do I have? And if I had powers, then wouldn't I have prevented bringing such bad luck to myself? (Sheth, 2007 p. 211).

Leela also questions society's unequal attitudes towards men and women. She asks, "Fat Soma was widowed once, why does not he bring bad luck? (Sheth, 2007 p. 211). Her kaki answers, "It's different for men. They can marry again and be happy"(Sheth, p. 211). Leela again cries in grief," Why can't women be happy again too?" (Sheth, 2007 p. 211). Leela wants to go to Ahmedabad for studies because she thinks that if she educates herself she can step out of her image of Leela –the widow to Leela as an individual. When Leela thinks of going to Ahmedabad her cousin Jaya appreciates it and writes to Leela, "...It will open up a new world for you. A world where you will be Leela and nothing else" (Sheth, 2007 p. 146).

Leela is a victim of such a custom in India. Kashmira Sheth tries to depict a new Indian girl in Leela, who is shaped by liberal feminist ideals and successfully balance tradition and modernity. She honours tradition by working from within and improving family relationship, at the same time she embraces modernity in her fight for gender equality, and in her desire to join Gandhi in his freedom movement. Leela is such a girl who is empowered and progressive. She acts to reject traditionally prescribed roles for Indian girls by insisting that girls and boys are equally valued members of society and deserve equal opportunities, particularly in relation to education and self-determination. Leela is the epitome of such a girl who not only succeeds in improving her life but tries to bring transformation in lives of other people also and thinks for the well-being of her community and country.

INTERIOR COLONIZATION

In *Keeping Corner* the conflation of national progress and

gender equality is clearly demonstrated as Gandhi's pursuit of freedom from colonial control is consistently shown to inspire Leela's own pursuit of freedom from patriarchal constraints. Gandhi is struggling for freedom of the nation and Leela is struggling for liberation of self and women in general.

Before 1947, India was a colonized country. In the novel Gandhi is shown struggling against the colonizer for getting 'Purna Swaraj, means freedom of choice. In the same way women, for many centuries are suffering from 'Interior colonization'. They are colonized by the patriarchal tradition and custom. For many centuries there has been a tacit acceptance of a number of such assumptions about the inferior status of women which pervade all fields of life. With the codification of laws by Manu, the subordination of women was assured for centuries to come. Manu's idea that a woman does not deserve freedom, that she has to be protected in her childhood by her father, in her youth by her husband and in her old age by her sons put the seal of male domination and tyranny over women and their socially sanctioned oppression. As observed by Moi (1987),

It is quite natural to assume that women have internalized this objectified vision about themselves and consequently they lived in a state of unauthenticity (p. 92).

Leela feels that tradition has bound people as foreign has bound India. Even when they hurt people they cannot leave them because people are so used to them. Forced by her relatives to behave according to strict Hindu behavioural codes, newly widowed Leela begins to follow the patriarchal Hindu customs. But as a new girl Leela begins to question the tradition by saying," who started this? Can anyone benefit from it?" (Sheth, 2007 p. 59). She then realizes that custom is nothing but made up rules. She begins to rebel against the out mood customs. She cries in grief, "I don't want to follow this custom. I want my bangles, my earrings, my ghaghri-poulka-I want everything back, everything" (Sheth, 2007 p 59).

PATRIARCHY

Being nurtured in a society that caters exclusively to the well being of men can spell disaster for a girl, when she finds herself captive in 'a man's world' she will necessarily be torn between the values that she has imbibed from her elders and her own ambitions regarding her future. The patriarchal myths incorporating archetypal images and role models have been internalized by men and women over the ages and it calls for immense effort on the part of women to liberate themselves from the cultural influence imbibed by them. Each of them has to live through an experience of casting off the image imposed by society in order to find an authentic identity. An archetypal image of woman cherished for ages has

been the 'angel-in-the house' which Virginia Woolf has elaborated in the following manner,

Intensely sympathetic...immensely charming, utter unselfish, excelled in the difficult arts of family life, sacrifice herself daily...In short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathies always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all...she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty...her blushes, her great grace. In those days...every house had its angel... (Woolf, 1966 p 39).

In this way patriarchal culture insists that a woman should confine her life to cooking, cleaning, washing and bearing and rearing children ignoring her intelligence, education, human potency and even her selfhood. At the age of 12 only girls like Leela are taught as Leela's mother advises her, "You'll be thirteen soon and must behave like a young woman, don't gawk" (Sheth, 2007 p 7). Girl's childhood is spent as a training period of being a woman only. Even when parents pamper a girl child and try to make her happy there is always a fear in their mind that what if this pampering become a burden for a girl when she goes to her in-law's house. Even society cannot bear such pampering for a girl. As Leela's Masi shows her anger to Leela's mother, saying,

I never heard of a little girl who could make the whole family dance around her! Why don't you raise her the way girls are supposed to be raised? Our ba only indulged our brothers, never us sisters (Sheth, 2007 p 25).

Feminist contend that in a male supremacist world owned and controlled by men; it is no wonder that women consistently find themselves in subjugating positions. Each and every avenue of power within society is in male hands. The concept of 'power' is highly charged for women. The delimiting aspect of power in its usual sense is that it has long been associated with violence and the use of force. Power is seem to act only in its own interest and by exploiting the powerless, including women and children.

Feminists consider it important to re-define the very concept of power. To them power means, "the capacity to change...the individual and the environment...without the use of force" (Boneparth and Emily, 1998, XIV). Feminists, as a rule, are not interested in exploitative power but in power that is mutually strengthening and fortifying. Human relationships and structures when subjected to a total transformation would result in the sharing power in the form of knowledge, expertise, education, decision-making and access to multifarious field of life according to the feminist concept.

Leela, before she meets her teacher Saviben, she is confined in her house with her narrow vision. Saviben proves to be a real Guru for Leela. She becomes a

touch-bearer to show Leela the correct direction and widen her vision. With the help of Saviben, Leela realizes that she has power to change her fate. Leela who was not interested in studies earlier, starts taking interest in studies and reading books and articles written by the reformists like Narmad and Gandhi. Leela shows her gratitude to her teacher by saying, "I'll never forget the day you came to teach me. I didn't really want to study then, but now I know it was the best thing that ever happened to me" (Sheth, 2007 p 181).

Leela does not think about herself solely as an individual, but rather sees herself as connected with a societal whole once she begins to understand her position as part of the larger condition of child widows, widows in general, and ultimately women's role in Indian society. Narmad's ideas have widen her perspective. She says about Narmad, "He said that childhood marriage was a shameful thing and should be abolished right away. He believed that widows should be allowed to marry" (Sheth, 2007 p 163). Narmad's ideas begin to sink in her mind and her thoughts begin to grow. She starts thinking that customs and tradition is man-made and someone should take initiative to question the unfair tradition which is partial to women. She says,

Narsi Mehta's 'bhajan', devotional song, that Kaka loved, said we were all part of the same God. If it was true, then widowed men and widowed women should be treated the same. May be some tradition started as silk threads but had turned into stubborn ropes. If I was questioning them, then others could be too (Sheth, 2007 p.164).

For the first time, despite her confinement, Leela begins to open her eyes to the changing world. Leela initially believes that her social position is nonnegotiable due to her fate, she later understands that her action can make a difference in changing her life. By reading newspaper as well as other reading for her school work, she becomes familiar with the philosophical values and protest work of activist, including Gandhi, who are leading the struggle to emancipate women in India- as well as India itself. In turn Leela recognizes that her individual actions can affect her entire society.

GENDER EQUALITY

In India where the oppression of women was perhaps more severe than in other countries, not until the nineteenth century, was there a move towards abolishing the unjust practices and evil traditions. Since the majority of women were leading 'muted lives', the moves for reform was made by men. Indian reformers of the period like Mahadev Govind Ranade and Raja ram Mohan Roy pleaded for the spread of women's education. A campaign against early marriages gained wide support. The evil practice of 'sati' was declared illegal by the

government (Nirmala, 1996 p 4).

The cause of equality of women was taken up by the national freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi was an ardent champion of women's rights. The cause of the nation's freedom drew many brilliant women out of their houses and led them to join the freedom struggle and fight on a par with men. With the participation of the Indian woman in the freedom struggle, the woman's question acquired a new dimension in India. By proving her mettle as freedom fighter, the Indian woman proved that her sphere need not be confined to the household chores. Participation in these movements gave women awareness about their inherent power (Nirmala, 1996 p 4). The existence of different groups and various mass movements in which women get involved indicates that different perceptions on women's oppression and on the ways to overcome them prevail in India. Since the oppression of women in Indian context is based on a multiplicity of factors like class, caste, gender bias, ethnicity, so the need for plural expression of feminism is imperative. It is practically difficult to convince of a single women's movement which can include within its fold all the complex issues faced by women of India who belong to different groups and communities.

Activists the world over have raised their voice against the patriarchal tendency to look down upon woman as an object or a possession of man, denying her the right as a free individual who can exercise her discretion and intellectual capabilities, make her own choices in life and play her role in decision making which can bring about drastic changes in her life and in the life of the universe. As Gandhi demands for 'swaraj' freedom of choice for the people in India, in the same way Leela also demands for the same for the women in India. She questions, "If Brahman men can remarry, why can't Brahman women? Why can't women be treated equally to men?" (Sheth, 2007 p. 167). Leela frequently uses Gandhi's principles and arguments to support her own: for example she confronts her father by saying, "Gandhiji thinks widows should be able to go to school...what good are all his ideas if widows and their families don't take the lead? Ba, I want to study, and I need your help" (Sheth, 2007 p 236). While convincing her father to allow her to go to Ahmedabad and study further Leela tells her father,

It's easier to follow customs than to question them. Bapuji, we have to take a pledge to fight against all that is wrong and cruel, including customs and prejudices. Don't our scriptures, Vedas, say that truth is whole? So how can we fragment it?...How can we fight against cruelty and unfairness in some cases but not in others? I didn't do anything wrong, but I have to suffer. Don't I have a right to wage satyagrah against that? (Sheth, 2007 p. 246).

Eventually Leela's father recognizes that, "this is not just about Leela, it is also about something bigger" (Sheth, 2007 pp. 246-7) and approves Leela's demands. The

new Indian girl as a collective is about something bigger: changing social roles for Indian females, roles that ultimately serve a national agenda. Thus, in their own small ways, Leela and other fictional new Indian girl characters create a ripple effect that conceptually expands the boundaries not only of girlhood but also of what comprise the Indian nation.

Novels such as *Keeping Corner* which imagine girls taking initiative and acting with agency to become new Indian girls by obtaining education and pursuing gender equality can provide inspiration and demonstrate that gender equality may be attainable. As imagined by Indian women writers in many English language children's novels, the new Indian girl is a saviour: in emancipating herself and others and pursuing gender equality. Leela in *Keeping Corner* is one such girl, who transforms herself and her community, ultimately providing a valuable contribution to post colonial Indian by creating an empowered balance between tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

Leela is like any teen at the threshold of a new adventure when her life falls apart. She gains strength from adversity and fights back. The teens will realize that even in the most dire of circumstances an individual has a choice and responsibility to question authority. It may be family, society or government. I hope Leela's courage will make them care deeply for what happens to her and help them find strength when facing their own problems. As imagined by Indian women writers in many English-language children's novels, the new Indian girl is a savior: in emancipating herself and others and pursuing gender equality. Leela in *Keeping Corner* is one such girl who, transforms herself and her community, ultimately providing a valuable contribution to postcolonial India by creating an empowered balance between tradition and modernity. She symbolizes a new way of being not only for Indian girls, but also for the Indian nation.

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