

## Progression from Feminism to Female: A Trajectory of Shilawati's Character Development in Surendra Verma's *From Sunset to Sunrise*

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper is divided in to two sections the first section discusses feminist theory briefly. It particularly focuses on the subjugation of women in patriarchal society and discusses the views of various feminist critics. The second section analyses Surendra Verma's play *From Sunset to Sunrise* from feministic perspective. It attempts to analyse the play specifically using Elaine Showalter's model of gynocriticism.

### **Introduction:**

Feminism emerged as a political movement in the West in the twentieth century which fought for voting franchise for women. Later it broaden its horizon and included various issues of women centering around their subordination. The experiences of women vary from place to place and local context. Black feminism, Radical feminism, Marxist feminism, Postcolonial feminism, Lesbianism, Dalit feminism emerged as a consequences of specific female subjectivity and experiences. The present paper analyses Surendra Verma's *From Sunset to Sunrise* as a postfeminist play in the Indian context. Hence Indian customs and traditions during the era of the king Malla of medieval period are taken into consideration for the exposition of the play.

Surendra Verma a famous Hindi Playwright. He has written plays *Setubandh*, *Draupadi*, *Chote Sayed Bade Sayed*, *Ek Duni Ek* etc. Surendra Verma presents his characters in historical settings with modern individualistic sentiments. His plays manifest modern man's sexual passions, hidden fantasies, western thoughts, social drawbacks, existentialism and psychological analysis. His plays are based on existentialism, inner conflict, changing social relationships, changing relations between man-woman. His plays discuss openly on sexual marital relation of husband and wife. His women characters very passionately express and defend their individualistic existence. His majority of plays present conflict of relations due to unfulfilled sexual desires.

### **I**

Feminist literary criticism aims to unravel the patriarchal ideology inherent in literary texts. It deciphers literary texts and attempts to understand representations of women and points out that

these representations portray socio-political oppression of women by justifying this oppression and naturalizing it too.

Feminist critics argue that literary texts display power struggle between men and women. The text presents stereotype women as weak, vulnerable, seductress, sexual object of the male's desire, a procreating device etc. Feminists assume that literary texts reproduce social biases that perceive women as 'Other' of the male. Religion, social practices and cultural traditions construe women as subordinate; women's identity is subsumed under that of a male. The woman is typecast as 'Mother Nature', thus implying that she possess perpetually giving, all-forgiving nature that never demands anything and willing to suffer everything. Religious doctrines support these representations. Feminist critics also argue that masculinity and femininity are coercive categories that strait-jacket men and women. Simone de Beauvoir points out that:

One is not born but rather she becomes, a woman. (p. 283, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*)

This implies that socialization of woman renders her with certain qualities as being weak, feeble-minded, patience etc. These enable patriarchal men to argue that women need to be protected and controlled. Her sexuality and desires are treated as subservient to that of males. Thus feminists argue that inequality of sexes do not have a biological basis but originates in the cultural construction of gender difference. It is perceived that gendering is nothing but a practice of power, where masculinity is associated with authority.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her *The Second Sex*, suggests that woman is relegated into a 'second sex'. Beauvoir argues that woman is the Other of the standard and has no value or identity. She is defined in relation to the man, as what the man is not. As Beauvoir says:

[woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her... He is the subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other. (p.295, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*)

Thus, the qualities endowed to women are different from those of men and become mythicised, the subject of male dreams and idealizations. Hence culture and history have bestowed women with certain qualities depending upon the masculine need. So woman is associated with life, fragility, purity, beauty, goodness etc. on some occasions while she is evil, seductress, corrupter etc. on other occasions.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* demonstrate that sexual relationship controlled by the males reinforces gender oppression. This extended into the domain of ideology, biology, socio-cultural institutions like family, religion and education. Millet also suggested that masculine sexuality reinforces patriarchal domination and criticized Freud's biological determinism of 'penis envy'.

## II

*From Sunset to Sunrise* is a historical play which dwelves on the man-woman relationship. In this play Shilawati is married to impotent Malla king Okak who is incapable of giving physical satisfaction to Queen and also unable to provide successor to Malla kingdom. The queen Shilawati has been sacrificing her physical pleasure for the sake of Malla kingdom and its dignity and reputation. The subject of Malla kingdom desperately expect a successor from the marriage union of the King and Queen. The ministers of State has a fear that if the King does not announce the good news of his successor soon, they may rebel against the King. The subject is restless and anxious in anticipation of the successor of the Kingdom, since it has been five years of the marriage of the King.

The tradition with the aid of religion has a provision that, childless royal couple through ‘Niyog’ ceremony can fulfill their dream of acquiring a child and solve the problem of providing successor to the throne. This suggests that even religions doctrines aid the subordination of women. The solution to the impotency of the king is ‘Niyog’ rather than the dissolution of marriage. The Queen is deprived of marital bliss; She is sexually starved yet expected to perform wifely duties. Nobody thought of her remarriage despite her husband’s impotency. In the play the queen is forced to take part in ‘Niyog’, Queen Shilawati is forced to accept the proposal of ministers of council to take the path of Niyog to give successor to the kingdom against her wish. The king Okak is also against the idea of Niyog and to send his wife to sleep with some stranger for the night. He cites various reasons so as to reject the proposal of the ministers of council, but the council said that they spoke to the Rajwaidya and the chances of getting child from the King is bleak. The Rajwaidya has used every possible medicine to cure the impotency of the King but he is helpless. Eventually Okak yield to the pressure of the council and helplessly accepts the proposal of Niyog.

When council orders to perform Niyog, Shilwati goes through extreme psychological turmoil. Shilawati was already going through the sufferings of her unfulfilled physical needs and the performing Niyog added to her psychological troubles. She expresses her troubles to the King Okak, She says :

1. “ Don’t you know the epithets that your poet use to describe a woman like me who is confined to the interior chambers of palace? They call me ‘the one untouched by the rays of the sun!’..... and tonight the same woman will walk away with some man for this one night.... The man she has never seen before..... the man about whom she knows naught..... and to such a man she will surrender her body... her beauty, her youth and her virginity.....!” (p. 396, Verma, Surendra. *From Sunset to Sunrise*. 2000.)

The thought of family, disgrace, reputation makes her nervous and terrorized. In such a psychological conflict eventually she gets permission of her husband Okak to fulfill her

obligation to perform ‘raj dharma.’ The king Okak, an extremely sensitive and self respected person very hesitatingly gives permission to his wife to select her paramour (Uppati) for one night. But psychologically disturbed, the King could not sleep throughout the fateful night. The dramatist very beautifully presented the inner conflict of the King Okak, his self respect and dignity which results into regret and helplessness. The author very sympathetically presented this self respected and helpless king breaking from within. He says, ‘...The hour of my trial... a testing time for my patience....For my self respect?’(p. 395, Verma, Surendra. *From Sunset to Sunrise*. 2000.)

Meanwhile a Swayamwar is held and the Queen Shilawati garlanded her ex-lover Pratosh to become paramour (Uppati) for the night. The encounter with Pratosh and their love making gives an awakening and provide Queen with the true knowledge of life. Shilawati has been married for five years but entire her life, was spent in protecting the dignity of the King’s family. These things gave her neither any happiness nor any satisfaction. The night with Pratosh has given her all the satisfaction one craves for. The impotency of her husband kept Shilawati unaware of the sexual pleasure. But the night with her paramour incites in her a zeal for sexual pleasure. By spending night with Pratosh she realizes what exactly she lost in her life so far. She says,

“..... following the norms of married life, for five long years, has not given me the kind of satisfaction that I have derived from this one night alone..... I am overflowing with emotions..... such a lot of pleasure, such a thrill, such titillation..... last night has completely revolutionized my life.”(p 416-417, Verma, Surendra. *From Sunset to Sunrise*. 2000.)

Shilawati declares that social restrictions, values, tradition and norms have no meaning before lively pleasure of sex in present time. She expresses very boldly her feeling of physical satisfaction to the king which is considered to be a taboo in patriarchal society but her attitude reveals that for her physical needs, Shilawati is ready to rebel against the society and traditional and norms.

This fateful night has metamorphocally changed her attitude towards sex and physical pleasure which according to Shilawati is far more important than anything else in the life. She teases her husband that he won’t be able to understand this real happiness of life since he is impotent. Her teasing of her own husband reveals her coming to terms with her sexuality; her coming of age.

The dramatist has reflected truthfully the importance of sexuality, its importance. The drama presents sexuality not with the point of view of the patriarchal ideology but feministic view point. The drama has given voice to the voiceless. Patriarchy does not allow to speak sex and sexuality openly, it believes that sex and its pleasure are secondary and primary aim and ultimate goal of sex is to produce children and perpetuate humanity. The Women speaking about sexual pleasure is taboo and they face wrath of the society. The patriarchy believes that a woman

achieves completeness once she become a mother, motherhood makes her a complete woman. But after her sexual encounter Shilawati believes,

“the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood is not in motherhood....her actual fulfillment is in this.... The satisfaction she derives from her physical union with man and motherhood is secondary.” (Verma, Surendra. *From Sunset to Sunrise*. 2000.)

The queen initially hesitates to perform ‘Niyog’, the royal priest convinces her to perform as dharmnati and pursues her to concentrate on the child which will be born with this union instead of the sexuality. When the Queen accepts the proposal of ‘Niyog’ and enjoys the sexual pleasure with her paramour, she admits that during the moment of intercourse no woman can have her entire attention towards the child which will be born after the intercourse but her entire focus is concentrated on the joy, ecstasy, thrill and pleasure she gets during the love making. She replies back to the priest and says that no woman thinks of the unborn child when she is in the moment of love making and expresses her true feelings of sexual pleasure,

“Even if it is the object of a woman to conceive, is that what she is thinking about when she is in that bed. .... When excitement and passionate longing mixed with a heady feelings of sensuality have produced an intoxicating effect on her..... every breath of hers is racing towards the final moment of joy and fulfillment. Do you think a woman would be thinking of an unborn child.”(p. 419, Verma, Surendra. *From Sunset to Sunrise*. 2000.)

The Queen’s reply reflects that child- bearing is secondary and subordinate to sexual pleasure. The ‘Niyog’ provides three opportunities to a woman to get conceive, it means legally a person can avail three chances to select the paramour and spend three nights with him. Shilawati after her first experience of sexual pleasure, wants it second and third time as well. With this intention she deliberately eats contraceptive medicine, so that she may not conceive in first attempt itself. She would not want to miss all her three legal chances to mate with the paramour. This act of Shilawati highlights the manifestation of her longing to get more physical pleasure and satisfaction.

The drama presents a modern attitude towards sex and its pleasure. The dramatist Verma through his ancient story tried to present the modern outlook towards individualistic attitude of sex and sexuality. He presents boldly the primary aim of man-woman relation is sex and there is no other base for this relationship. Shilawati has sympathy for her husband but her individual happiness gets priority hence she consumes contraceptive medicine.

The play runs in three acts and it has major eight characters in it. But play rotate around mainly four characters: Okak, Shilawati, Mahattarika and Pratosh. The play is set in sixth century BC. The major theme of the play is the conflict between social values and individualistic outlook on life. The play very boldly explores the sexual life of Okak- Shilawati, Pratosh- Shilawati, Mahattarika- her invisible husband. The first act focuses on the discussion between Mahattarika

and Okak. The first act presents the psychological trauma faced by the King and the Queen for undertaking a task of Niyog. The first act ends with a decision to send the Queen to spend a night with paramour to get conceived and beget a successor to Malla kingdom. The decision of Niyog is simply taken because the King of Malla is impotent. The act gives detail description of the Swayamwar ceremony, we also come to know that the Queen has selected her ex lover Pratosh as her Uppati for the night.

The second act presents two parallel scenes between Okak and Mahattarika, Shilawati and Pratosh. The incompetence of the king is stressed through the talks of the King and the Queen. The dramatist has presented the incompleteness, inability and helplessness of the King Okak, the manliness of Pratosh is also presented in this act. The act shows sympathy towards incompleteness Okak and depicts Shilawati first time in her life reaches complete womanhood.

The third act focuses on the change in the attitude of Shilawati. This act portrays the alter ego of Shilawati in act first. The king sinks further into her misery of incompleteness after listening to the Shilawati's feeling of attaining complete womanhood in company of Pratosh. Shilawati reveals that to achieve personal happiness one need more than one person. The third act ends with the second announcement of Swayamwar. This second announcement reveals the victory of Shilawati and physical desire. The dramatist has presented a drama where his character breaks the social dogma and shackles the norms. The drama is based on the western individualistic ideology which gives more importance to an individual who has all the right to seek personal happiness. The ideology believes in the attainment of all the personal pleasure without sacrificing for the sake of society. The play presents post modern attitude which treats sexuality as a commodity. The mouth piece of this ideology is Shilawati who says,

'Propriety... duty!....good conduct!..... bonds of marriage! Everything is false.... All a show!.... everything bookish.. but now I no longer want to live my life according to books,.... Now, I want to live life as it really is.' (Verma, Surendra. *From Sunset to Sunrise*. 2000.)

Some of the erotic presentation of the love scenes takes this drama to the level of modern pornography.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, *From Sunset to Sunrise* can be labeled as a post-feminist play. The play charts the development of the character, Shilawati from being a traditional wife to an erotic lover. Shilawati is shown to be a devoted wife. She is virgin inspite of being married. She is sexually deprived due to impotency of the king; yet she didn't complain. She reluctantly performed 'Niyog' ; but when she experiences sexual intercourse, she refuses to come back to king and expresses desire to have communion with her lover. She throws to wind all the societal norms and establishes her sexual identity, characteristic of modern , individualist women. The development of Shilawati's character from being a traditional wife to an erotic lover, aware of her sexuality and pleasure and

freedom, seems parallel to what Elaine Showalter charted out the phases in feminism: feminine, feminity and female. Shilawati later becomes aware of her bodily functions and rejects social

Compulsions that had constrained her liberty. Thus , the play is a classical illustration of radical feminism.

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