



A Paradigm Shift in the Portrayal of Woman in Wedlock-A Comparative Study between *Thereafter* and “Comfort”

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ABSTRACT

The cross culture study always unveil different notions especially with regard to gender treatment and helps us to draw a parallel note between two countries which belong to different hemisphere. The question of relationship between a man and a woman is always subjected to various criticisms particularly in context of marriage. In general women are portrayed as someone who is constantly under the surveillance and subjugation of men. In contrast to this idea a novella and a short story from distinguished background gives a strong picture of the woman in marriage bond. The text dealt in this paper is Saniya's *Tyanantar* (2002) in Marathi which was later translated into English as *Thereafter* by Maya Pandit and “Comfort” by Alice Munro. The former falls under the category of novella while the latter is short story. The Indian and Canadian story respectively presents the women of twenty first century who will no more pertain to the former ideological framework. This paper ventures to present an Indian and a Canadian woman in an empowered way who have their own ideas and life to live.

Saniya's *Tyanantar* (2002) in Marathi was translated into English as *Thereafter* by Maya Pandit. Saniya was born in Maharashtra and she has so far written ten volumes of short stories and three novels. Being a winner of many literary awards and state-level prizes, her novella no surprise captures the current scenario of Indian family. *Thereafter* unveils the present state of gender and psychology in India. Traditionally India is well-known for nuclear family and even in modern India though the concept of nuclear family became a question mark still there is a strong trust and faith on the institution called family. Further, the term family is closely related with the term marriage. The institution of marriage and family is intertwined. They complement each other. However, in the current scenario this institution of marriage and family is determined by the main pillars husband and wife who belong to different genders. The concept of gender bias and discrimination prevails for a long time in Indian society but the institution of family and marriage has lost the firm foundation due to the realization of gender importance and identity.

The woman in family is said to be the basic chord of maintaining the strong relationships among the members of the family. In India the traditional idea of maintaining a family and marriage rest on the hands of woman. The movements like feminism and the ideas like gender equality provoked the thinking of woman and this led to great questions and caused the mass disturbance and havoc in family and marriage institution. *Thereafter* rightly presents the thought of a rationale husband who always have philosophical thoughts and search in contrast with his common housewife who tries to balance and come out from the sudden disturbance caused by her husband. She is very different from the so called traditional Indian women. She represents the contemporary Indian women who could deftly handle tough times. The society as usual treats her with indifferent eyes labelling her with different names but she is least bothered about the society and manages to come out of the devastation caused by her husband.

The narration of the story is presented from the perspective of a character called Radhika. She is the protagonist of this novella. She leads a cosy and pleasant upper middle class life. Her husband Lalit presents her a life woven around the four walls of a sophisticated flat in Mumbai. He holds a high position in office and at the outset they are a happy go family. They have a son named Amol and he is at the verge of completing his school studies. The shock comes in for Radhika when Lalit one day suddenly announces his departure from the home. He makes the announcement quite seriously but without any reason. Radhika knows about the futility in asking reasons to Lalit but still she asks the question of 'why?' and he gives a grave answer like the male chauvinist. He says, "Nothing. It's simply impossible to make you understand. May be after some years..." (*Thereafter* 228). The idea of a woman saying goodbye to a family becomes unpalatable and on the other hand it is quite common to observe a man who bids farewell to his wife proudly stating that he has left the home, furniture and everything for her convenience. Probably at this juncture he seems to be a little good as he leaves his wife economically in a better state. He makes some allowance for his absence. He least bothers about the question and trouble that Radhika has to face during his absence.

The trigger of question is pulled against by Amol and the society including her family, friends and Lalith's office friends. The questions are framed in such a way either doubting the trouble in their relationship as husband and wife or they demand a strong reason from Radhika for his move from the home. Infact fearing the series of question, she keeps her door shut for a long time however it becomes the talk of the town. The distance between the mother and son grows wide apart. Radhika is viewed like an accused and she is found as guilty for her husband's decision to leave her and the son. Instead of treating her as a victim the society treats her to be a failed wife who could not satisfy her husband and keep him within home. When Radhika openly admits her ignorance about the reason for her husband leaving the home, she is treated with enraged eyes. At times a few people pour their benevolence on her and again questions Radhika that why she did not protest her husband's move. The passive acceptance of Radhika about Lalit's decision is seen as a great crime. The society expects her to react. In contrast when Radhika despite the inner turmoil poses to be cool without making a hullaballaa, it brings a greater disappointment for the friends and the society. Radhika through her attitude presents the ideology of modern Indian women. In reply to Lalit's friend Vijay about her coolness, she tells, "So, you want me to cry, weep, beat my breast? Why? Why should I Proclaim to the whole world that my husband has left me? What is to be gained from it?" (*Thereafter* 234).

She receives a letter from her husband once and she is also quite sure about the stubborn nature of her husband. She is a woman of rationality and therefore she rightly thinks about the futility in saying no to his decision or creating a scene. It is quite interesting to watch Radhika's management of emotions and the reaction of other women. For instance Shalini, friend of Radhika showers argument about this issue and uses the words like "Have you heard the news? You'll be shocked to the core...Lalit has gone; deserted Radhika..." (*Thereafter* 237). Even Aai (mother) of Radhika is quite shocked to see Radhika's reaction. A mother is said to well know about her daughter but in case of Radhika she expects her to react like a normal girl. She storms and bursts seeing her calmness. She shouts,

Don't I know you? Always so stubborn! Anyway, if you had come the whole affair would have become public. Already Manu has been a problem, and now you...And look at your letter. You write as if it's someone else you're writing about! Now, tell me what is wrong? Didn't you get along well? **You are quite capable of driving him out.** (*Thereafter* 240)

The husband walks out simply from the family without any reason and the wife is being blamed as the one who has the capacity to drive him out. The mother grills her daughter like a police officer to find the reason for the breakup of the husband from the family. The mother is worried about the prejudice talk of the society, survival and the way she would run the family. So far Radhika had been a frog in well and now she has to swim on her own to bring up Amol.

The twist in the story occurs with the entry of Dalvi and Partha. Radhika constantly fights within herself. She floats between the memories of the past and the turbulence of the present. Initially she looks for the wanted column in newspaper and later she stops even buying the newspaper. Amol's departure from home to Vishakapatnam for pursuing engineering also creates lot of vacant at home and causes bareness in the heart of Radhika. The acquaintance of Dalvi becomes a passing cloud but the entry of Partha brings out certain change in the life of Radhika. As usual the society expects her to define the

relationship with Partha. Initiating from her neighbour to her friends Shalini and Vijay everyone demands explanation about Partha. She blocks them out all from her head and gives a space for him even at home.

At this juncture she evolves herself as a modern Indian woman who can decide her own life. She does not equate Partha with Lalit. She gives a unique position to Lalit and he in turn approves the action of his wife after his sudden comeback to home. He is not surprised to see Partha in his room and Radhika ask Partha to return in the evening. The husband and wife mutually seem to share a space. They appear to be detached but the sense of understanding despite belonging to different genders is highly unique. They are different from the traditional husband and wife. They do not reiterate the old school of philosophy that gives a unique definition for genders in Indian scenario. The character of Lalit and Radhika sets a new pathway in approaching the marital relationship in context of twenty first century India.

In a parallel line with this novel, one can find such interesting elements in Alice Munro Short stories like “Comfort” and “The Bear around the Mountain” extracts from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. Alice Munro born in Ontario is a well-known short story writer. She has won Nobel Prize and it is surprising to find a literary person from a non literary farmer’s family. Her fourteen phenomenal collections of short stories have gained her recognition as a literary person. Her short stories reflect the lives and problems of common human beings in the Canadian landscape. She deals with the issues of family life thereby indirectly she probes into the difference in the ideologies of gender.

The story of “Comfort” presents an understanding couple Nina and Lewis who can be placed on par with Radhika and Lalit. The context and the story line are different but the togetherness between the couple forms the uniqueness. The bond of marriage dissolves the gender difference and it leads to the dissolving of gender domination and subjugation that is always formed between a husband and wife in the marriage bond. In “Comfort”, Nina and Lewis arrive at a decision for committing suicide as Lewis suffers from neurological disorder. He is a retired science teacher and he was forced to resign from job for being a strong atheist. He has also denied teaching about creationism by God. One day when Nina returns she encounters the shock of husband’s suicide. Though they have discussed this earlier she did not expect her husband to die in her absence. She searches for a suicide note but it turns out to be unsuccessful. She informs medical authorities but at any rate she tries to avoid the evidence for suicide.

Nina entrusts the funeral arrangements to Ed, a local undertaker. While embalming the body, Ed discovers a small note in Lewis's pocket and he gives it to Nina. There was no farewell to Nina but she finds the satirical verse ridiculing Lewis's creationist adversaries. Nina spreads Lewis's ashes outside the town. She experiences a newfound comfort to get rid herself of her deceased husband's remain. The question of Nina’s comfort in the passing of her husband has to be discussed in detail. The author takes enough time to introduce these two characters Nina and Lewis but the story is later swiftly presented to the readers. The arrival of Ed does not turn as a twist in the short story but the disease of Lewis and the search for the meaning of life slowly forms the cleavage in marriage relationship. They both try to cope and Nina understands the breakdown of her husband.

The demise of her husband with a satirical note on his creationism adversaries in a way provides comfort for her. She saves her husband from the ridicule of the science society and at the same time she is relieved from the struggle that she has to undergo with her neurological disorder husband. Both Radhika in Indian context and Nina in Canadian context accept the life path. They do not try to fight against destiny. Nina perhaps faces the life due to the discrepancy that prevails in marriage life.

What had been between them, all these years, had been kept in balance because of their two marriages. Their marriages were the real content of their lives—her marriage to Lewis, the sometimes harsh and bewildering, indispensable content of her life. This other thing depended on those marriages, for its sweetness, its consoling promise. It was not likely to be something that could hold up on its own, even if they were both free. Yet it was not nothing. The danger was in trying it, and seeing it fall apart and then thinking that it had been nothing. (“Comfort” Alice Munro)

Simultaneously Lalit in Indian context and Lewis in Canadian context are very different from normal men. They venture to search the meaning of life and they are quite rational who keeps pondering a lot about the life and its meanings. It is surprising to note the preparation for suicide done by Nina and Lewis. In general a wife is said to intolerate the death of her husband but in contrast Nina joins her

husband and plans for death as if she plans for the wedding. Though it is shocking to observe her deed still they do it in a harmonious way to avoid trouble and disaster. The stubbornness observed in both is quite admirable. Both the first mentioned novella and the later short story discloses two pair who are complement to each other. There is no gender bias between the husband and the wife. They encounter trouble times but still come up with great courage to face the situation.

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