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### **The Articulation of Women's Woes in The Context of Nation and Novel: A critical reading of Mahipatram Nilkanth's Sasuvahuni Ladhai (1866)**

One would hardly deny the fact that the rise of the novel in Europe, as a literary genre, is closely associated with modernity. During the nineteenth century, the establishment of the printing press and the spread of a number of periodicals and magazines made novel the most favoured form among the bourgeoisie entertainment. Realism was a dominant trend in the writing of the nineteenth century English fiction as novel was believed to have more scope to capture the 'real' and its structure allows more liberty to discuss the social problems such as starvation, poor wages, slum conditions, drug-addiction and crimes in the urbanity. The rise of the Indian novels during the second half of the nineteenth century should be looked at with these things kept into focus as those early grafters of the Indian novels, having come into the contact with the whole vistas of English literature through their 'Westernized' education, were heavily influenced by the realist trend of the Victorian novel while looking for the social issues pertaining to the immediate Indian climate.

What role do the Indian novels play in depicting the nation within their prose narratives? E.V. Ramakrishnan observes:

The novels written both before and after independence in various Indian languages narrate the Indian nation in all its complexity, diversity and plurality. They constitute an unofficial history of the subcontinent depicting the people's version of what happened or what went wrong. They reveal to us the manner in which the nation was imagined and re-imagined from various locations in society. (Introduction, 11)

The essay focuses on the formation of nation within the foundational Gujarati novel Sasuvahuni Ladhai (Feuding Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law). Partha Chatterji's arguments in Nation and Its Fragments have been used for the theoretical analysis.

The origin of the Indian novel in the second half of the nineteenth century coincided with the rise of nationalism as an ideology in the public sphere. (Ramakrishnan E.V., Introduction, 12)

Being a social reformer, educationist and a man of letters, Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth( 1829-1891) was one of the most influential figure in the nineteenth century Gujarat. Born into Nagar Brahmin family of Surat, Mahipatram along with his friend and contemporary reformer-writer Narmad were ardently working for the dissemination of new education and technology. Mahipatram initiated Shalapatra for training of the teachers and he had been a member of Gujarat Vernacular society (founded by Alexander Forbes). The three novels to his credit are: Sasuvahuni Ladhai (1866), Sadhra Jesang( 1880) and Vanraj Chavdo (1881). Sasuvahuni Ladhai, published in 1866 is considered to be 'the first social novel in Gujarati'; the first novel written in Gujarati being Nandshankar Maheta's Karanghelo (1866), though it's still a disputable issue as both the books published in the same year.

Achyut Yagnik states in his fascinating book on Gujarat that the 'Three Elphistonians' – Narmadashankar (1833-86), Mahipatram Nilkanth (1830-91) and Karsandad Mulji (1832-71), 'in the early 1850s in Bombay received European knowledge and values from their English teachers and inspiration for socio-religious reforms from their Indian teachers' (Yagnik, 76). The illustrious trio was rebel at heart and started advocating for widow remarriage for which severely irked their orthodox

families and communities. I would mention only the case of Mahipatram as it is indirectly related to the writing of Sasuvahuni Ladai. The incident is described in detail in Achyut Yagnik's work. It says that Mahipatram was ostracized by the Nagar community as he was leaving for England for further studies and 'when his father died two years later, not a single Brahmin in the city of Surat was ready to perform the last rites. This forced him to submit to caste diktats and observe prayashchit for re-entry into the caste' (Yagnik, 77). This was heavily criticized by the social reformers and led Mahipatram to endorse 'the foreign travel' that he had carried out. He was again excommunicated and 'after a four years of struggling against Brahmin orthodoxy, he was forced to yield for the second time' (Yagnik, 77). One who is familiar with the social structures of varna and caste can clearly see the totalitarian nature of caste Hindu society where any derivative move that went against the given caste norms was severely met with hazardous outcome for the 'trespasser'. The reason behind narrating the episode is that the antipathy of the Nagar community might have made Mahipatram to base the story of his novel – Sasuvahini Ladhai- in orthodox Nagar family and in this way to attack and ridicule the extremely rigid Hindu-upper caste rituals, customs and practices. This might to some extent be seen as 'symbolic revenge' exerted upon the community responsible for putting him in trouble.

Set in the 18th century Modasa, a village in Ahmedabad district, when the Muslim rule was at its decline in Gujarat, Sasuvahuni Ladai (Feuding Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) moves around Sundar, the daughter of Vireshvar and Shivilakmi. We are informed that Sundar is betrothed at the age of seven and married at the age of nine. She is attributed with all the 'virtues' of the upper caste Brahmin girl: she could read in Devnagri, has memorized Aadityapath, knows Garba and singing.

Like a true Nagar girl, she was very conscious of her looks. She combed her hair with great care and was always found in neat and spotlessly clean cloths [...] she was quite hard-working and liked to do all sorts of domestic chores [...] She had earned the reputation of a good cook at the mere age of eleven. (Nilkanth, Chapter 1, 2)

Sundar was sent to the house of in-laws at the age of fourteen. The family consists of her husband Harinand, his father Ramanand, his mother Anpurna, his elder brother Veejianand and Veejianand's wife Chanda, and Harinand's sister Kamla.

Sundar's mother-in-law has a dual personality. She was known for her kindness and wisdom 'outside' the home but within the home she was ruthless and tyrant, for her 'there was no difference in the status of a daughter-in-law and a servant' (Nilkanth, Chapter 1, 6). Her husband, misled by his mother and sister, used to beat Sundar. He even visited a kept/ prostitute to whom he gave Sundar's anklets and Sundar was blamed for losing them. The quarrel ensued over the lost anklets between the mother-in-law and Sundar. Harinand, in spite of knowing everything, beat his wife severely with a bamboo stick. She swooned. Even when she came to consciousness, she wished to please her husband. Therefore, on the insistence of Chanda, she got ready to consult a fakir, who was said to be an expert in solving any type of problem via exerting black magic. Chanda had been visiting him for begetting a child.

Disguised in Muslim attire, both the women left for the Zamla Pir roza, which was a bit far from Modasa. Meanwhile, the Nagars were infuriated to know that the fakir had taken away both the women in a carriage. The Nagars saw this as a 'disgrace' upon them: 'They said that the honor not only of the Nagars, but all the Hindus of Modasa was at stake, and that, all of them should join in to batter the Muslims' ( Mahipatram, Chapter 14, 142). The Nagars reached the site but Sundar took to her heels. She was safely taken by Hasankhan Pathan, the thanedar of Modasa, to his home. Before taking her at his home he assured her in these words:

I am responsible for safety and welfare of my subject. I have to safeguard people's interest, male or female alike. To protect the weak and punish the wicked is my duty. You need not be afraid of anything. Your chastity and honor would be preserved by all means. But my first concern is to see that you receive proper medical care, as you look completely worn out. My hakim will treat you and restore you to health, and then only we'll think of anything else. My begum is very kind and virtuous. I'll keep you under her care. ( Nilkanth, Chapter 15, 146)

A brief dialogue between Hasankhan and his begum consists of the begum's advice to her husband to marry Sundar taking her under the Islamic fold and her husband's denial to that. The fakir was tried in the court and punished for his misdeeds. The medical treatment given to Sundar didn't work and she died. The Nagar community was divided in to two on the issue of Sundar's funeral rites as she died in the household of a Muslim. Harianand was punished for beating and causing her wife's death and sent to jail. However, Veejianand got him released by paying bribes. The family was ostracized from the caste and at the meeting of caste leaders it was decided that the family would be re-admitted if it agreed to arrange feast. The feast was arranged. The novel ends with the greedy Brahmins relishing free meal. However, a sudden windstorm came and interrupted the feast, the Brahmins had to rush in agony. Veejianand told her wailing mother that she tasted the fruits of her own deeds: 'If a wicked mother-in-law cause feuds in the family, then she is bound to be disgraced like this. You did not allow your daughter-in-law to live in peace. This is the consequence' ( Nilkanth, Chapter 21, 36)

The novel takes up several issues such as child marriage, ill-treatment of daughter-in-laws and husbands, and the pathetic condition of brides in the house of their in-laws where their lives were marked by 'drudgery' and 'scullery'. Though set in a different time period, it is obvious from the depiction that Mahipatram has taken the plot from the immediate social climate. The polyphonic nature of the novel allows certain voices to enter within the narrative and present their respective point of views. The most interesting among them is the Pathan's articulation of the evils within the Nagar community and the reference of a corrupt Vaishnavait saint.

Mahipatram was aware that society is a larger component but its basic unit is a family. He must have felt that the social reform should begin with familial reform. For Mahipatram, who pained to see the plight of women, the root cause of all the predicament concerning women is the lack of education among them. One might wonder why the early phase within the Indian nationalism was marked by an ardent desire to take up women's question. We must look at what Partha Chatterjee says in order to enable us to form the answer:

...the period of "social reform" [from 1820s to 1870s] was actually made up of two distinct phases. In the earlier phase, Indian reformers looked to colonial authorities to bring about by state action the reform of traditional institutions and customs. In the later phase, although the need for change was not disputed, there was a strong resistance to allowing the colonial state to intervene in matters affecting "national culture." The second phase, in my argument, was already the period of nationalism. ( Chatterjee, 6)

In the light of this perspective, we can analyze 'An Appeal to My Educated Countrymen' (no date is given but from the pointers within the 'Appeal' it's in 1873 ) written in English by Mahipatram for the second edition of Sasuvahuni Ladhai. Mark the title of the appeal which does not address to the British administrators but to the educated countrymen. The reason given by Mahipatram is as follows:

Believing that an appeal, through the English language to such of my enlightened countrymen as can understand it, on the crying social evils in this book, will be more effective for their removal, and for rousing the sympathy of the educators and civilizers of this country. ( Nilkanth, An Appeal, 49)

What one could gather from this is that Mahipatram was 'imagining' the community consists of English-educated countrymen and identifying indirectly for them the task of nation-building through the removal of the social evils within it. One is able to perceive that such discourses try to legitimize the status and role of specific group of people within the 'imagined' nation. Let's assume who were the people that received English-education during that era? The obvious answer in the context of Gujarat was: the people belonging to the Brahmin, Baniya and Patidar community.

The articles from the Bombay Gazette produced in the appeal focus on the institution of marriage and the wretched condition of the Hindu daughter-in-laws which are considered 'native' or traditional features of which 'little or nothing is seen of it out of doors' and are 'simply not discerned by those [Europeans] who have no free access to native house on account of the seclusion in which the females live.' Thus, the Indian family is conceived to be 'in the inner domain of national culture', to

put Partha Chatterjee's words. Chatterjee argues:

The European criticism of Indian "tradition" as barbaric had focused to a large extent on religious beliefs and practices, especially those relating to the treatment of women. The early phase of "social reform" through the agency of colonial power had also concentrated on the same issues. In that early phase, therefore, this area had been identified as essential to "Indian tradition." The nationalist move began by disrupting the choice of agency. Unlike the early reformers, nationalists were not prepared to allow the colonial state to legislate the reform of "traditional" society. They asserted that only the nation itself could have the right to intervene in such an essential aspect of its cultural identity. ( Chatterjee, 9)

We do find the assertion of the 'nationalistic reform' of the later phase in the 'Appeal':

Though we may reasonably expect help from our foreign protectors, we cannot assert that these social evils can be remedied by them alone or even principally by them. While they can lend us their influence in any way they can, we ourselves must be principal actors. (Nilkanth, An Appeal, 61)

The assertion might be helpful to think of why Mahapatram has set the novel in the 18th century and why has he presented the benevolent Hasankhan Pathan as the one who imparts justice than an Englishman.

The novel as its subtitle claims to be 'True Image in the Form of a Narrative: Instruction through Entertainment' also consciously 'essentializes' the significant markers of 'True Image' of 'Indian' women which is the image of the upper caste Nagar Brahmin girl ( look at the way she is described). She is good enough to represent the nationalist construct called "Indian woman" once she is educated. Later, Govardhanram Tripathi, to some extent, seems to have created the characters of Kumud and Kusum in line with the character of Sundar.

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