



## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN *A HANDFUL OF RICE*

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### ABSTRACT

*Women's Drama provides new perceptions of gender roles and shows a shifting sense of gendered space. They revise the self/other dynamic and destabilize the self/world/reality configuration by asserting the possibility of change. The debate about Indian Drama in the past decades has been dominated by the issue of identity – national/regional, traditional/modern, realistic/anti-realistic, urban/folk, colonial/ postcolonial, and western/ indigenous. But rarely ever any cognizance has been taken of Indian Women's Drama as a separate entity. The contribution of Indian women playwrights has generally either been glossed over or subsumed despite the fact that they have added to the dramatic canon those aspects of women's experiences that had not found visibility. Though an in depth survey is not possible within the limited scope of this paper and some narrowing of a potentially enormous field becomes inevitable but to name only a few, playwrights like Tripurari Sharma, Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mrinal Pande, Malini Bhattarcharya, Nabaneeta Dev Sen have carved a niche for themselves in this sphere. Therefore, an attempt has been made by the researcher to analyze Tripurari Sharma's play, Bahu and explore the hidden identity of women.*

**Keywords:** *Angry, Desire, Dignity, Gender, Image, Loss, Patriarchal, Passionate*

Indian Drama, well ensconced in a glorious tradition, has developed steadily from Classical to the Contemporary in its multifarious forms defying any homogenous, neat categorization. It has emerged as a heterogeneous, intercultural and multilingual dramatic idiom. But one common feature that has consistently prevailed is the gendered exclusivity of this genre

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where male playwrights have enjoyed almost a monopolistic control and women playwrights have been conspicuous by their absence.

The plays written by women, often presenting family situations, symbolize their resistance to the social pressure to circumscribe their sphere of activity/ productivity and thereby contain their endeavour towards making explicit the various kinds of oppression and violence that form a part of women's daily experience. Taken together as women's drama, they unfold as dramatizations of poignant narratives, interactions, recollections of female characters who refuse or resist falling into a silent consent to oppression. The struggle to establish one's identity and to assert one's individuality led them to wage a desperate fight against the existing social order of the day. They learnt to resist the "multiple systems of oppressions which simultaneously corroborate marginalizing ideological maneuvers that define 'othernesses'" (Few 454). They explore the artistic and social territories of Indian life and are mesmerizing in their depth and detail and also in their covert and overt violence which after all, forms a part of women's daily experience.

Their creators, the women playwrights, celebrate the great adventure women's lives can be and mourn those that are not. To truly appreciate the experiences that make up a woman's life are her sufferings, her struggles, her failures, and her strengths. As it has been truly said that, "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between the male and eunuch which is described as feminine" (*The Second Sex* 249).

There has been a long history of exclusion or marginalization of women from the significant cultural constructs and discourses. Traditionally, like Epic, Drama has also been regarded as an elevated and serious literary activity for which women, because of their 'lighter brains' and quotidian concerns have been considered less capable of doing justice to the genre. The total proportion of Women's Drama might not be very large; there is a wide range of work that can be considered under the rubric of Indian Women's Drama.

Tripurari Sharma has been at the forefront of theatre-based activism in India for almost thirty years. She has brought a changed outlook towards gender discrimination. According to Sharma, theatre is not just a stage but a means to share and talk about the lives of women and bring in the changes in the outlook of people towards women. She devoted herself completely to the cause of women and explored the potential of drama as a tool for discussion on the problems and issues related to women. She appropriated the Street Theatre which has emerged as a strong socio-political medium where women audiences could relate to various issues. She founded and set up a theatre company called Alarippu in 1983, an organization



that provided a formal base to her work. Her method is to deal with locally relevant social issues through her plays.

Sharma's approach to the issues of peace, women's rights, human rights and the right to information has helped crack the traditional barrier between high art and grassroots communication. Through her performances the public opinion was evolved at the grassroots level. The plays she has directed over the years are an integral part of secular consciousness. She has written and directed plays like *Bahu*, *Birsa Munda*, *Aks Paheli*, *Banjh Ghati*, *Sazaa*, and *Kath Ki Gadi*. Some of her plays have been translated into English, Urdu, Gujarati and French. Her scripts for films like *Mirch Masala* and *Hazaar Chaurasasi Ki Maa* won a wide acclaim. She was honoured by Sanskriti Award, Delhi in 1982 and by the Delhi Natya Sangh in 1990. Her writing is largely dedicated to giving voice to those who are not often heard and discussed. She is concerned with the exploration of the inner world of the protagonists- their desire, loss, betrayal, fulfillment, dignity, freedom and the associated conflicts therein.

The play, *Bahu* was written in 1979 as the author writes it was based on her father's own aunt. It is a slap to those hypocrites who live in the bubble of idealism. The play revolves around the whole one year seasonal cycle, the festivals, sowing, harvesting and then autumn and winter. Social taboos play a crucial role in the creation of the typical picture of ideal women stature in the Indian society. Umavati is the main female protagonist in the play who stands out of the queue in order to strengthen her own standing in this patriarchal society. Society sets certain behavioral patterns and norms which a female child is bound to abide by. All the old and obsolete rules are forced upon females considering them no more than a slave of expectations. They are forced to prove themselves worthy of a price tag or dowry. Rejection and dejection are the two major standpoints which are juxtaposed in the Indian society.

*Bahu* is a socially acclaimed play which throws light on the female problems and forces the readers to introspect. The play gives the reflection of all the atrocities faced by a female during the course of her life. She has to play different roles at the different stages of her life in which society leaves no scope of mistake. She has to struggle all her life just to give happiness and satisfactory quotient to others but she is robbed off her happiness every time. Why? Why her verdict does not matter? Readers are bound to ponder upon the cruel and harsh realities. Social stratification and identity crises are the two irreversible phenomena present in our society. Without them the society will be dysfunctional and entire social system will collapse. Women continuously run and struggle for their identity and standing in the society. Why are they treated as second class citizens? Why all their desires are crushed ruthlessly? Why are they taught to compromise for everything? Why their feelings are not taken care of? All these are the frequent asked questions by female. They are the ones who



sacrifice all their dreams and goals for the sake of family so why are they treated as an alien in their own personal domain. There is no equality between the two opposite sexes.

A woman is always defined in respect to man as the female protagonist in the play is simply addressed as Bahu (Daughter-in-law). She is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always assigned a relative position. She is always thought of lacking in certain qualities, as being marked by a natural defectiveness. Not only due to identity crises but also due to ignorance woman suffers a lot. She does not have any verdict or saying. The remark made by Bahu (Daughter-in-law) justifies these allegations. As she says, “I have nothing to say..... Whom am I to speak” (*Bahu* 333). In patriarchal society, the standard of womanhood is set by men. The traditional role assigned to her was that of a dutiful wife and mother. The whole code of morality for a woman was laid down by man. Marriage and the ideal of family life were reinforced as a moral. As Kate Millett rightly points out: “patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male and the power is exerted directly or indirectly in civil or domestic life to constrain women” (Millett 48). In our society, the role of a woman is confined to be passive and as sexual object in order to please man’s minds or bodies. She is not an individual in her own right but a medium through which man aspires for self-affirmation and self-realization. The culture that created ‘Sita’ and ‘Savitri’ has denied the rights of existence to woman as daughter, sister, wife and mother etc. She exists in bi-polar world: on the one hand, she is subordinated to the masculine world of her husband and on the other, committed to the assertion of her womanhood, her female ego.

A woman is the victim of all forms of social stratification of which gender and class affect her the most. A woman in Indian society is doubly marginalized first as a woman and second as a victim of social stratifications. Marriage has become a forced institution in general. Woman has lost her status in the society and is bound to live on the terms and the conditions of others. Woman has nothing of her own as she depends upon her father before marriage, her husband after marriage and her son in old age. As S K De in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. II says, “To woman is assigned the care of the home. Family being her creation, her association with man in every sphere is stressed. Her unassociated individuality is ignored” (De 321). The social constructs have played a crucial role in the creation of the typical image of women in the Indian society. Society sets certain behaviours and norms for a child which determine his/her gender. Along with the gender, class also divides the society in different hierarchies. Pascal Gisbert, in his book, *Fundamentals of Sociology* defines class as “a category of group of persons having a definite status in society which permanently determines their relations to other groups” (Gisbert 367).

A woman is judged only on two scales – love and lust. Bahu is widowed very soon after her marriage. One day her husband comes home drunk and she does not open the door. He goes



away and dies. Nobody knows what happens to him. The play opens with the news of his death. Bahu is a woman who everyone tries to make feel guilty and she fights back against the guilt. She also has a relationship with her brother-in-law after the death of her husband. But he cannot marry her because they are Brahmins. Both are trapped in caste and class. Bahu's emotions... and then she is going to have a child. The brother-in law suggests that they do away with the child and she refuses. As after the death of her husband Bahu was left alone with suppressed desire. In the arms of Ramdutt, she found her comfort but soon her misunderstanding was clear when Ramdutt turns her proposal of marriage down saying that he cannot marry such a female. As it is clear with the conversation between Ramdutt and Bahu (Daughter-in-law):

*Daughter-in-law: If it is so you could marry me.*

*Ramdutt: My brother's wife? You're senseless. We don't. As Brahmins.*

*Daughter-in-law: I may not be your wife, but soon I will be mother of your child.*

*Ramdutt: I sensed it*

*Daughter-in-law: Listen, let's run away from here.*

*Ramdutt: How so, what will become of us. Everything is here – I mean the fields, the land – I owe myself to them (after a pause) we could call a midwife. She'll help us. I mean, to have it done away with. And it's certain she'll be silent. Or go away somewhere with her for a few days. What do you say? The house will have no stain. (Bahu 331-332)*

It is clear from the above conversation that every act is justified in the context of males and is a sin if it is committed by a female. Her desires and expectations matter nothing. She is no more a puppet whose string is handed over from person to person in the course of her life time. A widower is allowed to remarry at any point of time but when it comes to a widow, she is forced to live her life alone no matter how harsh it could be? She is considered as a producer of an heir or successor for future. It has been 70 years since India gained freedom but unfortunately women are still in the clutches of narrow thinking of the society.

In the patriarchal society, the female identity finds no place of its own but the one in relation to man, the notion of male superiority has taken many forms – paternal tyranny against female child in the family, male supremacy in the state and dismissal of the intellectual capability of the females in the intellectual fields. This allowed to develop them no identity of their own, whether individual or social. They have always been passive victims of male oppression. The plays of Tripurari Sharma not only take note of the exploitation of women in patriarchal system but also record the change that is taking place. Women's search for self under the oppressive forces of patriarchy becomes one of her major concerns. Through the



depiction of the female quest for identity, Sharma explores the inner workings of the minds of her characters that are attempting to forge a better fulfilling survival for themselves. They are engaged in trying to find out their hidden selves through re-examination and self-analysis.

The play, *Bahu* deals with the subjugation of women. Bahu leaves her marital house to not only escape from the claustrophobic haveli but also a rejection of the values that go with it. She desires to establish her own world and her own identity. As Indira Kulashreshtha rightly observes, "After centuries of social stagnation, the Indian woman is now encouraged to come back to the mainstream of social life and resume her rightful place." (Kulashreshtha 5) In rejecting the patriarchal world/ and her claims to the house, Bahu has in fact laid stronger claims to life. When after the passage of time she sees Ramdutt who recognizing her says:

**Ramdutt:** *Listen. Listen please. Look here... you (she does not turn) Just once...*

**Daughter-in-law:** *(pauses) My name is Umavati.*

**Ramdutt:** *Umavati? Yes, yes... of course... (Bahu 363)*

The woman known as "Bahu" throughout the play finally articulates her name and claims her identity. Ramdutt asks her to return but she refuses. He then asks for the child, but she is adamant. He cannot possess what he has disowned at birth. The child belongs to her and her alone. She walks away firm and calm, a little sad but no longer angry – a quiet woman transcending her destiny. Like 'Shakuntala', she maintains a distance and seeks no reconciliation, but unlike 'Shakuntala' she takes a claim to the child. We can also draw a parallel of Bahu with 'Sita' who preferred to be absorbed by the earth rather than return to Ayodhya. In the end of the play, when Ramdutt requests Bahu to come back and she refuses, it shows her strong-mindedness and her identity. As it is reflected:

Ramdutt: You come now. The ruins will breathe again. I'll accept the child in front of everyone.

**Daughter-in-law:** *I stand on my feet. So that's something.*

**Ramdutt:** *But you are happy?*

**Daughter-in-law:** *Go home now. You won't understand. It's getting late,*

**Ramdutt;** *go now. I am no longer within your understanding. I stand outside of it. (Bahu 364-365)*

Bahu grew introspective, developing a pattern of thought which instead of embroiling her in property and family feuds, took her beyond it. She rejects her claim to the house in order to lay a stronger claim to life. This was not an escape from the haveli in which she lived but a



rejection of the values that were associated with it. Bahu discovers herself through this disassociation and a new chapter begins for her.

The playwright, Tripurari Sharma has depicted the entrapment of female characters in an unyielding, traditional society and has given voice to women who refuse to live by disabling definitions that mark them inferior sex. Thus, the play *Bahu* portrays the story of a conventional lower class woman who encounters various hardships after the death of her husband. When the play begins, Bahu has no name and no identity apart from being a daughter-in-law but when her family throws her out of the house, she shows resistance. The play, *Bahu* depicts her journey from nobody to somebody. It is her struggle towards emancipation and identity. It deals with the oppression of women. In this way, the dramatist gives voice to a group that has been oppressed by class and gender.

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