

Ashes & Fire: Newly Emerging Notion of A Female Protagonist

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Abstract

If you consider a woman less pure after you have touched her, maybe you should take a look at your own hands.

-Kajia Sabbath

Since times immemorial, a lot has been said and heard about women's chastity and purity. Since the times of Ramayana and Mahabharata, the notion of an ideal woman has been extremely framed and inflexible. A woman touched by another man other than her spouse is seen as impure. Society boycotts her and she faces a united rejection of not just outsiders but her own family members. This is the reason that adds to the misery of rape victims. A girl who is sexually violated, gets abused by society for losing her virginity, as if it lies in her control to protect herself from the gang of rapists and scoundrels. People are more concerned about the hypocritical idea of her impurity than the degradation of their own society. In such a context, it's unimaginable to perceive a woman like Suvridha as the protagonist of a novel. A society that can be so insensitive towards rape survivors, would never take a second to declare a woman with multiple sexual partners as a harlot. Ours is a culture where Seeta and Parvati are ideal women with a strong character. Our culture also had the notions of an ideal man fighting to preserve his wife's honor and protecting her from all sorts of troubles, earning to feed and fulfill all the desires of his family members. However, this notion has changed with changing times. Today we talk of equality in men-women relationship. Both work and both earn. This has become the mantra of financial stability in the 21st century. But what has not changed is the notion of women's sexuality. If a man has an extra marital affair, the family tries to sort out the whole affair through communication but in case a woman has an extra marital affair, it becomes an unpardonable offense. A man sleeping with multiple women is okay but a woman having multiple sexual partners is characterless and a slut. This is hypocrisy. What is unethical for one gender should be unethical for another gender too. If we give a second opportunity to our heroes, the same must be given to our females.

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Therefore, it is high time to change the concept of an ideal woman.. Ashes & Fire is a controversial novel that introduces the notion of a new kind of a female protagonist who is not virtuous, not chaste and free enough to commit errors. This raises the questions if the novelist is trying to justify the acts of adultery and in chastity or is he attempting to create a space in a society that allows people to learn from their errors and transform themselves into a better version of themselves. This paper would attempt to find the answers of such questions.

Novelist Vikas Sharma has successfully made his name as a writer of contemporary society and scenario. His novels are relatable and value based. He is a progressive writer, far from the orthodox customs of the community. He may be criticised for writing the story of a woman with extremely active sexual desires but will also be admired for giving a second chance to a woman character.

Keywords

Marriage, sexual relations, gang, crime, money, earnings, sex, education, protection, challenges.

India has always been a motherland of not just male combatants but female combatants too. It has produced plenty of warriors fighting and sacrificing their lives for the prosperity and progress of our land. When India was shackled under the clutches of the British empire, it was not just men who fought for its freedom but women also participated with full enthusiasm and vigor to liberate their motherland from foreign invaders. There were an enormous number of women freedom fighters. The misfortune is that most of them such as Bikaji Cama, Matangini Hazra and uncountable others have been forgotten. All whom we remember for their gallantry are very few. These names include Rani Laxami Bai, Sarojini Naidu, Rani Chennamma, etc. These were the active frontline warriors, facing the enemies with their courage and love for their motherland. There have been many examples of mothers and wives protecting their families and husbands. Most popular among them is that of Savitri who brought her husband back from the gloom of death. Suvidha, our protagonist, is also one such woman who not just protects her family but the whole country by killing serious gangsters who pose a threat to society. The only reason behind the controversy of her heroism is that she is sexually active and does not hesitate to satisfy her sexual desires outside of wedlock. This article may ignite opposition for comparing Suvidha with great and chaste women such as Laxmibai and Sarojini Naidu. Therefore, it needs to be made crystal clear that this paper never dares to draw a comparison rather it endeavors to portray and appreciate the gallantry of a female protagonist and partially supports novelist Vikas Sharma's notion of a newly emerging woman protagonist.

Novel Ashes & Fire presents Suvidha in a positive light by making her the protagonist. She is not a perfect character with a spotless personality; rather she has a whole list of errors and mistakes in her name. Suvidha's courage and patience even in adverse circumstances make her different from common people. She never loses her calm and faces every catastrophe with her best capabilities. But what makes her objectionable is her reluctance to develop into a chaste woman. Readers

may condemn the novelist for making such a harlot kind of a character the protagonist of his text but one thing that the readers should not miss is the last part of the novel where Suvidha undergoes self introspection in form of a dream, witnessing three Gods who raise multiple questions and her failure to answer any of them as a result of her weak character. This is an anagnorisis where she regrets for the first time for losing the most essential part of one's life which is conduct. This reflects Vikas Sharma's real ideology that he does not advocate adultery; rather he looks for a way to provide sufficient space for a character to realize his/her shortcomings and modify them.

Suvidha, a postgraduate student of English Literature, lives with her father alone after the death of her mother. She is a beautiful girl and marries Samyak who likes her and whom she admires too. Samyak is a middle class man who works as an Engineer in the Irrigation Department. Suvidha's father approves of the marriage solely because he respects his daughter's choice and wants to see her happy. After their marriage, Seth Deena Nath (Suvidha's father) gives huge sums of money and expensive gifts like a car to the couple to help them settle in Lucknow and begin a new life. In Lucknow, quite a few colleagues of Samyak get fascinated by Suvidha's beauty and make advances towards her but she reprimands them.

“Samyak's boss Swapna Das admires her beauty openly with lecherous eyes, she snubs him “Sir mind your own business and don't stoop to a low level. “ In another instance when Khayali Ram, a senior engineer tries to overpower her, she gives a severe blow to him that he had to take medicines for a week to get cured.” (p-13)

It is evident from these lines that Suvidha was not a woman of spoilt character since the beginning, rather circumstances and unsatisfied desires made her a characterless lad. Another crucial point that seeks reader's attention is the fact that Suvidha does not depend upon her husband for her security like a typical Hindi cinema heroine, in fact she has the guts to defend herself by making use of the skills that she learnt in NCC. She is not a helpless young lady shouting for aid rather she is her own protector.

In their short stay of a few years in Lucknow, they had three kids; two sons- Arshdeep and Mandeep and one daughter- Kaharika. Then Samyak got transferred to Ghaziabad where he purchased a bungalow with the help of Deena Nath and began planning for their happy future. However they could not realize the insecurities of living in Ghaziabad because it was a city where crime rate was extremely high. After a month of their settlement in the city, the gang of Jaggu, Kashi, Tora and Soni came to their bungalow and demanded one lakh rupees as

extortion money. Samyak refused to give and Jaggu warned him to arrange money within the next three days otherwise be ready to suffer the consequences. This was enough for Samyak to lose his peace of mind but Suvidha acted smartly. The following conversation between Suvidha and Samyak displays how the roles are shifting and gender lines getting blurred.

“Suvidha - Then, think and plan for a bold action. We have to be in job as no second transfer is possible so soon. It’s a question of do or die. Nails have got to be trimmed monthly.

Samyak- That’s the question. What to do next? I don’t have friends in the police department to help me.

Suvidha- Police officers help those who help themselves.” (p-18)

These lines are the best illustration of Suvidha’s boldness and strength whereas Samyak’s helplessness and weakness to face the villains. Later on she shot Jaggu when he revisited to extort money. Samyak was terrified after this whole scene and wanted to seek transfer from Ghaziabad but Suvidha resisted. As ill luck would have it, Samyak got killed by Tora and Soni to avenge the death of their leader. Soni got killed in the police encounter; Kashi and Tora were arrested and they failed to get bail. This was the turning point in Suvidha’s life and she prepared herself for a life of struggle as she was the supporter of her three kids, old and weak mother in law and father. Suvidha was not among the losers. She was indeed a winner. She had realized that in order to ensure the security of her family she would have to end the remaining two gangsters. She hatched the plot and got it executed with the help of inspector B.L. Rawat and finally both Tora and Kashi were killed. She became the reason for the end of the whole gang. She not just avenged her husband’s murder but also ensured the safety of her family. This is today’s nari shakti. Conventionally, it is the woman who is portrayed as a feeble, powerless and dependent character crying for support and security but the novel has turned the tables.

Another instance showcasing Suvidha’s courage and presence of mind is when she saves her son Mandeep. Mandeep joined the jewelry shop a few years ago and had to pay Siddhu and Monti for the purchase of stolen goods. The tensions rose because they didn’t feel satisfied with Mandeep’s trade. Mandeep shared the whole situation with Suvidha who asked him to keep a pistol with him every time and guided him in the following way

“Villains remain villains and can’t be trusted at all. They understand only one language and it is the language of the gun.” (p-170)

Motivated by mother's advice, Mandeep killed Monti and shared the whole story with Suvidha. She understood her son and sorted out the whole affair with inspector B.L. Rawat's help. She arranged her son's marriage clearing all odds and troubles.

She was also a wonderful administrator who maintained Suvidha Technical Institute and provided her students with all forms of new technologies, created labs in her school in order to make sure that her kids along with all other students in the institute get the best education. She emerged as an independent woman who managed both the domestic and the outside world. This picture of Suvidha so far is the glamorous one but it is here when novelist Vikas Sharma brings the twist. He doesn't make his protagonist a flawless character. He talks about how Suvidha often neglected her kids' upbringing that should have been a major concern of a mother. Novel shows how Deena Nath looked after Suvidha's kids and their education. Sometimes it appears as if Suvidha becomes a self centered woman with an I, ME, MYSELF attitude, least bothered about her own kids. While sharing bed with Ganesh Salil, Satyendra, Harsh Pal Harsh and Dr. Vinod Grover, she hardly thinks about how her actions would affect her children. She never thinks about her father who has always been with her in all her thicks and thins. She leaves Aayush to suffer and changes her room, refusing to live with a half mad man. These acts of Suvidha compel a reader to think of Suvidha as a lusty woman who can aspire and give physical love only. She left Aayush alone when he needed her the most. Providing excellent and expensive medical care is not enough for a patient. What he needs the most in his illness is the time and care of his family which Suvidha failed to give to Aayush. Undoubtedly, she is a winner whom no gangster could terrorise. Both her husbands were cowards. Neither could Samyak face the situation bravely nor could her second husband Aayush. Aayush even lost his mind and became half mad in fear of the gangsters who extorted money from him. Suvidha underwent all the dark phases of her life alone except for her father's support but then he was also an old man and had his own limitations. Therefore, her bravery and courage are non controversial. She never gave up to any of the external forces that dared to threaten her but to her misfortune she lost the battle to her own inner self. What defeated her was the lust and extremely active sexual passions. She became a slave to her desires and continued falling down into the moss. She had intercourse with her student Vijay Shekhar followed by Aayush, Ganesh Salil, Satyendra, Harsh Pal Harsh and Dr. Vinod Grover.

Novel's criticism of Suvidha's adulterous behaviour is evident through the fact that she loses her peace of mind after getting sexually active with so many men.

“But her sleep was disturbed by the spirit of Samyak . The spirit asked her-why did she forget even his birthday and offered no donations on his death anniversary? How could she forget him while enjoying sex with other males? How could she ignore his mother in her daily life? How was she the custodian of the morals of the children? Who would take care of children if she led a life of a slut? Shame, Shame, Shame! Worthless woman! Repent and confess your guilt!” (p- 118)

Suvidha becomes restless still ignores the dream. She falls further and eventually faces God in her vision. This is the time when she realizes the intensity of her faults and their irreversibility. In order to compensate for her mistakes, she begins helping others. She provided salary to her staff even in the times of Covid epidemic and donated for charity. Novel ends on Suvidha’s another act of courage when she finally ends the gang of Aslam.

One of the most important qualities of an artist is to talk about the contemporary world and its situations. Novelist Vikas Sharma deserves applause for his quality to accommodate the scenes and situations of his contemporary society. All his novels such as *Raah Ke Patthar*, *IAS Today*, *498A : Fears & Dreams* never fail to identify the problems of the present world. What he writes in his novel is a very prevalent scenario in the metropolitan cities where men and women are very successful but still lead a life of stagnation in the personal world. Failing relationships, breaking family ties, increasing divorce rate and percentage of extra marital affairs, poor mental condition of those kids whose parents are the least bothered about them (because every kid does not have Deena Nath to look after them) seek the concern of the social scholars to evaluate the future of such kind of a deteriorating social fabric.

Conclusively, a novel is a mirror to those who are distracted and lost in the haziness of this unpredictable world. It calls forth for self introspection to analyze the fall of oneself. No matter how courageous and gallant you are, you yourself would never be at peace with your stained character, let go of society. It’s not just women’s chastity that needs to be preserved, rather men should also become faithful and devoted to their partners. Characters such as Vinod Grover and Aayush represent those lecherous men who readily seduce other women, completely forgetting about their wives. Therefore, this novel intends to evoke a sense of responsibility and dedication for a relationship to bloom. Moreover it also goes against a society that has always been extreme with women. It will either place women on a pedestal and worship them like Goddesses or it will bring them down to the level of harlots. There is no space for mediocres. *Ashes & Fire* by Professor Vikas Sharma seeks to

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Pragya Awasthi

create that middle space where women can commit errors and still be the leading protagonist. It also limits itself from censoring women such as Suvidha and believes in giving them another chance of self modification.

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