

## ALIENATING INDIAN CULTURE: READING SYMBOLICALLY SINGH'S *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY* AND DEVI'S *WOODROSE*

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### Abstract

*The settling down of the Aryans in the various parts of the world developed the idea of joint family of which India became a follower thus making it the traditional culture of the country. This system can be seen in India from the ancient times itself. But the coming of English education and infiltration of western culture shook this system and transformed it into that of the nuclear family system. The shift in paradigm caused discomfort to the older generation and they were unable to adjust; even though they tried, they perished in the attempt.*

*Through their short stories, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Woodrose* respectively, Khushwant Singh and Abburi Chayya Devi says how western culture influenced Indian youth and how they started neglecting their native culture, and became, as Macaulay said in his *Minutes*, Indians in blood and colour but British in other aspects like thought and morals. The grandmother and mother in Singh's and Devi's stories respectively become the victims of the shift from the joint family system to the nuclear family system. Though the grandmother created a world of her own in the town where she lived till her death, the mother was not able to do so. When she tried to get adjusted to the new system, she becomes a no one not only in the family but in the society itself.*

The most important element of a society is its smallest unit, family. This institution is a necessity for every individual as well as the society. The development of a human being starts with his coming in contact with other human beings, and this process first takes place in the family. His constant contact and communication with the family develops in him the qualities which are useful not only for the development of personality, but the society itself, thus helping a lot in the continuation of culture from one generation to the next. The genetic traits and characters “are formed in the emotional development of the child in the family environment, in the interpersonal relationships of the family” (Prakash 279). The various qualities like cooperation, self- sacrifice, service to humanity, and so on develop in a man from his interaction in the family. “Thus in the family, the biological, psychological and sociological forces meet in giving the individual his start in life” (Prakash 279).

When the Indian family structure is taken into consideration it gets evident that the system was that of a joint family and could be seen from 1500 BC. The joint family system originated with the Aryans settling down in the different parts of the world. Due to the absence of easy communication and travel they lived together in the same place which resulted in the formation of the joint family system.

It is important to note that from the ancient times itself the Indian family gave importance to certain values like extending hospitality to guest. In ancient India one of the important duties to be performed by the householder was the performance of the five daily sacrifices through which he performed his duty towards the ancient sages, towards his ancestors, towards the gods, towards all creatures and towards the guests. From this it gets evident that the Indian society, gave importance to everything live.

With the rapid changes that came in the society the structure of the Indian family also changed. This change greatly affected the people in various manners. Now the condition is such that the joint family system, the traditional system of India, is a dying institution and it is the nuclear family system that is having strong grip in the place. J. P. Desai says that, the nuclear family in India is a stage in the joint family cycle in that, simple families once come together and form the joint family, and when it reaches a particular level, the family again breaks up to form simple families. But this paradigm shift has caused great problems for the people, especially children and the geriatrics. In the busy life of the nuclear family, since no great emphasis is given to emotional attachments, the people feel alienated, which leads to frustration and low tolerance level. Also the members are not able to have free talk with each other, which results in the failure of the family in moulding the personality of the coming generations.

Some sociologists have observed that some of the many reasons for the degeneration of the joint family include the coming of modern education, enlightenment of women- to a certain extend- and the influence of the Western culture.

The lawgivers of the Gupta period opined that girls should be married off before they attained the age of puberty, as a result of which no heed was paid to their proper education. But it should also be noted that there were women who have composed hymns in the Rgvedic period. Even then there was a limit to their education. Some duties were expected from their part which included serving the members of the family in the best manner as possible; the women should have great self- control and also the art to manage all domestic affairs. Later it can be seen that during the time of the British rule in India and after that, women got empowered and strong with the education that they got which led to the development of the society. In today's world some such educated women are aware of their rights and refuse to submit themselves to their in- laws.

Modern education and the influence of the West played major roles in the increased number of nuclear families in India. In the past an Indian gave importance not to himself but to the society. He made his goals in such a way that it was the goal of the society and not his alone. The achievement of this goal helped in the development of the whole society. This was the ideal of collectivism which also aims at “ fitting into the group, behaving in ways that are in line with social norms, group solidarity, and gaining a sense of identity from being part of the group” (Psychology glossary). But with the influence of modern thoughts, collectivism got replaced with individualism. Individualism propagates the idea that a person living in a particular society should strive to improve his or her own interests and try to achieve them without taking into consideration the interests of the society. This area of knowledge says that the interest of the individual should gain triumph over those held superior by the society. In the case of an individualist, he or she may be completely opposed to those philosophies of the society which propagates the idea of sacrificing self- interest of the individual for a higher social cause. So with the coming of this principle even members living in the same family, or rather under the same roof became selfish, and what was important for them was their existence and no heed was paid to the other members, not even the immediate kins. One of the policies of the joint family system was to care for the other members in the family and protect them from outsiders. It should come to notice that when the father died, all responsibilities fell on the eldest son and he “fully realized his responsibility and arranged for the proper bringing up and education of younger brothers and sisters, not minding the inconvenience which he had to bear in discharging his duty towards his younger brothers and sisters” (Prakash 283).

But when individualism spread all over the society this concept changed and one got completely concerned about saving his or her own skin from danger and not to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the traditional system. After this came the idea of existentialism, whose major proponent was the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, according to whom, it is the responsibility of the individual to make his own life meaningful, and

completing the full cycle of life sincerely, happily, and passionately, even in the midst of existential obstacles like despair, alienation, boredom and so on. This philosophy also, to a certain extent had a major hold on the individuals' mind in that, people became conscious about their own lives and making their lives happy and satisfactory became the one and only goal. In search for a happy life they started discarding and avoiding those principles which chained their freedom, and among them were the principles of the joint family system. For their own liberation people started preferring nuclear family system to the joint family system which soon became their culture. When people achieved modern education, gaining a job became their major interest as a result of which they settled down in the cities away from their joint family. These people successfully achieved their interests and were not willing to sacrifice it for the maintenance of the traditional system. In the modern times joint family is degenerating in India as some of its citizens follow the policy of the nuclear family; "me, my wife and my children". They are not even willing to sacrifice a little for those members of the family who are old or sick.

A change in the pattern of family system in India is caused also due to the influence of the Western education and culture over the people of the country. The western mode of education was completely different from that of the Indian mode. In the Indian context, education was meant mainly for making a man virtuous; it was the means that give light and power to the individual. The education was given not only for the well-being of the individual, but for the society as a whole. By making an individual perfect, he will become useful to the society. The major aim of education can be understood from the convocation address by a teacher to his student:

"O pupil, speak the truth, follow the 'dharma', do not neglect the study of Vedic literature and preach the principles discussed there to other people. Be careful about giving birth to worthy children. Do not neglect the activities which help you in speaking the truth, in acting according to your 'dharma', in maintaining yourself in good health and which bring you fame in this world. Do not neglect doing your duty towards mother, father, teacher and guests. Follow only good actions of mine. Do not follow other activities of mine...."

(Prakash 324).

So the major aim of education was the welfare of a single family and the whole society. A student taught in this manner will be able to protect the cultural heritage of the society and he will pass it on to the coming generations. Interpersonal communication was of great significance in India. That was why a student was instructed to behave politely and amiable to his guests, as a householder.

The process of teaching and learning was different in India, and Kautilya divided the process into seven which included "paying attention to the words of the teacher, listening the

words carefully, understanding the words, learning them by heart, discussing the meaning of the words, understanding the full implication of the words, understanding the implied sense of the words” (Prakash 329). Thus in the Indian way of education, the student became mature enough to distinguish between good and bad with great intelligence. The moral sense developed due to education makes in him a feeling of sympathy to his fellow men, and also makes him useful to the whole society. But with the process of colonization by the West, India changed, and the system of education also faced a transformation.

The Christian missionaries during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in stood for the teaching of Western literature and culture in India, using English as the medium. As the East India Company wanted Indians who were well- versed in English language along with the vernacular languages, the Western culture was introduced in the country. “The main factor which tipped the scale in favor of English language and Western literature was the economic factor. Indians wanted a system of education which could help them to earn their livelihood” (Grover 343). The letter written by Raja Ram Mohan Roy is an important milestone in the introduction of Western education in India. In his letter to Lord Amherst in 1823 he wrote that if the aim of the British Government was the improvement of the native population, the Government is expected to promote an enlightened system of education involving Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and so on. In response to this letter the government decided to spread the study of English as well as the oriental languages. Even though this did great help to the people, it also, to a certain extent, destroyed the native culture.

The introduction of English education in India was such that, only the elite layer of the society got the opportunity to learn the language, and such people showed contempt to the native culture as they were forcibly made to believe that India did not have a culture and civilization of its own. If the country had any, it was derived from the invaders. The major aim of the British in doing this was to create a group of people who will support them in looting the country. The words of J. N. Farquhar are significant here:

““The new educational policy of the Government created during these years the modern educated class of India. These men are who think and speak in English habitually, who are proud of their citizenship in the British empire, who are devoted to English literature, and whose intellectual life has been almost entirely formed by the thought of the West...”” (Yahoo). With the coming of this sort of attitude from the part of the British and the Indians, there was the blurring of the people’s awareness of the country’s history and culture.

Macaulay in 1835 wrote in his famous *Minute* the aim of the educational policy in India as creating a group of persons who should be “ “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”” (Grover 344). The people who were taught in the British system started believing that their native culture was below average and one

which does not accept development. They wish to be known as the products of the 'fully developed' culture which actually is far removed from them. Now also, this attitude can be seen in many Indians, especially those who migrate to the West.

So the influence of the British culture completely changed India in terms mainly of family and education. Abburi Chaya Devi's *Woodrose* and Khushwant Singh's *The Portrait of a Lady* symbolically tell how a change came in the relation between a mother and a son, and a grandmother and a grandson, with the impact of Westernization,

The mother in *Woodrose* and the grandmother in *The Portrait of a Lady* pass through the same experience. Both are spending their old age in solitude, in a city. When the mother is presented as in the city for a long time, it can be seen that the grandmother was uprooted from the village to the city. Another similarity between these two ladies is their relationship with the son and the grandson. The grandson was very much attached to the grandmother, who took care of him in the village, and the son was very much attached to the mother and he disliked her being scolded even by her husband. But with the English education that both of them got, the mother and grandmother were alienated.

The grandmother in *The Portrait of a Lady* can be considered as a typical traditional Indian lady. When the grandson was a small child his parents left him with her in the village, and they settled down in the city. As a result of this, the grandson and the grandmother were always together; "my grandmother and I were good friends" (Singh 2). So the child got the opportunity to live in an atmosphere of a joint family- even though it was not- hearing the stories told by the grandmother, and he also started his schooling in the traditional manner. The grandmother taught him the basics of life such as, "she said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing- song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart" (Singh 2). The school resembled that of the traditional Indian school, where the teacher was a priest, who made the students sing the alphabets and the prayer in a chorus. The grandmother was happy living in the village with the grandson. It is said that in India in the past, the householder and his wife performed the five daily sacrifices, and among them was the sacrifice towards living beings. The grandmother in Singh's story can be seen as a considerate woman to the living things when the author shows her as giving chapattis to the street dogs everyday when she and her grandson returned from school. All these were done in order to train the grandson in the traditional Indian style so that when he grows up he will be a perfect householder, and will be able to pass on this cultural heritage to the coming generations. The grandmother was guided by the principles of the joint family system which stood for the preservation of the cultural heritage of India. But soon it can be seen in the story that the grandmother had to face a change in her life regarding the culture. She and her grandson were uprooted to the city where the child's parents lived. The grandmother was not comfortable in the place. In the village when her grandson was in school, the grandmother

used to sit inside the temple reading scriptures. But in the town she could not even accompany the child to his school, as he was studying in an English school. So the culture changed to another about which the grandmother knew nothing. In the city also she showed her respect to living beings by spending her time in the balcony feeding the sparrows with crumbs. The close bond between her grandson and herself was gone. The boy was not able to communicate with the grandmother as he did earlier, as most of his conversations were filled with English words and this created an unbridgeable gap between the boy and his grandmother. "... she could not help me with my lessons. She did not believe in the things they taught at the English school and was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures" (Singh 3). The influence and impact of English education frightened the grandmother. So the English education resulted in the detachment of the boy from the grandmother, and his attachment was towards the new culture, the influence of which makes him go abroad for sometime.

In *Woodrose* the author presents before the readers a mother who spends her old age with her son in the city, where she is not comfortable. While in the city, she thinks about the village life, and tells that, "I also know there is a great difference between growing old in the village and growing old in a town" (Devi). The old woman presented here is a victim of the shift in paradigm from the joint family system to the nuclear family system. In the house there resides her son, his wife, and children, but even then the mother feels alienated. She spends her time sitting in the balcony and watching the passers-by. The typical attitude of the nuclear family is presented when the mother says, "in this big city everyone is for himself; no one seems to care for others. The neighbours don't call on us and when they do, there is no informal air or intimacy" (Devi). The mother, who had spent most of her time in the village, can never get adjusted to the new culture.

In Devi's story what the daughter-in-law introduces is a strange flower- woodrose- of which the mother is ignorant. Complete neglect of Indian elements is seen when the son and his wife accidentally pulls away the plant whose seeds the mother had sown. The woodrose creates discomfort in the mother's mind. She thinks "but why should these flowering plants we have never seen or heard of be grown at all" (Devi). The problems regarding the new modes of relations can be understood with the description of the flower. The woodrose first blooms with yellow colour, in the shape of a bell. But soon from the middle of the bell blooms other flowers, the colour of sandalwood and shape of roses. The 'specialty' is that they have no fragrance. Like this is the culture of nuclear families. As the daughter-in-law said about the flower, the nuclear family is beautiful to look at from a distance; but when one gets into it, it gets evident that the system gives no comforting fragrance to its inmates. The situation in which the mother lives in is similar to this.

In *Woodrose* and *The Portrait of a Lady* it is seen that the son and the grandson who were attached to the mother and grandmother respectively soon detached from them and got attached to something which both the elderly could not accept. Both of them embraced the Western culture.

In the traditional Indian society it was customary that the elderly should pass on the Indian culture to the coming generations. This, they imparted through their actions. In both the stories it can be noted that even though both the old women tried to impart the culture to the younger generations, the latter paid no attention to it. Khushwant Singh, in the story says that the grandmother used to utter prayers while getting the boy ready to go to school, "...in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart. I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it" (Singh 2). Same is the condition of the mother in Devi's story. The mother wishes to talk to her grandson and granddaughter, telling them stories. But she herself thinks that, "how can my grandson and granddaughter like my gossip? They spend their time reading comics" (Devi 99). The mother understands that her old real stories are not good enough to make the grandchildren happy. They live in the world of comics, where there is no reality, a world different from the real world, which creates an unbridgeable gap between human relations.

People in India in the past had in their hearts, the ideal of collectivism as a result of which they strived for the welfare of other people as well. The advice given to the student by the teacher was not to neglect his duties towards mother, father, teacher and guests. This, the teacher says is in order not to make his student follow the ideals of individualism. As a result of this, the man never grudged when the whole household duties fell on his shoulders with the passing away of the eldest member. He found it his duty to take care of the family. But with the passage of time individualism crept upon the Indian culture, like the tendrils of the woodrose plant, which completely hid the ideals of collectivism. Now with this change no one cares of the wellbeing of others, and one is concerned only about himself and sometimes about his family, which he prefers to include only his wife and children. In *Woodrose* Gopalam who was very much concerned about his mother now pays no attention to her. When he cuts down the woodrose plant he never counts his mother's attachment to it. He doesn't even have any concern for his wife, and that is why she asks her mother-in-law "would he listen to me?" (Devi 99). Gopalam is concerned only about himself and his comforts, which transform him into an individualist. His staying in America for three years made him embrace a new culture. As a child he used to tell his mother that when he grows up he would never make her work hard in the kitchen. He did as he promised, not due to the concern towards her, but now he dislikes her mode of cooking which included so much spice. She is now useless to the family.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* too the grandmother gets the feeling that she is of no use to the family, which may be one of the reasons why she creates friendship with the sparrows. She knows that as long as she is alive she will be of use to the birds, for she feeds them. She will never become a barrier to those living beings. But this is not the case with the nuclear family where she lives. There she can turn into a nuisance to her son and his family. It may be due to avoid the embarrassing situation that she spends her whole time either in the balcony or in front of the spinning wheel. “My grandmother accepted her seclusion with resignation. She rarely left her spinning wheel to talk to anyone. From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers” (Singh 3, 4).

While the mother in Devi’s story starts accepting the new culture, the grandmother in *The Portrait of a Lady* sticks on to her own culture, without disturbing the new culture of the younger generation. Just as she was in her village, the grandmother recites her prayer in the town as well. Even though many of her routine activities were stopped- getting her grandson ready for school, accompanying him and so on- she accepts it as a part of her life. When the boy decided to go abroad for five years she did not become sentimental, “she came to leave me at the railway station but did not talk or show any emotion. Her lips moved in prayers, her mind was lost in prayer. Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary” (Singh 4). So the grandmother created in the town, a world of her own, where she was the only one sticking on to the traditional culture, showing respect to God and nature alike, without causing disturbance to the new mode of living. Till her death she lived in that world.

It can be said that among the many reasons the mother in *Woodrose* came to stay with the son in the town, is her wish to spread the traditional culture in the minds of the people there. But she is forced to get accustomed to the life in the town. She, with the love for the old culture, when sees the woodrose being planted by her daughter- in- law, thinks that instead of the woodrose, some fragrant flowers should be planted so that they can be presented to the Gods and be gifted to young women. But this thought was of no use because, the daughter- in- law, one among the many modern women, is not willing to accept her mother- in-law’s feelings. She is a product and follower of the new culture. Even then the mother wishes to stick on to her own culture, but the new culture started blocking the mother’s old perspective of looking at the world; “in three months the creeper spread over the balcony wall. It began to envelop the grille around the balcony. I was very agitated that I might not be able to see the passers- by in the street from the balcony. That was the only way for me to spend time....she tied up the creeper tightly with strings and wires so that most of it would creep only on the terrace” (Devi ). The mother gets the feeling that her attachment towards the younger generation should be tied up, or otherwise she would have to throw away her culture.

One day when the daughter-in-law arranges flowers in the vase putting some woodroses along with red and yellow roses, which she says is an arrangement showing old age and youth together, which is the co-existence of the traditional culture and the western influenced culture. Now the mother sees the woodrose as something attractive and instead of watching the passers-by on road she started watching the woodroses bloom. That is, the mother understands that in order to maintain the relations she should accept the new culture brought in by the various influences, especially that of the west, on her son and the society. But this co-existence is not preferred by the younger generation, who are part of the individualistic society. When the mother started loving the woodrose, her son can be seen pulling away the creeper without paying any heed to the mother's shouting. Gopalam changed a lot. He became, as Macaulay said, an "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" with no concern for others' feelings, even for his mother's. It was for the sake of her love to her son that the mother started accepting the new culture, but she understands that, "...the affection between two people should not grow as thick as that dense creeper. If it grows, the youngsters may cut it off and throw it away" (Devi).

As compared to the mother in *Woodrose*, the grandmother in Singh's story is luckier. She was able to hold on to her culture even at her death bed. "She said that, since only a few hours before the close of the last chapter of her life she had omitted to pray, she was not going to waste any more time talking to us...she lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads...her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew she was dead" (Singh 5). The grandmother's death and the flying away of the sparrows can mean the flying away of the final elements of the traditional Indian culture, which, like the last bread crumbs thrown to the birds, now lies in the dustbin; the innermost part of the mind, not coming out voluntarily as before.

The characters, except the mother and the grandmother, in the stories are products of the new Indian culture, a culture that emerged out of the influence of the colonizer. In *Woodrose* the daughter-in-law is more powerful than the mother, for she is able to do something in the family without the permission of the other members. She is not submissive to her mother-in-law, and she becomes sole owner of the kitchen where the mother is not allowed in. The mother is not very much free in the town and this makes her lead a secluded life. When she decides to embrace the new culture, she is not allowed to, and thus becomes a no one in the family, and the society. Unlike her, the grandmother in Singh's story, from the beginning of her life in the town itself, creates her own world, where she is not interrupted by anyone, and where she enjoys complete independence from her perspective.

The element that puts both the old women in solitude was the western education that their attachment figures got. The grandson going to the English school resulted in the end of

the grandmother's role in his life. English education became a wall that separated their minds. The son, after spending five years in America, in *Woodrose*, soon felt the habits of his mother as bad, and he started depending more upon his wife, who is a product of the new culture, ready to accept the new ways of life, but not submissive to others.

So in one way or the other English education resulted in the destruction of the Indian culture especially the idea of family. Now in India we are not able to continue the joint family system, even though we wish to, because the western influence completely changed the people's lifestyle which now cannot be transformed to the past mode.

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