

The Politics of Being a Woman: A Study in Shweta Mishra's *What is a Woman: Leave It, Its Trash*

Pratima Chaitanya
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English, MBP PG College,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow, U. P., India
pratima.chaitanya@gmail.com

Abstract

What is a Woman: Leave it, its Trash by Shweta Mishra is not just a treatise on feminism, the institution of patriarchy, the subtle, accepted, unsaid oppression of women in the society but goes much beyond; it transcends above the barriers imposed by the writings of the patriarchal world that can be categorized or compartmentalized into specific genre: theory, poetry, drama or fiction. The feelings and emotions of the writer escape this “trap” of specification and her words flow into all forms—drama, poetry and prose. The work teases the notion of channelizing emotions into one particular form of writing and presents a supreme example of *écriture féminine*. Rape is one of the rampant issues in present day India and has been widely addressed in the work. The Whore-Madonna syndrome, identified by the great psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud and lashed against by a multitude of feminist critics, like Simone de Beauvoir, is also brought under violent criticism in the book. The work presents a strong critique of the idea of “penis envy” and the notion of a “phallogocentric universe.” *What is a Woman: This is Trash. Leave it* is anything but trash and sends chills down the spine of the reader and forces her/him to confront the truth of female suppression in India—hard, raw and naked.

Key Words: Woman, feminism, patriarchy, oppression, *écriture féminine*, etc

What is a Woman: Leave it, its Trash by Shweta Mishra is not just a treatise on feminism, the institution of patriarchy, the subtle, accepted, unsaid oppression of women in the society but goes much beyond; it transcends above the barriers imposed by the writings of the patriarchal world that can be categorized or compartmentalized into specific genre: theory, poetry, drama or fiction. The feelings and emotions of the writer escape this “trap” of specification and her

words flow into all forms—drama, poetry and prose. As the writer herself admits in the forward to the work: “This is a collage of different forms of writing. I indulge more into natural outbursts that guide my pen and that push me; and less into the artificial and superimposed design of the brain.” (Mishra *What is a Woman*, i) The work teases the notion of channelizing emotions into one particular form of writing and presents a supreme example of *ericture feminine*. The renowned French Feminist, Helene Cixous introduced the idea of *ericture feminine* in one of her writings as :

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reverse-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence"...In one another we will never be lacking.

(Cixous, The Laugh of Medusa)

Defying the patriarchal form of writing, defying Lacan’s symbolic stage of logic and reason, Mishra delves into the ocean of imaginary stage which breaks the logical, rational, compartmentalized writing of the symbolic realm of a man’s writing to produce a typically feminine and feminist work which flows like a turbulent river in all directions. The writer writes from her body, the body of a woman in an Indian society, a body subjected to violence, to shame, to objectification.

The work is divided into nine chapters, “nine” being an important and religiously significant number in Hindu mythology: the *Navaratra* or the celebration of the Goddess, the *Shakti*, the compassionate and ferocious feminine force, is held for nine days, each of these days celebrating different aspects of the *Shakti*. Ironically enough, the chapters in the book celebrate the varying degree of insults and abuses hurled at women in the oppressive and hypocritical Indian society. The writer too has, in a dark satirical vein, after exploring the overt and covert significations of being born a female in an Indian society and the power politics of the man and the woman inextricably linked with it, mockingly paid obeisance to the Goddess of *Kali*, *Lakshmi* and *Saraswati* to expose the hollowness of our culture; A culture and an ideology which on one hand elevates its women as *devis* and puts them on a high pedestal and on the other implicitly or explicitly tortures them.

Chapters in the book are woven around a similar pattern: they start with a letter to God, whose existence itself is questioned in the text and in whom there is more fear to be found than love or compassion. Then the writer goes on to make her points candidly and bluntly about the various issues pertaining to the existence of the creature called women. The language of the book with ironic-satiric word play and presentation, sprinkled of and on with

poems and dialogues of utmost nudity and intensity, rack one out of his/her own self and force one to ponder over the shamefully secondary treatment meted out to women by the society. Rape is one of the rampant issues in present day India and has been widely addressed in Mishra's *What is a Woman*. What is interesting is the dark satirical undercurrent in the depiction of rape as a choice rather than as an act of violence, as something a woman chooses. This is evinced in the very title of the chapter, "Rapes are harmful. Do not Get Raped. Avoid them." The chapter scrutinizes the conduct of men in the society whom the patriarchal culture justifies at every step. Even a grave offence like rape is justified by the patriarchal order. In her ironic-satiric style which pervades the entire text, she writes:

Boys naughty, so they give it a try, too eager to know what a woman's breasts or a vagina looks like; and men, who very well know that, want it even more badly to do it. So boys rape out of curiosity and men rape out of lust. (Mishra 23)

The incapability of the society to withhold rape which are on a constant rise in the modern day world, the failure of the society to eradicate misogyny from the patriarchal order and their failure in teaching their boys respect towards women is poetically and satirically represented in these words of a dystopian world:

There would be fewer rapes if naked women would be available on the streets—powerful women for all men. Men would be free to choose and if a certain woman refuses, there would not be any need to rape her as there would be many others to go to. Everyone's wife, mother, sister and daughter would walk naked on the road. Then the world would become a better place to live in. (32)

Mishra seems to be full of utter poetical lyricism in expressing her grief and frustration over the brutality of rape which the females of all ages have to undergo, where they are reduced to mere objects of lusts.

The Whore-Madonna syndrome, identified by the great psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud and lashed against by a multitude of feminist critics, like *Simone de Beauvoir*, is also brought under violent criticism in the book. Beauvoir blatantly criticizes Freud and finds that his work is full of phallic pride. She goes on to say that "Freud never showed much concern about the destiny of women; it is clear that he simply adapted his account from that of the destiny of man." (Beauvoir *The Second Sex*, 70) Women are seen either as goddesses, images of supreme self-sacrificing, ever giving mothers or fallen women, sluts, the scheming inhuman vamps of Indian tele-serials; they are hardly seen as humans with normal human desires. By perceiving women as either completely good or completely evil is to deprive them of humanity, it is an attempt to keep the woman out of the web of power and

supremacy. In a similar vein, Mishra reiterates the idea in her book and writes: “Be a *devi* or a slut, and keep your mouth shut.” (79)

In an extreme reaction the gross inequality practiced in society between man and woman is brought out in strong, pungent, satirical poetical lines:

Do boys come out of man’s womb
And girls of women’s womb
That they are different?
That space, room, extent is as much her right
As a man’s (88)

Mishra raises eyebrows on the issues of the sphere of authority given to men in everyday life. She very humorously pictures men with the supreme authority of urinating in public. Men relieve themselves anywhere and everywhere with no sense of shame. As she says, “They can stop anywhere and simply pull down the zips of their pants or the *naras* of their *pyajamas* and begin to urinate.” (96) The menfolk perhaps feel that there is nothing shameful in this act. While on the other hand, such an act is simply unthinkable for the women. Mishra cites one of the reasons for this act of audacity: “Men’s penis is not a thing to hide, women’s vagina should be hidden or else men would be salivating all the time wanting to fuck immediately.” (97) The authority of men and the authority accorded to men by the women themselves in a rooted patriarchal structure like India percolates and invades all systems—the economic, the political, the social, the religious and all institutions—family, society and education. The nauseating prejudice to the core against the women is brought out beautifully in these poetic lines by the author:

They the givers
We the takers
They the pain causers
We the pain accepters
They hanging out
We hiding in
They with
We without
They haves
We have-nots (98)

Freud’s talks about “penis envy”, in which he pictures the girls as deformed beings, anxious about their lack of penis, incomplete in a major way so perhaps lacking and incapable. (Sigmund Freud, Full text of "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex.") This idea is openly criticized by the author in these lines:

Women are the have-nots; they are by birth the nobody. No matter what capacities she has as an intellectual, moral or creative being—she is nothing but a grant “no one” for a physiological shortcoming, inherent in the making of her body, that is, the lack of a ‘penis’. The holders of penis are the holders of power and possessors of wisdom. A woman despite all her ‘she’-ness is ultimately and pathetically ‘auratzaat bechari. (97)

She voices a strong reaction against the idea of phallogocentric universe and echoes many other feminist writers of the western world. Feminist critic Karen Horney, advocated the idea “womb envy” replacing it with penis envy and challenges the superiority of the males in a social order. (Christopher L., Heffner, Karen Horney’s *Feminine Psychology*)

The book finally ends in celebration, a celebration of female form, her physicality, her very being, her mind, her uniqueness, her essence of being human. Mishra craves for a world with sensitive souls rather than a shoddy division between man and woman. The author criticizes throughout the gendered use of language and proposes that the word ‘human’ with a man within it should rather be changed into a sensitive being or discerning soul. In contemporary India, with rapes, molestations and different kinds of violence against women on a rise, this comprehensive work by Mishra bares with violent claws the gory picture of Indian society, the devilish mindsets concealed within painted faces of tradition and manners, the brute desires of oppression and savagery against women dissembled under the slogans of gender equality. *What is a Woman: This is Trash. Leave it* is anything but trash and sends chills down the spine of the reader and forces her/him to confront the truth of female suppression in India—hard, raw and naked.

Works Cited:

- Cixous, Helene. Excerpt from “The Laugh of Medusa”, 1971. 10 September 2017. <http://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/ARTH_220/cixous_medusa.htm>
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books: London, 1997.
- Freud, Sigmund. Full text of “Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex.” Translated by A.A. Brill, The Macmillan Co., New York. April 29, 2018. <https://archive.org/stream/threecontributio14969gut/14969.txt>
- Heffner, Dr. Christopher L. Chapter 5: Section 5: Karen Horney’s *Feminine Psychology*. April 29, 2018. <https://allpsych.com/personalitysynopsis/horney/>
- Mishra, Shweta. *What is a Woman: This is Trash. Leave it*. AuthorsPress: New Delhi, 2016.