

Articulation of Gender Violence – A Study of Reshma Qureshi and Tania Singh’s “*Being Reshma*”.

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Abstract: Indian English literature witnessed many writers to portrayed life, and society in a vivid manner and the Portrayal of women in literature is as old as literature itself. The impact of the feminist movement helped women writers in breaking the social and literary norms of the past and explore women’s plight. They depicted the marginalized women in society’s identity crisis, and gender inequalities through their narratives. One such effective narrative genre is a memoir which is based on the writer’s personal memories and the factual assertions made by the writer. This paper aims to analyse a memoir, Reshma Qureshi and Tania Singh’s “*Being Reshma*” to demonstrate how a memoir articulates violence inflicted on women in society. It attempts to illustrate Reshma’s journey from oppression to expression exposing incidents of domestic violence.

Keywords: *Marginalization, Acid-attack survivor, Memoir, Violence*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English have been impudent in demonstrating the realities in fiction, novels, and dramas. Indian writers in English have provided various insights into changing sites of life, social conditions, and other realities. English Literature has integrated all the varieties in its dominion. The enormous scope of feminism has helped women writers across the world after the origin of feminism, as a concept and political movement that originated from the west. The Indian women writers include Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shahi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy etc. reflected the concept of women marginality, gender inequality and the condition of women in the society of their period much more intensely as the movement guided them the need to admit the stipulation of looking problems of women on a broader canvas. As Manu, the Hindu law giver says, “Women are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are

children, they must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of their son in old age or as widows. In any circumstances she should not be allowed to assert herself independently.” The status of vast majority of women in India is the same even in this era irrespective of which religion she belongs to.

They voiced the voiceless and dealt with various topics from physical to the psychological aspects which are hindering and affecting Indian women in post-colonial era. Over the several decades, the number of novels which have appeared are in great number, dealing with the diverse subjects related to anguish of women

The bold assertion of the female writers attempted to show the position of the postcolonial Indian woman in the Indian society which was more obscure through different genres. A substantial number of novels, poems, biographies depicted the postmodern woman as bold, smart and breaking the long-lasting social codes and male imposed barriers who stepped out and involved in diverse sectors of the male dominated society. It was also portrayed how this audacious attitude of stepping out has exposed her to various threats. The modern-day woman is subjected to abuse, domestic violence despite the legislation acts to safe guard and protects her. The plight of the women in modern society needs to be acknowledged as the discrepancy persists still in the modern women, and she is a victim of gender violence and patriarchal decrees of society. The problematic of gender-based violence which go beyond abuse, physical torture such as rapes, acid attacks, human trafficking. The victims of gender violence and their predicaments are often neglected, or they are marginalized. There are many autobiographies or memoirs articulated these issues. One such memoir is *Being Reshma* by Reshma Qureshi and Tania Singh. Reshma Qureshi is an Indian model, vlogger, and anti-acid sale activist. She is the face of Make Love Not Scars, an NGO that works towards rehabilitating and empowering acid-attack survivors.

Being Reshma is a memoir that tells the story of Reshma Qureshi who was born in a middle-class Muslim family living in Mumbai with four siblings. His father was a taxi driver. Reshma was the youngest of five kids and she was much indulged by her siblings and parents. On 19 May 2014, at the age of seventeen, Qureshi was attacked with sulfuric acid by her estranged brother-in-law and two other assailants when she was traveling to the city of Allahabad for an Alim exam. The book unfolds the harsh realities of woman’s life in society. As Shashi Tharoor says:

“*Being Reshma* is a powerful story of courage, perseverance and triumph. This crisp yet emotionally grounded narrative not only enables the reader to connect with acid-attack victim Reshma but also brings to life the reality of violence and humiliation

that many women in India continue to face. A significant achievement and a compelling read”.

The memoir articulates the plight and predicaments of ordinary women in the traditional role of wives, mothers, or sisters. The practices imposed and male domination in women's life are considered a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society. The social, economic, and cultural forces influence gender roles which are set by convention.

Gulshan: A victim of Domestic Violence

Patriarchy is the complex agency of violence which is enforced repeatedly. The memoir Qureshi's *Being Reshma* reflects the gender inequalities and domestic violence with the incidents of demand for dowry, abuse, violence from husband and in-laws. When Reshma along with her parents visit her sister Gulshan, after her marriage, Reshma was very much excited to meet her sister as she was only eleven and she missed her sister so much. But Reshma was not welcomed, and she was surprised to see the strange new change that had occurred in his sister's behaviour. and she narrates:

“In that moment I felt as though I was witnessing the rebirth of someone I had known in a previous life. To begin with, she had never covered her head in front of her family, and this new practice seemed odd to me.”(pg. 45)

Gulshan, being submissive by nature withdraws herself from her family after her marriage. The practices imposed on women are constructed by patriarchal ideology. They are fixed in the minds of women to perform certain roles following the cultural practices designated to them without any sense of disapproval. Gulshan who was born and brought up in eastern Mumbai during modern period was forced to change her way of life. Reshma expresses the strange behaviour of her sister who was very fearful, reluctant to talk to her own parents. Her actions are the obvious result of dominance of in-laws. The role of women is confined to do all the household and domestic duties. Her rights are often dejected, and roles are not acknowledged. The memoir also delves into issues of women after marriage such as dowry, physical harassment, gender inequality. After Gulshan's marriage with Jamaluddin, Gulshan was never allowed to see her parents and she was tortured to get money from her father. But when Gulshan refused to ask money from her father, her husband and his family tries to kill her. Reshma explains:

He clothes, soaking wet, hung from her ragged body, she reeked of kerosene. Then it hit me: she was drenched for head to toe in kerosene. They had tried to burn her alive. (pg.54)

Reshma's sister Gulshan represents all those victims of violence who are either starved to death by her-in-laws or physically tortured, abused, and various types of violence inflicted on them for dowry. The belief of the Indian female community that they are weak, mediocre, and submissive adds to their emptiness and leads to the traumatic state of woman, her physical and psychological distress. Gulshan is repeatedly tormented by her in-laws. Gulshan expresses the anguish which was never shared with her parents. She represents docile Indian girl who constantly hides her pain and sufferings and never lets her parents know what she is going through until she is on the verge of death. Gulshan says:

“He used to hit me earlier, over money. I asked for as much as I could, but it wasn't

fair to Abba and you. “Jamaluddin doesn't have a job and why should he have the luxuries he hasn't worked for?” I told them this once and that was when they slammed my head against the wall. For the next week they made me cut wood for hours without any help. My arms hurt and my feet were swollen. When I came back inside, I was forced to cook, and if I sat down for even five minutes, they would deny me the chance to spend time with my children”(Pg.61)

Gulshan is not an individual woman but a representative of all women who face the problem of adjustment in their married lives. Reshma was horrified to know about all that abuse her sister had suffered at the hands of this cruel and violent family. Reshma feared that if her sister hadn't escaped, they would have received a call about her suicide.

Reshma: Acid Attack Survivor and a Victim of Violence

Reshma, was merely seventeen when she had lived through the most horrific ordeal. The incident took place after her sister Gulshan's talaq with Jamaluddin. Reshma, her sister, and her cousins were on their way, traveling to the city of Allahabad for an Alim exam. She was attacked with sulfuric acid by her estranged brother-in-law and two other assailants. The attack was aimed at her sister Gulshan, but Reshma became the victim. She narrates:

The nephew and the cousin had already grabbed me from behind; they were tugging at my hair from over my sister's niqab and pushing me down to the ground. The men were heavy and strong, but still, I tried to fight them off, and clawed them with my bare hands, but my physical strength was at best a feeble shadow compared to those monsters. I was just seventeen” (pg.82)

The memoir *Being Reshma* primarily illustrates Reshma's journey from oppression to an expression which also exposes the depths of human depravity. It reflects the realities of life, dives into the inner turmoil and chaos inside the mind. According to Indrani Bose,

‘Being Reshma isn't only an account of an acid-attack survivor's harrowing road to recovery, it is also about the fight against any and all kinds of oppression’.

Violence against women is partly a result of gender relations that presume men are superior to women. The subordinate status given to women leads to social sanction for men to exhibit physical aggression. Reshma's endless effort to escape the attack fails and she was grabbed by her brother-in-law's cousins, and they pulled them over my head so there was no way Reshma could fight. She narrates the incident:

“Without even removing my niqab, he emptied over my face the contents of a flask he had been carrying. I remember wondering why they would throw warm water on my face, but that thought lasted only for a heavenly fraction of a second. But within moments I could hear at a distance a strange, terrified, unnatural, desperate scream. It was me. I was on fire, and the haunting screams were erupting from my own being”.(pg. 83)

The effects of violence are devastating to women's mental and physical health. According to Reshma, her attack happened faster than lightning, she noticed her niqab melting off her face. She felt the burning of flesh and the acid started to eat through the layers of her skin and before long it aimed for her bones.

The narrow streets with over a hundred people bore witness to her pain but no one had the courage or the will to stop her attackers. As Surinder Khanna discusses about violence in *Violence Against Women and Human Rights*, the history of violence against women is tied to the history of woman being viewed as property and a gender role given to be subservient to men and other women. Violence against women is a technical term refers to violent acts which are primarily or exclusively committed against women. Such a type of violence targets a specific group with the victims' gender as a primary motive.

In Reshma's case too, the victim was a young girl but not her male cousins. The acid attack was so intensely painful that she begged her sister Gulshan to kill her to at least end the pain. There were people motionless merely watching everything like the way stray animals are ignored. The harsh reality of our society is exposed where people are never empathetic towards the victims of any kind of violence and the system, which is always archaic, bureaucratic, and painful towards them. The memoir provides insights of Reshma's painful treatment process and her audacity to walk in front of people without being ashamed. The memoir throws light on the status of Indian woman in modern India who is treated like an animal. It voices the plight of marginalized victims of gender violence and inequalities demonstrating vulnerable legal system of society which has made men dare to commit many heinous crimes against woman. There is powerful urge for the need for woman to encounter the system. According to Beauvoir,

“Masculine claims are contradictory; authority no longer works. Woman must judge and be critical, she cannot remain a mere docile echo ----what she is able to agree with, in her husband's way of thinking, she should agree with only through an independent act of judgment she cannot borrow from another her own reasons for existing. (Beauvoir 208)

He aptly points out that women must be powerful and courageous to voice against all those male imposed barriers and rigid system. *Being Reshma* evidently shows how the rigid social structure of society has led to gender inequalities and it is essential to break the rigid social taboos formed around women.

CONCLUSION

The stereotypical roles of women Roles of women to be submissive, with passive qualities and in subordinate positions in comparison to male. The journey of women has been neglected and always dominated by male supremacy and the male behaviour is always neglected as the social attitude of society often values men and masculine pastimes over women and feminine attributes. The memoir, *Being Reshma* breaks the stereotypical roles, and it is distinguished with other autobiographical works with its brilliant portrayal of the story of an average middle-class young girl who emerges from the

depths of despair . The strength she has displayed to reclaim her life is a remarkable tale for thousands of victims of gender violence. The memoir assert that bold, overt writings are needed to address the issues of gender inequalities and violence. There is a need to definite strategy and a new approach to change the future course of Indian womanhood. *Being Reshma* not only inspires people by giving new voice for new identity and a new credo of individualism, but it also tries to convey boldly the underlying beliefs and ideologies are responsible for the marginalisation and subjugation of women. It has undoubtedly captured the complexities underlying women's experiences of multidimensional violence with reference to her ethnicity and class.

The memoir has tried to understand violence as a patriarchal discourse as well as a kind of oppression which can be represented and examined. In the process of narrating the story of Reshma Qureshi, an acid attack survivor, it has not only emphasised on the physical or visible violence, but it also tried to show the psychological distress affected them, and how often the victims of violence or gender inequalities are marginalized. It has attempted to advocate the need for women's emancipation from gender violence and inequalities prevailing still in this modern society. It is an example of the continuous change which has occurred in the attitude of modern women to transmute into the new figures who are more empowered and audacious in breaking the stereotypical roles ordained to them. The memoir has articulated gender violence displaying audacity of a young woman who is embroiled in passion to make the best out of the worst of human nature. The story of her survival from acid attack and the determination to turn tragedy in to powerful movement for change is truly inspiring for all those victims of gender and domestic violence to overcome insurmountable odds in their lives.

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