

The Gender of Coloniality: A Thematic Reading of the Subjugated Women in Shiv K Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse Shiv K Kumar's portrayal of women in *A River with Three Banks*. It is an understanding of how the novelist has perceived the conditionality of women during partition. While partition divides women by creed and religion, the community has further segregated and subjugated women as the other. Partition is the historical consequence of colonization, and community suppression of women is a cultural consequence of male hegemony. Hence this article titled, "The Gender of Coloniality: A Thematic Reading of the Subjugated Women in Shiv K Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*".

The colonial era had suppressed and distorted the identity of Indian women. They are victims of subjugation in varied forms emanating from the political, historical, cultural and social spheres. No wonder, the colonial impact has further denigrated the status of women. Designated the subaltern, she has been part of male hegemony. The masculine power structure has manipulated throughout history in such a way that she has been confined to the parameters of masculine ambience. Eventually, when it comes to the partition history, gender is one manifestation of subjugation and subordination. Shiv K Kumar has rightly identified the areas of the colonial manipulations of women. *A River with Three Banks* is an illustration of women as a victim of double subjugation, advanced by colonialism and communalism respectively.

Key words: Colonialism, feminism, partition, post colonialism, religion.

Shiv K Kumar is a postcolonial writer. He deals with themes such as political violence, marital disharmony and community hypocrisy. India is a secular country. *A River with Three Banks* advances India as having been divided by caste, creed and religion. They were built united before the arrival of the Imperial Powers. The colonial intervention has been both constructive and destructive. Constructive in the sense, they built hospitals and schools and destructive in the sense, they were responsible in the creation of a great divide between the Hindus and the Muslims. This is what Dr. Bhaskar A. Shukla observes of the colonized people:

Colonized peoples are highly diverse in their nature and in traditions, and as beings in cultures they are both constructed and changing, so that while they may be 'other' from the colonizers, they are also different one from another and from their own pasts, and should not be totalized or essentialized – through such concepts as a black consciousness, Indian soul, aboriginal culture and so forth. This totalization and essentialization is often a form of nostalgia which has its inspiration more in the thought of the colonizers than of the colonized, and it serves give the colonizer a sense of the unity of his culture while mystifying that of others;... (40)

A River with Three Banks furnishes details. The colonized people are looked down by the colonizers as the other. The colonized one has to undergo psychic and cultural suppressions. But the British officers want to reside in India and enjoy a sophisticated life. The heat and dust of this land does not create aversion in their minds. Bob, the English officer informs Berry that they will have meagre pensions, no servants, winters and fog at England. They prefer India to England. They form the superstructure of the nation. This colonial hegemony has encompassed the existing Indian community into playing their nefarious designs. Ngugi Wa Thiong says:

Colonialism's ... most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world ... To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education orator and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. (16)

We find in the novel, the British administrators, who shift their power to the Indian politicians. At the time of Indian Independence, the Indian subcontinent is divided into India and Pakistan. The power thirsty political bigwigs are responsible for the partition and its aftermath. Uprootedness, displacement, arson, riots, massacre, abduction and rape are spreading throughout the country at the time of this holocaust. Millions of people are migrating near the border. The refugees have lost their family, friends and belongings. Women are the worst sufferers of partition. The novel opens in a pessimistic tone

announcing the murder of a Muslim by a Hindu in vengeance to the act of the Muslims to Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. Refugee vendors are selling ornaments at the bazaar. These refugees have lost their home. A young refugee vendor's wife is feeding her infant and the buyers are staring at her. The women refugees feel insecure and abandoned. Violence against women is rampant everywhere and the author explains the pitiable condition of a young woman as follows:

But hardly had they moved to the front door when they heard a poignant cry – a woman's. Rushing back to the window, they looked through the curtains again and saw a few assaulters pulling away at a young woman's sari, while a man in dhoti and kurta stood close by with folded hands, beseeching them to let her go ... "A bunch of Muslim goons tried to rape a Hindu woman..." (59, 61).

The assumptions of the colonial administrators inflict injustice on the colonized women. At the same time, the laws of the male hegemony of the ethnic communities also suppress women. John McLeod states that, "Kristen Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase 'a double colonisation' to refer to the ways in which women have *simultaneously* experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy" (175). Sarita, Sonali, Haseena and Radha Mehta undergo suppression at the hands of the patriarchy.

Women are victims of ethnic suppression. They have to depend on their father, husband or son. Mrs. Radha Mehta never agrees with the opinion of her husband or her son in religious matters. Yet, she submissively accepts their point of view. She does not accept her son's marriage to a Muslim girl named Haseena, only to accept the alliance later.

Berry has illicit relationship with Shyama, the maid servant of their house. He behaves like a lion tamer with his wife Sonali. Sonali has no right to question Berry or take decisions on her own. Sarita's infidelity makes Gautam take decision to divorce her. But Sonali has to undergo suppression in the hands of Berry, who never treats her as his equal partner. She is almost treated like a maid in her own house. In this regard, Sheila Rowbotham's observation warrants mention here:

A woman in one day performs the functions of innumerable workers, dustbin man, nurse, cleaner, psychiatrist, stripper, fortune-teller, cook. A woman has to be all kinds of people on demand. She has the satisfaction of knowing she is working for people she cares for. (77)

Sonali is expected to be an obedient wife, who can carry no grudge against anyone in the family, for fear of being divorced. Berry sarcastically says that, "... if she creates a scene, out she goes. A wife should be broken into complete submission from the very beginning, otherwise she can give you hell" (42). Sarita, a divorcee is almost alienated from her community. Mr Trivedi does not allow Mohinder to come to Sarita's house, considering her a moral pollution. Sarita is now childless, husbandless. She is like a widow. Berry makes a masculine justification of his extra marital affairs. John McLeod is of the opinion:

Kabbani shows how the depiction of Eastern women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries objectified them as exotic creatures who epitomised and promised the assumed excessive sexual delights of the Orient. She shows how in reading these representations we must be aware of the mutually supportive processes of colonialism and patriarchy which produce Eastern women in eroticised term. (175,176).

In order to get a divorce from his wife Sarita, Gautam persuades the Bishop to give him baptism. As he moves outside the bungalow, he hears a loud shouting. An old man named Abdul Rahim falls down dead. Gautam comes to know that he is in search of his daughter, Haseena who has been abducted and forced into prostitution.

Berry and Gautam witness a violent crowd of Muslims with knives, swords, spears and sticks arriving there. The mob violently kill a cow to take avengement against the killing of an old Muslim. At that time, they hear the poignant cry of a woman. These Muslims try to pull away a young woman's sari. Her brother pleads to them to leave her. The violent crowd stabs him at his back. They seduce her by threatening her that they would murder her brother. Gautam wants to help her. But he knows very well that if he intervenes they would murder him. Berry also feels humiliated. Violence against women is prevalent throughout the border of the nation.

Gautam and Berry visit Bridge Hotel expecting a virgin from UP. A woman in a black burqa arrives there with the pimp. Gautam and the woman spend time together and Gautam identifies that woman to be Haseena. Haseena is shocked to hear Gautam telling all the details about her family. Haseena pleads to him to take her away from this forced prostitution. She explains her condition as follows:

But not darker than the one I've been through... Imagine a group of young abducted girls, holed up in a house, murky as a dungeon, forced into prostitution at knife-edge. I don't know why I submitted myself to all that ignominy... But each time I let a customer take me, I felt as though I'd thrown a bone to a dog. (103)

Gautam informs Berry about the condition of Haseena. Both of them devise a plan to rescue her. The young girls are abducted and put in a brothel, which has been run by Pannalal, Suleiman Ghani and others. The rooms in that brothel are damp and windowless. The wet floors and cockroaches are almost like death cells. If these girls resist, they will be put in fire. Most of the young girls are Muslims, who have been abducted from Pakistan. William Thornton makes a surprise raid at that brothel and he realizes that it is a multifaceted racket- prostitution, murder, violation of foreign exchange and what not. He must ask Bob, he tells himself, to thank his Indian friend, Birendra Dhawan for putting him on it. Also he comes to know that the policemen are in league with these pimps. Shiv K Kumar as a postcolonial writer pictures the pitiable conditions of women, as the novel manifests postcoloniality. John McLeod says:

Davies reminds postcolonial critics that they must remain sensitive to issues of gender difference in their works if postcolonialism is significantly going to challenge male-

dominance. Otherwise, postcolonialism will, like colonialism, be a male-centred and ultimately patriarchal discourse in which women's voices are marginalised and silenced. (180)

A River with Three Banks can thus be regarded as an illustration of the postcolonial realism. As a novelist, Shiv K. Kumar submits characters and events in such a way that it enables the readers to perceive the masculine suppression and the eventual feminine subjugation in terms of the postcolonial terms.

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