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## Pasho as a 'Strong' Woman: Reading Krishna Sobti's *Memory's Daughter*

Ashok Verma, Ph.D.

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Krishna Sobti

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## **Krishna Sobti's Female Protagonists**

Krishna Sobti, the “grand old dame of Hindi Literature” has created some memorable women characters in her long journey as a creative writer. While on the one hand, she has created bold and audacious characters like Mitro and Ratti, she has, by and large, portrayed traditional, stereotypical female protagonists in her novels. Precariously perched on the verge of tradition and modernity, she could be safely associated with the first generation of Indian women novelists and as such, her writings raise the issues related to women and voice their concerns and aspirations, thus offering a parallel perspective to that of the male authors. Sobti has successfully addressed gender issues in her novels by using a myriad canvas for portraying Indian women in all their hues and dimensions.

## **A Composite Viewpoint on Gender Issues**

However, Sobti's understanding of the gender issues is not myopic; she perceives such issues in the light of a broader, humanistic perspective. That is perhaps why the seasoned author does not want the feminist tag for herself. Instead, she seems to be favouring a balance between man and woman each trying to respect and understand the otherness of the other. No doubt, she comes down heavily upon the patriarchal mindset and indicts it severely for the wretched condition of women, she at a deeper level, strives for the stage where man and woman can meet on equal grounds. She believes that man and woman are essentially same and are different only biologically. In answer to a question on gender issues, she quotes Agrippa Von Nettesheim:

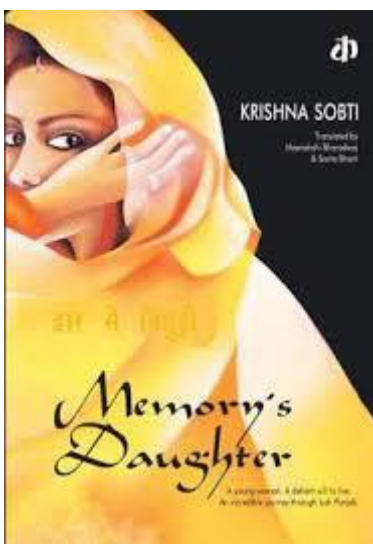
The only difference between man and woman is physical. In everything else they are the same. A woman does not have a soul of different sex from which animates man. Both received a soul which is absolutely the same and of equal condition. Women and men were equally endowed with the gift of spirit, reason and the use of words. They were created for the same and the sexual difference will not confer a different destiny.  
(Personal Interview)

Thus Sobti displays a composite viewpoint towards issues related to gender. This wide spectrum thus renders a touch of humanism to the feminist issues. Gunjesh Kumar Mishra, a Hindi critic, also supports this viewpoint when he says that Sobti “understands feminism in totality and registers it in her novels by taking it closer to humanism” (Mishra 38).

### **Lost in the World of Their Own**

The first impression about Sobti’s women characters is that they are lost in a world of their own as if oblivious of the feminist issues and concerns. There are no apparent feminist issues in their lives. It is largely because they are simplistic and follow certain basic principles in their lives. They are honest to themselves and to the world at large. They are sensitive and instinctive. These features are commonly found in all Sibtian women, irrespective of their situations and circumstances. While a few women of Sobti’s creative oeuvre justify the title ‘modern emancipated women’ with an acute sense of awareness for their rights as individuals, her traditional women lack awareness towards their individuality. They, in fact, epitomize Beauvoir’s definition and are no better than wombs. They feel contented in performing subservient roles to their husbands thinking that this is what they are meant for. Their thoughts, actions, behaviour are largely controlled by the male hegemonic power and they simply succumb to male dominance as powerless beings. They are easily accessible to their males, provide them with emotional support and domestic labour and so on. Neither have they got the power of education. As a result, they cannot come to realize their status as individuals. They are exploited by the males in a gendered society and appear to be a part of that section of society for which the feminists claim to have raised their voice. The scope of this paper is to read the character of Pasho, the female protagonist of Sobti’s first novel *Memory’s Daughter*, who is by and large cast in the stereotypical mould; and yet she impresses the reader with her strong will and courage and therefore, despite being subjected to manifold oppression, she handles the challenges of her life successfully and overcomes all difficulties.

### ***Memory’s Daughter***



*Memory's Daughter* was originally published in Hindi with the title *Daar Se Bichchudi* in 1958. In the novel, Pasho exhibits a deep-seated tendency to accept the four walls of the household as her domain. She has been projected as an out-and-out traditional woman who is blissfully ignorant of her rights, has no aspirations other than bearing and rearing children for the family and feels blessed in performing the household chores. She justifies the angel-in-the-house image of woman. Her plight may be seen from the traditional Indian perspective of finding a home, a shelter for a girl. Without home, she is insecure, vulnerable and thus a cause of shame to the entire family. Therefore, once she has crossed the threshold of her maternal uncles' house, circumstances keep on tossing her from one household to another and she has absolutely no clue as to what to do under the circumstances.

### **Shelter for the Girl: A Must**

This necessity to find a home for the girl is so important that all other considerations such as the gaping difference between the ages of the girl and the groom, emotional compatibility etc. are relegated to the background. All that matters is that a girl must have a *thour*, a shelter – a 'roof' over her head. There are many instances in Sobti's novels where finding a *thour* for the girl remains the prime concern for the girl's parents/guardians. In *Zindaginama* too, this tendency is noticed when Kartaro is married to a middle-aged widower without considering the age-difference. The only consideration of her guardians is that the groom earns well and the girl would get all basic amenities. It is primarily because of this

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consideration that Pasho cannot think of crossing the threshold of her maternal uncles' house in spite of incessant abuses and thrashing. Finally, when she does that after sensing a potential danger to her life, she can think of only one place – 'Khojon ki Haveli' where she has heard her mother lives. She is married off to Lakhpat Diwan in a clandestine manner who is almost his father's age. Perhaps Pasho would have accepted the new Diwan also as her master had the latter not sold her to another family. She never tries to run away either from her new household with three robust soldiers and their old father; or from Manjhale's grip. The only two places she dares to run away from are those places that cannot be her *thour*. One that has already been described is her maternal uncles' house and the other is the 'firangi' camp which cannot be a shelter for her.

### **Desire for Beautiful Clothes and Jewellery – A Respite from Suffering**

Another noticeable feature in Pasho that puts her in the category of traditional women is her obsession with the idea of having beautiful clothes and jewellery as if there was nothing beyond dresses and ornaments. This strong penchant for jewelry defines Pasho's personality, conditions her behaviour and limits her aspirations. It seems she cannot think beyond nose-pins and earrings and perennially dreams of getting beautiful clothes, ornaments and a handsome groom. That is the be-all and end-all of her aspirations. She gives the reader the impression of an adolescent girl of a romantic novel, always lost in wishful thinking and roaming freely over cloud nine. At the very outset, the girl's passion is seen clearly when she describes her tough days with her maternal grandmother and aunts. Even during tough moments, she simply cannot resist the temptation for jewellery. The wound on her forehead is still fresh and this is what the girl is thinking about:

I noticed the scar, still showing red and angry. I pulled a curl from any plait and let it fall casually over my forehead. And suddenly I saw dancing before my eyes the gem-studded tika that adorned the foreheads of the Syalkot women. Fingering my nose pin, I promised myself, a tika like this will adorn my forehead too one day. (12)

When her uncle beats her severely and locks her up in a room, Pasho dreams of wearing a red 'joda' and fine jewelry. Later on, her middle-aged husband Lakhpat Diwan, in a generous mood, asks her to make a demand and she fondly demands new earrings. Through this particular trait of her personality, the author perhaps pinpoints a universal feminine desire for decoration and looking beautiful. To a feminist, this fascination for jewellery and clothes might seem disgusting, bizarre and outdated, but for Pasho, it is "real heaven." However, jewellery fails to bring security and confidence. After the sudden death of her husband, she is deprived of her lawful claim on the household and is exploited in every possible manner by the new Diwan. Through her plight, perhaps Sobti wants to show that without consciousness for one's individuality and rights, no amount of jewellery can bring the desired sense of security.

### **Submissive Character**

Be it Lakhpat Diwan, Manjhale or any other man, Pasho seems to be falling in line rather than asserting her choices on others. Things happen to her rather than she making things happen. When the novel opens, she is at the mercy of her maternal uncles; then she takes shelter at 'Khojon ki Haveli' and is under Sheikhji's protection. She meekly accepts Diwanji as her bridegroom; later on is played up on by the new, wily Diwan; becomes Manjhale's mistress and starts even loving him; is protected and given shelter by the Sikh 'brother'; runs away from the firangi camp to survive another molestation bid and finally gets reunited with her family.

### **Woman as a Commodity and a Womb**

Thus "Pasho's journey is the journey of a woman who is bought and sold, who changes hands like land or property for money, whose sex renders her vulnerable and a perpetual victim, and who is trapped in her body" (Jain 102). She is no better than a commodity, a thing, a womb. A typical product of the traditional patriarchal system, she simply cannot think beyond good clothes and ornaments and therefore represents the first category of women characters in Sobti's fiction who are completely overpowered by the forces operating on them.

Pasho befits Simon de Beauvoir's definition of woman as a womb. In fact, she is no better than a female animal, a *bhogyā* – a thing to be enjoyed and a toy to be played with by the male. In this sense, she epitomizes a common Indian woman who is never recognized in her ordinariness; as a vibrant individual – a position she so richly deserves but has never been able to get. As such, the rightful place of woman in Indian society has eluded curious minds of a nation that boasts of having a glorious history and culture of more than five thousand years. Mahadevi Varma, a celebrated Indian feminist author, in one of her essays poignantly puts the plight of Indian woman thus:

For centuries, the Indian woman continued to be deprived of her rights. Numerous political and social conditions led her to that degraded state which cannot be described as anything other than the limit of pathetic wretchedness. (41)

### **Will to Live – A Characteristic Feature**

Nevertheless, the protagonist exhibits what Schopenhauer calls “will to live”—a characteristic feature in Sobti's characters. This is a strong desire in her and this trait of her personality renders a touch of grit and liveliness to her personality. In spite of all hardships, she never loses heart or contemplates suicide. Actually, the girl is in love with her own physical self. She takes great pride in her physical beauty; the shapes of her limbs and her fair complexion. This physical beauty imparts a sense of arrogance to her character though outwardly she appears timid:

There was a time when I would walk down Shah Almi, sure and arrogant, a song in my stride. Eyes would rise and fall on me like a tide, attention congeal in my wake. And I walk down Shah Almi, flamboyant leather jootis on my feet and bright parandas swinging at the ends of my long plaits, smiling at their murmurs and whistles. There was a time when no gaze or cloth would stay tethered to this body. When my arms would swing to their languorous rhythm, to rise and fall, to hug my supple curves, to hold. (6)

## **Pride in Physical Charm**

The maltreatment Pasho is subjected to at the hands of her uncles and aunts, fails to distract her from this narcissistic feeling. In spite of the fact that the girl is abused, scolded and thrashed almost every day under one pretext or another; the grandmother and the aunts keep on cursing her physical charms, she keeps on taking great pride in her physical beauty: “I glanced at the small mirror in a niche in the wall, my pearl white teeth flashing back at me. I smiled. I will never allow a stare of any uncle or aunt to sully this beautiful face, I told myself fiercely” (12). The use of the word “fiercely” aptly captures the spirit and grit Pasho displays even in adverse circumstances. Another instance that shows Pasho self-love is noticed when her uncle beats her severely and she is locked in a cellar. Pasho waits for the door to open not for freedom but in order to “see myself in that magical mirror in the wall niche” (18).

One might easily term Pasho to be a crazy girl. This craze however becomes her greatest strength as she is able to get through all critical phases her life has in store for her amidst some happy moments. Had she not been in love with the self, she would not have been able to take so much suffering. Perhaps, she would have committed suicide much earlier. Even her unexpected homecoming after a series of adventures, is possible largely due to her willingness to live under any circumstances. Sobti perhaps wants to show Pasho’s happy reunion with the family to acknowledge her inner strength.

## **Victorious?**

Pasho emerges victorious even after being repeatedly sold and purchased like a commodity, played upon like a piano and treated like a servant. However, there is another facet of her personality. Her love for the self, instead of being a weakness, becomes an asset, her strength and gets her through all difficulties and reversals of fortune. This desire to live even against heavy odds becomes her forte. A reviewer on Krishna Sobti aptly sums up the character of Pasho thus: “Another fiery spirit, but not like Mitro, Pasho has the will to live, to outwit her tormentors by sheer grit, rather than deception, and to flower whenever fate smiles on her” (Rajan 2).



Pasho thus can be seen as a strong, gritty character who despite her traditionality, stands tall and erect. Of course, she cannot be termed a ‘strong’ woman when judged on the feminist parameters, she does display a sense of inner strength and personal courage. Her “will to live” does not only help her survive difficult, critical times but also present her as a woman who manages to negotiate her circumstances even without any awareness about her rights as an individual.

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