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Protest as a Replacement Model: A Study of Krishna Sobti's *Sunflowers of the Dark*

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Sunflowers of the Dark

The aim of the present research paper is to approach Krishna Sobti's *Sunflowers of the Dark* – the English translation of her Hindi novel *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke* (1972) – from the perspective of the protagonist's protest against oppression. Ratti, the protagonist, asserts and thus poses a challenge to the oppressive forces by maintaining an eyeball-to-eyeball contact. The stance she takes assumes significance in the light of the position generally taken by the Indian women. Normally, Indian women put on all shame

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and blame allowing the oppressor a safe passage. Therefore, Ratti's spirited resistance against the multiple socio-cultural forces assumes becomes all the more significant as it throws open new avenues for the Indian woman. It offers a strong basis for the replacement model as suggested by Chaman Nahal, the famous Indian English novelist and critic. As such, her journey is the journey of Indian woman towards self-realization. However, before moving any further, it is necessary to locate Krishna Sobti, the veteran Hindi novelist, in the Indian literary tradition and see how she, through her works, perceives the feminist issues in the Indian context.

The Author Krishna Sobti and Her Works



Krishna Sobti 1925 -

Krishna Sobti (1925-) is known for her portrayal of strong women characters. Mitro of *Mitro Marjani* (1966) for instance, is a live manifestation of Sobti's uninhibited portrayal of female sexuality. Mitro is what can be called physicality incarnated. Mehak of *Dilo-Danish* (1993) strongly asserts herself on the father of her children once she grows into awareness that she has been exploited throughout her life by the conniving lawyer.

Similarly, the girl of the *Listen Girl!* (1991) rejects the conventional life after marriage and therefore decides against tying the nuptial knot. Such characters have remained etched on the psyche of the reader ever since the books were published. These characters are assertive, open about their needs and desires and strong willed. However, honesty towards themselves as well as the outer world remains the hallmark of their personalities. It is this characteristic which gives them courage and inner strength to call a spade a spade. They will simply be not cowed down by the outside pressures.

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Ratti, the Protagonist

In Ratti, Sobti has created a strong character, perhaps stronger than the girl of *Listen Girl!* It is because Ratti prefers to face the situation rather than shying away from it like the girl. While the girl of *Listen Girl!* chooses the escapist model of resistance and decides not to marry at all in order to escape the trials and tribulations of married life like her mother, Ratti boldly takes the challenge of asserting herself on those who have wronged her in any way. Even as a teenager, she could not be prevailed upon when she was not in the wrong. Whatever happened to her as a child was not her fault; so why should she bear the burden of shame all the time?

Thus, Ratti surpasses all women characters of Sobti in not only resisting oppression but also subverting the oppressive structures of power through resistance. Subhash Chandra also links Ratti's protest to Chaman Nahal's replacement model in which the Indian novelist maintains that protest could be "one of the bases on which the replacement model can be constructed" (Nahal 32).

The Replacement Model

Here it would not be out of context to refer to Nahal's replacement model. In his essay "Feminism in Indian English Fiction", Nahal elaborates upon his concept of a replacement model for Indian women. He avers that in the present scenario when the orthodox model has been brought down, there has to a replacement model for woman to fall back upon, the way man has the rhetoric of custom or tradition to fall back upon and enjoys the prerogative to continue to wield power. This is how he puts it:

I would like to examine whether we have a replacement model in feminine fiction. It is very difficult to construct a replacement model. One cannot escape the myths—the conditioning myths with which one has grown up. Unless we construct new myths, we cannot construct a replacement model.... the replacement models are to be constructed in the context of the myths we already have. (31)

Further, Nahal suggests that there could be various bases on which this replacement model could be constructed. These bases include protest, defiance as well as

conformity. The bases of protest and conformity may be contradictory, but they lead to a replacement model.

The Traumatic Experience

In the novel *Sunflowers of the Dark*, Ratti, the female protagonist has to bear the traumatic experience of a rape-bid while in her teens. This single incident leaves an indelible impression on her mind and heart and she is not able to overcome the perpetual anguish caused by the incident. The after-effects are none-too-cheering. In fact, they are equally obnoxious.

What further worsens the situation for Ratti is the mindset of the society that holds her responsible for the accident and constantly reminds her of the misfortune by incessant bantering. Ratti's schoolmates concoct vulgar stories about her sexuality and she becomes a butt of their comments. Even after years, this incident mars her relationships with men and thwarts her attempts to realize her womanhood.

There are many occasions where Ratti is unable to consummate her relationship with her male friends. There is something that sends her freezing at the last moment and she withdraws. Frustrated, her male friends allege her to be sexually perverted. She remains an enigma for them. However, Ratti is finally able to attain consummation and self-actualization through Diwakar, a friend who understands her well and helps her forget the ghosts of her past that continue to haunt her and mar her present.

Attack and Challenge from Two Fronts

Ratti's protest in the novel is witnessed at two fronts. First, she is faced with the challenge of defending herself against the searing comments passed by her adolescent classmates about the accident and her resultant status of an outcaste. Second, she has to wipe out the after effects of the cruel, violent transgression on her individuality. At any front, it is not a walk over for Ratti. Sobti here shows the multiplicitous and impervious nature of dominant power structures wherein Ratti's classmates club together against the victim—a situation that is, at least seemingly, insurmountable. Shyamali, Ajju, Pikku, Dimpy, Pashi – all gang up against her. Even her parents in a way fail to provide

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emotional succour to Ratti: “They seemed to be looking at her with Ajju and Dimpy’s eyes” (37). It seems as if she were all alone to fend for herself.

Determined Resistance

Ratti handles this multiplicity of the oppressive forces by reacting violently rather than accepting her marginalized status submissively. She thrashes the scandal-mongers handsomely and takes pride in the fact that “she had it in her to defend herself” (43). When her parents seek an explanation for her ‘unruly’ behaviour at school – not caring for her version – she starts throwing down the dishes from the dining table. Even after being slapped and thrashed, her resistance does not abate and she stands firm. Finally, the parents realize their mistake in not being able to understand their daughter’s perspective. It shows clearly that even as an adolescent, Ratti chooses the base of protest to assert herself rather than retreating in anonymity. She hits back vehemently and violently at all those who want to push her back to the corner. She takes up cudgels on her schoolmates, her parents and society at large and is ready to fight as she confides in Asad: “I will not weep. I’ll fight each one of them” (SD 43).

Solace and Comfort from a Source

Asad is the only person who shows maturity and provides support to the girl. Amidst all accusations, he consoles Ratti with his caring words – the words that have a balmy effect on her bruised soul and give her a new vigour to face the challenges. When she is accused of being a bad girl, Asad cheers her up with the following words: “Look here, Ratti, look at me. Now listen to me. Ratti will always remember that she is a good girl. Sweet and brave” (45). These soothing words have a magical effect on the girl’s drooping spirits and she feels happy and light as a flower. Sobti only hints at a budding love relationship between Ratti and Asad who dreams of getting the girl as his bride and it seems that she too has no objection to this relationship. However, the boy dies a sudden, premature death with the result that Ratti is left all alone to fight the cruel, intimidating world.

Sexual Protest

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The second form of Ratti's protest which she resorts to as an adult is more complex and subtle. It manifests not in an overtly violent manner but it no doubt proves to be more effective. This mode of protest is sexual. The power exerted by the unidentified rapist is something she cannot forget easily. Now that she is an adult, self confident woman, she is no more vulnerable. It is now her choice that matters. She can always say no if she does not want to give herself. She cannot submit herself meekly to a male who like the unidentified rapist wants to overpower her using brute force. Ironically, all her male friends fail the test of love. To her great dismay, she finds them interested either in her body or her womb. In either case, Ratti would be a plaything – a role she can never accept.

Forced Withdrawal and Sadistic Pleasure?

In fact, her male friends do not recognize her individuality, her otherness leaving Ratti with no other option except withdraw herself. Subhash Chandra appears to be right when he comments in this regard: "Almost all of them brazenly crave for her body which she tantalizingly denies them. At times she appears to willing, but an indefinable inability to give herself grips her and she snaps the connection" (Chandra 117). Hurt, as her male friends feel, they label her as a 'cold' woman. Their harsh words bother Ratti no more as she has had enough of such experiences. There is a long list of her male friends including Sripat, Jainath, Ranjan, Bali, Sumer, Jagatdhar, Rohit, Bhanurao, Subramaniam etc.

Here one might accuse the protagonist of deriving sadistic pleasure out of her outings with boyfriends. But the fact is that Ratti is in search of a partner who can treat her on a par and thus genuinely help her understand and realize her womanhood and overcome the sense of shock. Actually, she is suffering from a psychological ailment and is striving hard to find a remedy. She wants a partner who approaches her with selfless companionship and not with lustful motives.

Nobody, however, bothers to understand her problem. The easiest possible conclusion people can arrive at is that she derives sadistic pleasure in tantalizing her male friends and thus threatens the social structure with her unorthodox way of living.

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Ironically, they do not see anything wrong in entering into a physical relationship outside marriage because they are males and the entire blame is put on the girl only. To quote Chandra again:

There is, at the back of her mind, a lingering but potent desire to assert herself and not to give herself, if she does not want to. Nobody can reach her sexually, if she is reluctant. It is her body, therefore her desire is sacrosanct. Her desire has to be respected by the body seekers.... She seems to celebrate the quest for personal independence. (118)

Restoration

Ratti's protest at the sexual level against those seekers of her body thus becomes a means of realizing her self. In denying her body to those males, Ratti regains her self confidence which was shattered by the rapist years ago when she was just a teenager. Sobti does reasonably well to present the protagonist's social neglect and seclusion in a matter-of-fact manner because to sentimentalize the trauma would have robbed the novel of its main thrust – that of one individual's coming to terms with oneself and defeating the ghosts of the past.

After several bitter experiences, however, Ratti happens to find a true companion in Diwakar. Right from the beginning, Diwakar shows keen interest in Ratti when he first heard about her from a common friend. It's not that they plan to get married. The man is already married. Likewise, Ratti too harbours no such romantic ideas about getting married to him. All she wants is healthy companionship through which she can realize herself. Diwakar too seems to be mature enough to see and recognize Ratti as an individual. He emerges as a genuine interpreter of Ratti's malady; and he frees the girl of all her inhibitions, reservation, mental blockades. When Ratti goes numb at the idea of trespassing into another woman's field, this is how he convinces her: "Whatever is happening within this common threshold, let it happen. Don't hold back, Ratika. No truth is absolute. The room that you saw is real. But it is also true that your nearness fills me with a joy that I've never felt before" (94-95). Here Diwakar's reaction to Ratti's numbness is radically different from that of her other male friends who grow restless and resort to accusations in the same situation. What they cannot understand or rather do not

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want to understand at all, Diwakar does and thus finds the key to her heart. Ratti also acknowledges it: “Do you know Diwakar, you have hit upon Ratti’s secret telephone number” (89). With his selfless companionship, Diwakar successfully rinses out the scar engraved on her psyche. The painful memories are replaced by the poetic, musical, blissful union of the two divergent forces:

Moving astride, Diwakar cradled Ratti’s head with a hand, and she tore off the cover, pulling him down into her depths. As her body danced to his rhythm, a spiraling pleasure, sharp and new, coursed through her. And Ratti seemed to laugh from behind the veil of her mind and body. Diwakar paused for a second to look into her eyes, and then he lost himself. A fish writhing on the shore was swept in by a whirlpool, and hearing Ratti’s silent scream, Diwakar too found his release. When he parted, pearls cascaded down her legs, lighting up Ratti’s decades-old darkness. (97)

‘Cold’ Woman Blossoming Like a Flower

The author too succeeds in proving that woman’s body is a sacred, sanctified thing and it cannot be won over without her willingness. In Diwakar’s company, the same Ratti who was termed as a ‘cold’ woman, blossoms like a flower and is able to exorcise the ghosts of her past. Their union is in fact based on the principle of equality and mutual respect and therefore fruitful and fulfilling.

Through Ratti’s open contravention and the resultant subversion of the prevalent power structures related to sexuality, Sobti makes a bold statement. Ratti’s escapades with her male friends are not in good taste of the dominant social norms. A girl is not supposed to roam freely with her male friends in late evenings otherwise she is viewed as a loose woman. If the male friends happen to be married, she is considered responsible for creating tension between the husband and the wife. Sobti however renders Ratti, apart from dignity and strength of character, a defiant attitude towards the sham morality standards of the society. Ratti therefore need not justify her actions to anyone. Whenever someone tries to enter her personal space by suggesting something about her behaviour and so on, she curtly shows him the mirror.

No Sense of Guilt

Ratti harbours no sense of guilt for whatever she does because she is honest to herself. She is clear in her perception and does not wear a mask. She openly accepts what she is or does. In this sense, she is more moral and ethical than her male friends who are basically hypocrites. They proclaim themselves to be the ‘custodians of morality’ but do not practice it themselves. To them, she appears to be a wench deriving sadistic pleasure out of her affairs with males, married and unmarried alike. That’s why they use for her judgmental phrases like “A heartless woman,” “A cold woman” etc. Ratti is amused at the hypocritical behaviour of people who otherwise would call themselves honest and respectable.

Against Conventional Social Fabric

Ratti, at the surface, seems to be threatening the close-knit structure of Indian society by her carefree roamings with her male friends; something which is objectionable from the traditional point-of-view. Here it must be kept in mind that both the protagonist and the novelist repose deep faith in the Indian values. As such, her version of individual space and freedom does not exclude the concept of family. Her concept of feminism is thus broad and in consonance with the Indian society. A critic on Sobti also supports this view when she comments: “Sobti surprises us, shocks us, even shakes us but does not rip everything in one go; rather she tries to join things together” (Aggrawal 28 English translation mine). This viewpoint is supported by the textual details as well. When Sripat brings her to his own bedroom, it becomes impossible for Ratti to go ahead as the room is the sanctum of another woman. She says: “How could you imagine that to love each other we have to live this lie of Una’s room?...The Sripat I wish to know should have been outside this room” (82-83). In her search for a companion, Ratti would never like to be blamed as a trespasser. Deeply rooted in the Indian culture and ethos as she is, she can never ruin a family. Being a woman, she cannot betray another woman. This becomes clear at many points in the novel when she pulls herself back due to such reasons.

A Milestone in the Journey of Self-actualization of Women

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In this sense, Ratti is an important milestone in the journey of Indian woman towards self-actualization. She can be called an emancipated woman with a modern concept of womanhood and her rights. She is economically independent, and open-minded. She is courageous and does not accept subservient status ever in her life. Having undergone a traumatic experience in her teens, she does not let the incident crush her personality and mind. In spite of the fact that the incident has left her aghast and few people can really provide the kind of emotional support she needs, Ratti successfully maintains her equilibrium. Through Ratti, Sobti shows how a woman can assert herself rather than lamenting her marginalized status and looking upwards for some divine help. In this sense, she rejects the idealistic, utopian solutions and adopts a practical, down-to-earth stance towards the real life problems.

Thus, Ratti emerges as a strong female individual who serves as a replacement model through her feisty protest. She successfully resists against the duplicity and multiplicity of the structures of power and is able to create her own individual space in a tradition-bound society. It is in protest that her potential for the de-hegemonization of the oppressive structures lies and she becomes one of the strongest voices of woman against oppression in the contemporary Indian fiction.

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