

**Women and their Exploitation: A Feminist Reading of K.A. Abbas's
short stories, *Flowers for the Feet* and *The Sparrow***

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Abstract:

This paper proposes to study K. A. Abbas's short stories, *The Sparrow* and *Flowers for the Feet* in the light of feminism. It attempts to examine the role of patriarchal thinking in the suppression and oppression of women like Chandra and Radha. The paper reflects as to how the fixed gender roles assigned by patriarchal set up doesn't allow women to engage with roles of their own choice. The analysis of *Flowers for the Feet* displays as to how women is forced into the institution of prostitution to serve men both at home and outside. The examination of the story further unveils the hypocritical hood of blood relations by exposing a father who has forced his daughter to work as a prostitute to get himself benefitted economically. The research paper also analyses K. A. Abbas's short story *The Sparrow* from feministic perspective in which the plight of Radha has been depicted realistically. It shows as to how Radha has become a beating object for her husband Rahim Khan whose anger against society gets poured out at his wife. The story projects as to how Radh's father suppresses her freedom of speech by denying of her marriage

with the Rahim Khan who was her only own choice. It highlights as to how Radha's husband mistakes her productive potential for child producing machine.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender and Exploitation.

Introduction to Feminism

Feminism is an analytical approach that examines the position and representation of women in literary texts and their role in various cultural practices. It advances the view that gender is not biological, inherent and inborn category like sex rather it is a socially constructed notion with regard to both women and men. This social constructionist view of gender finds its early proponent in the voice of Simone De Beauvoir who says, "One is not born a woman but becomes one" (De Beauvoir 267). Feminist movement champions the rights of women and demands educational, economic and political rights for women at par with men. This movement projects problems of gender disparity, inequality of opportunities, wage differences and social injustice of women either through writings or through their activism. Toril Moi observes, "Feminist criticism is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism". (Moi 204)

Objective of the Study

- To explore exploitation of women in K.A. Abbas's short stories, *Flowers for the Feet and The Sparrow*

Methodology of the Study

The undertaken research paper employed qualitative research methodology to explore the gender roles, oppression and exploitation of women in K. A. Abbas's short stories *Flowers for the Feet and The Sparrow*. The research paper used textual analysis method for the exploration such

feminist ideas like gender discrimination, women exploitation and oppression and their freedom of expression in stories like *Flowers for the Feet* and *The Sparrow*. The textual analysis drew on tenets of feminism. It drew on existing books, journals and research papers related to feminism. Last but not in any respect the least, this study used the ideas from various other disciplines as well.

Feminist Reading of Stories

K. A. Abbas's short stories address various issues and concerns of feminism by depicting life-like women characters in his writings realistically. He raises voice against the exploitation of any human being no matter, be it a women or men. His writings champion the cause of poor, helpless children and women through his writings. They advocate equal rights for all irrespective of sex, caste and gender. He highlights the issue of exploitation wherever he finds its roots in existence. He even represents such injustice in his films and novels. In one of his short stories, *The Sparrow*, Abbas elaborately projects as to how the wish of Radha has been crushed by her father, Ram Charan who is the symbol of patriarchal system. She has been in love with Rahim Khan but her romance with him fails to get materialized into marriage on religious accounts and androgenic thinking. Her father, Ram Charan, has snatched her individual choice and voice. He doesn't ask her for her choice of marriage. He gets her married to an old man, Ram Lal. She becomes mother of six children in a row. This procreating potential of women deludes man to mistake her for a child producing machine. If woman fails to deliver this essential function of child birth, she is thought as incomplete woman and sterile. This labeling makes her more vulnerable to various domestic and social taunting.

The Sparrow reflects as to how a woman like Radha has no option than to remain silent before a patriarchal dictatorship. She has to behave like a cow whether sold to butcher or imposed

husband. It makes no difference for her because her will to marry a person she loves has been killed. “Rahim Khan had noticed her watching him at a wrestling match and it had been the greatest moment of his life when, standing up after vanquishing his adversary– he found Radha looking at him with a light of love in her eyes” (Abbas 4).

Progressive vision of K.A. Abbas like feminism advocates the rights of women. This feministic movement fights for their rights and then ensures them. It puts in effort to bring women at par with men in all fields in order to make them enjoy choice of life partner, work and freedom of speech. K.A. Abbas depicts in, *The Sparrows* as to how the rights of women are crushed, snatched and trampled; as to how their voice is suppressed and is made to speak whatever man wants them to speak. Abbas says Radha was a human being with her own voice and choice. These are natural to every human being and come under the category of fundamental rights. So every man or woman is entitled to enjoy them. But, alas! Radha could not enjoy anyone of these because both were denied to her by dictator tempered father. He did not ask her where and whom she wanted to marry with. Rather, he like a dictator chose a middle-aged man and got her married with him. This all is against the concept of feminism. He says that everyone has full right to dream about their life and their realization. However, no one cared about the wishes and aspirations of Radha and Rahim Khan. Their dreams remained unrealized. Once society comes to know about Radha’s dream of crossing the barrier of religion, she is stopped and her dream is snatched from her. She is tied to an old man like a stick without being asked as if she is a vehicle given to a driver. Her father haven’t got her married but has sold her to an old butcher like a cow. Abbas observes:

Within a few weeks Radha was married to Ram Lal, a middle aged potbellied Banya of the neighboring village. With a few sad tears shed in the solitude of the

night in memory of her hopeless romance with Rahim Khan, she quickly reconciled herself to her fate and proceeded forthwith to be the mother of half a dozen children. (Abbas 5)

K. A. Abbas depicts in the same story the plight of women and the way they are treated in patriarchal society. He portrays character of Rahim Khan in his short story, *The Sparrow*, who symbolizes the cruelest face of patriarchy. He always beats his wife unnecessarily who is nameless in the entire story as if names are only meant for men. Her nature of being nameless in the story speaks out her humble position in the society and the level of thinking in that very society regarding woman. Radha as a woman has become an object of oppression on which he bursts out his anger. His grievance is basically against his father and society but instead of targeting them he thunders all grievances upon his wife. Abbas writes, "For thirty years his wife had been both the symbol and target of all his grievances against family, against society and against life". (3) It seems very clear that the status of women in the male dominated society is no more than an animal because he beats his oxen and wife in identical ways.

K.A. Abbas portrays the issue of women exploitation in his story *Flowers for the Feet*. He develops a character named Chandra who entertains public by dancing. She is paid and appreciated for her sensual and suggestive bodily gestures but not for her art of dancing. These gestures basically satisfy sense of sight and sense of sex of men folk. That is why even today women dancer is preferred over the dance of men. The current forms of such exploitation are item songs accompanied by the most sensual dance in which the female dancer exposes her body parts up to the extreme level. Chandalia observes, *Flowers for her Feet* is yet another story in which sexual exploitation of a girl is depicted. Chandra, the dancing girl is harassed and exploited by all, especially the economic elite as the rich people think that women are

commodities which can be bought or sold for money” (Chandalia). One of the characters Sath Sahib, dance spectator, has pulled Chandra’s by hand while her dancing and starts caressing her thighs erotically. She doesn’t like it and runs away. Abbas mentions, “His experienced hand was caressing Chandra’s well-rounded thighs. She did not seem to enjoy it and moved away.” (21) This erotic attitude towards female dancers does not only hold good for rich people like Seth Sahib but it is true across the board.

K. A. Abbas reflects through the story ‘Flowers for the Feet’ that prostitution is not women’s own choice. The main agent blamed for women’s forceful ingress in oppressive institution like prostitution is man who exploits her there sexually and emotionally. He highlights that they do not like to work or engage as sex workers. They, too, wish to live a dignified life and aspire to materialize their long cherished dreams. They seek dignified ways to self-actualize themselves and express their individuality. However, the social system dominated by man denies them those distinguished opportunities and design ways of trapping them in institutions like prostitution. Most of them cherish the wish of having a caring husband and a complete family. Aradhika Sharma conveys: “‘Flowers at her Feet’ is the story of a courtesan, who is famous in her days of glory, and whom many love. Her tragedy lies in a loss, so sad that it leaves the writer’s heart cleft.” (Sharma)

K. A. Abbas depicts the progressive journey of a woman leaving the business of prostitution for the better future of her daughter, Chandra. Her mother marries an admirer whose sights have been on Chandra just from the beginning of marriage. The nameless admirer has taken them to Mumbai and keeps Chandra in brothel house for economical reasons. Chandra longs to marry a flower seller, Babu, but her stepfather does not allow her. According to feministic perspective she is the owner of her body and has every right to dream a dignified life. Her decision of

marrying Babbu is right because she is an individual having her own choice and voice. However, her voice has been suppressed and her freedom of marriage is trampled at the moment when her stepfather comes to know about her elopement plan with Babbu, the flower seller. Like a beast, he cuts off both of her feet so that she is not able to run away with Babbu again. He resorts to this bestial act of amputation to retain the source of income with him. Nivedita Ramakrishnan illustrates:

The most filmy of the stories is “Flowers for her feet” where a prostitute called Chandra purposely spurns, in the end, the kind young man who loves her because she has lost her legs, a fact that she hides from him because she does not want to ruin his life and while he still brings flowers for her feet. (Ramakrishnan)

Chandra’s stepfather’s ambitious looks have been at Chandra right from the inception even before he marries Chandra’s mother. Though Chandra does not want to join brothel house, she is forced to create such atmosphere in her room. Since the very beginning of her childhood she has been put on this service and has been cultured like a plant in contrived atmosphere of prostitution. She is without the freshness of youth because of induced maturation. K.A. Abbas says:

Yet it must be said that she was young and there was the yeast of youth in the firm curves of her body. She could not be more than twenty but she was like a plant that had been nurtured too quickly in the unnatural atmosphere of a hot house. She has the look of youth, the colour and smell of youth but not its freshness sweetness. (Abbas 18)

K.A. Abbas attempts to convey that her freedom of expression has been snatched before its expression. He remarks that the aesthetic sense of public is too strange and self-centred. They

praise that whatever is praiseless, shameful and condemnable. They do not have real taste and identification of art. For example, Chandra is extremely appreciated when she dances in a sensuous manner giving sexual gestures of her flexible body. This dance performance full of erotic steps makes her a screen-hit and she gets contract after contract in films. In other words, this is the exploitation of women in the name of art and freedom because she is given role to gratify the sexual sense of man. The more a woman yields in getting herself exploited, the more she is welcomed. K.A. Abbas observes, "There was nothing in her dance except substantial quantities of Chandra's bare flesh and suggestive gestures. But later, I learnt it was much appreciated by the public and because of it she got several other film contracts to give similar dances". (Abbas 26)

K.A. Abbas projects Chandra as progressive because she has preferred to marry Babbu, a flower seller, over adopting luxurious life of hot-house. She even gets ready to elope with Babu to escape the demoralized life of brothel. Feminists, like Abbas raise voice against such exploitation of women and pen down writings to address and highlight their issues and concerns. His writings display that man always nods about the suffrage of women and does nothing to put it into practice. The occasion demands such a championship which not only convinces him for agreement but also changes his mentality positively towards her. This feeling will enable man not to behave like Chandra's father who is the living example of exploitation of womanhood. The loss of human value can be brought back provided man will change his mind set-up and behave like a progressive person. Abbas proposes that woman should not be looked upon as a drop of honey over which all the poisonous flies hover greedily. Her body must not be taken as machine without feelings and emotions. She must be considered an individual with her own wishes and wants. Peerzada Salman checks up:

My personal favourite, though, is “Flowers at her Feet”. Given that Khwaja Sahib worked in and for the Indian film industry he knew the business and those associated with it inside-out. The tale moves like a film, in short but meaningful bursts. It pivots around a dancing girl who has many admirers and, as it often happens, suffers a heart-wrenching setback in life. The reader can sense what the writer feels for his protagonist. There`s an element of compassion that stands out in the way he narrates the story. (Salman)

Conclusion

To sum up the whole crux of the story, it can be asserted that woman, too, follows and accepts the respectable code of conduct. But at times becomes iconoclastic when woman finds the water of injustice is about to submerge her. She knows how to rebel and resist against society but hardly goes for it as she believes in non-violence, opposite to the nature of man who often resorts to it as a tool of oppression and suppression. This story shows turning of a woman into a prostitute by man for his own ulterior motives and vested interests. History bears witness to the fact that whenever and wherever man finds women folk economical in terms of money, he allows their exploitation and then justifies it either by law or religion. This brings forth the hypocritical nature of man. Man always expects women to be submissive and obedient. The moment she asks for basic rights of freedom, education and choice she is considered as corrupt and irreligious. Man always supposes her to bow down before him and uses her as a sex-object no matter whatever way she is related to him namely daughter, wife or sister. These relations weaken and do not mean anything for man at the time of exploitation. He wishes her to behave like a cow and is expected not to object him whether he keeps or sells her. He behaves like a butcher and looks for materialistic ends in women. Moreover, women are treated as something to

bash at one's anger during frustration in identical ways as Rahim Khan does. This mentality still prevails in our social set-up as frequently as it used to be in traditional societies. The way to eradicate this curse of gender based violence may educational, social and political space and gender parity awareness.

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