

Interplay of Honor and Shame: An Analytical Study of Selected Non-Fictional Writings of Jaswinder Sanghera and Deepa Narayan

Riju Sharma*

Assistant Professor of English, Post Graduate Government College, Sector-46, Chandigarh

Abstract – Within the walls of their own minds women are being subjected to continuous torture & trauma for a variety of reasons. They yearn to be free from exploitation, victimization, injustice and all such evils that challenge their existence. For a woman, freedom is not a matter of having but a matter of being, a state of mind which gives her the liberty to transcend all kinds of barriers that the social order, religion, caste, gender and culture impose on her. She longs to carve a niche for herself in a world of mislaid identities which seeps into the dominance of the males and lowers the status of women though history gives evidence to show that women were not only intellectually at par with men but were also valued for their individualism. This study is structured under the broad framework of honor and shame as set in the minds of women through two non-fictional works written by Jaswinder Sanghera and Deepa Narayan thereby questioning their identity as well as existence in order to reclaim and rename womanhood and question the very basis of it.

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Jaswinder Sanghera entered the domain of literature with her debut non-fictional work *Shame* (2007). This submissive, timorous and self-effacing autobiographical illustration finds a revolt in this non-fictional narrative where Sanghera gives a captivating account of the sojourn of a runaway girl to a co-founder of Karma Nirvana, an organization for men and women who have become sufferers of forced marriage and honor-based abuse. The writer's experiences foreground the significance of women's own understanding of the concept of honor, shame, social malaise and the heartlessness exhibited towards women.

The man of the house, Chanan Singh in *Shame*, migrated to the English industrial city of Derby from Kang Sabhu, Punjab way back in 1951 in pursuit of better life dreaming that Derby was the place that would provide eternal bliss to him. It was not easy for him and his family to recognize and reconcile with their migrating identities. Later, he married a fifteen year old girl who was his first wife's sister and since then, both of them made indefatigable effort to take on and embrace the modern ways so that they could seek communal approval by the mainstream society in Derby. They struggled hard to cling on to the Indian habits which had been conferred upon them since birth. In spite of their gradual fondness for their place of dwelling, they still long to relive the harmonious days of the past, bear a nostalgia for Punjab and perhaps this could be very well defended by what Heidegger (1966) speaks of what he calls

autochthony or rootedness in a place as a basic condition for the development of authentic human existence. Physically, they lived in Derby, but mentally in Punjab, thinking about their farm in Punjab and the big shady tree in the middle of the village, where the men folk would sit at the end of the day. Caught in the vortex of new identity, their world seems to crumble when they see that none of their daughters has been blessed with conjugal harmony. Commenting on the lives of Sikhs residing in Canada, Kamala Elizabeth Nayar says, 'Immigrant parents are concerned about maintaining ethnic identity and cultural practices; meanwhile their Canadian-born children do not generally reject their religious and cultural heritage. Generally, they experience a great deal of ethnic insularity, when, in fact they would like the broader Punjabi culture and religion while doing away with those customs they dislike (such as izzat) and interacting more with the mainstream.' Consequently, the memoir *Shame* bears testimony to the fact that migration from one's homeland does not entail the immigration of the mind and the soul.

Along with a gaggle of six sisters and one brother, Jasvinder was born and brought in a family where an authoritarian, religious mother who could always be heard reciting Ik Omkaar, a symbol which appears at the beginning of the Sikh scripture and communicates the idea that one creative being, or one God, manifest in all of existence. It was so, because for Sikhs, religion and culture form a

single entity as it does for the Hindus. The lopsided double values of her mother could be very well seen when she went to the gurudwara, the Sikh temple which was to Jasvinder 'the local gossip shop'. Her mother always tried to instil her native cultural identity in her children which as shame and honor were the two things she feared the most and she wanted her daughters to be good daughters-in-law imbibing the virtues of respectfulness and subservience. This leads to submission in all the other six daughters though she fails to inculcate a strong moral fiber as per her ideas and beliefs, in Jasvinder. In Indian society, boys have a persuasive preference over girls and this zeal created havoc in the family. Perhaps, the boy would keep the family name intact. According to Manu, "A man conquers the world by the birth of a son; he enjoys eternity by that of a grandson; and the great grandfather enjoys eternal happiness by the birth of a grandson's son". Such ideas could be very well witnessed in Jasvinder's house. The son, Balbir, of course had more latitude, a wide range of options than the seven girls of the family. The only son in the family, Balbir does not apply the same code of behavior to himself. At seven, Jasvinder started questioning her mother vis-à-vis her male sibling Balbir.

'Why is he allowed out on his own and we're not? Why do I have to learn to cook when he doesn't?' (6)

Unfortunately, as far as parental preference was concerned, Balbir had an edge over the seven sisters. Ideally, though parental discipline and gender-role socialization should play a vital role in molding the lives of children, Shame's portrayal of women seems to be quite contrary to the belief of Hodding Carter Jr., a journalist and philosopher, who stated that a socialization process should aim at fulfilling two goals. He says:

'There are two lasting bequests we should give our children.....one is roots, the other is wings.'

A 'strong unbending woman', the mother succeeded in strengthening the roots and inculcating the socially defined roles for her daughters to be good wives and mothers with a silent presence, a kind of benevolent despotism, hardly giving them space. But Jasvinder was the only daughter who realized the value of wings and mustered the courage to fly. The new openness, camaraderie, sharing and newly attained liberty was initially a welcome change for her. However, her aspired freedom and joy was illusive and short lived. She started dreaming of a happy family reunion and wanted to pursue studies in the college by being a part of the family that was once hers and a world that used to be hers. She confessed:

'I wanted to teach Mum a lesson. I wanted her to say, 'Oh, all right then, come home, you don't have to get married.....Go to college' (73).

But now she had no one to call her own. She says, 'Images of home teased me, dancing in and out of my mind' (79). To her utter dismay, she was never welcomed again in the home which was once her own thus negating the concept of home as formulated in the following lines of poetry by Robert Frost:

Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in...

Her problems were three pronged: she was a girl, she was an Indian Sikh girl, and an Indian Sikh *Jat* girl who being dissatisfied with the probable way of life for a girl child that her mother wanted her to lead, under the duress of forced marriage had taken a step forward by marrying a *chamar* and therefore did not uphold the good name or honor of her family. Though her family had severed ties with her, when Jassey was back in touch with his family she realized:

'He was still their son but I was no one's daughter' (83).

Jasvinder was perturbed not only by the struggle she had to face in life but also by the treatment that was met out by her sisters who were one by one shipped off to India with an intention to get married to a man of their mother's choice. Jassey tried to be a friend, a mother, a father and husband to her but nostalgic feelings and a feeling of guilt hung around. According to the Encyclopedia of Psychology, 'Guilt is a cognitive or an emotional experience that occurs when a person realizes or believes—accurately or not—that he or she has compromised his or her own standards of conduct or has violated a moral standard, and bears significant responsibility for that violation.' Ever since the human species came into being in order to subsist in concert, some kind of communal order and social rules were to be adhered to. In the process of socialization, any infringement of these set of laws led to a feeling of guilt and shame as in the vast array of all those emotions that form the basis on human psyche, guilt and shame go hand in hand. Underneath the social framework of Christianity, lay the concept of guilt. The idea of guilt for them was closely associated with the idea of 'original sin'. A major distinction for socialization between the Eastern religions and the Western ones is that it is based on *shame* rather than *guilt*. According to a British economist, Deepak Lal, "Indian society has always been a 'shame' society, and whereas the Christians went on to build a guilt-based process of socialization to expiate original sin, no such sense of guilt underpins Islam. ... Islam's socialization process, like those of most of the other non-Christian Eurasian civilizations, depends upon shame." After her marriage with Jassey, time and again, Jasvinder felt as if she was

drifting towards an unexplored sea of uncertainty trying hard to come terms with the fact that her family did not even care a fig for her. A sense of guilt looms over her and rejection by her parents made her feel absolutely worthless. Alice Miller claims that "many people suffer all their lives from this oppressive feeling of guilt, the sense of not having lived up to their parents' expectations....no argument can overcome these guilt feelings, for they have their beginnings in life's earliest period, and from that they derive their intensity." Nothing could bring joy to her, nothing could comfort her. Jasvinder had absolutely no desire to make a new beginning:

'I was still convinced I was the one who had done something wrong and sinned against my family. Guilt hung around me like a big black cloud. Because of me people were spitting at my mum in the street'(101).

She was repeatedly made to realize that the claustrophobic family atmosphere that she had given up was far better, though it came as a backlash to her impulsive decision of marrying Jassey Rattu.

There is always a thin dividing line between guilt and shame. According to cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict, 'Shame is a violation of cultural or social values while guilt feelings arise from violations of one's internal values. Thus shame arises when one's 'defects' are exposed to others, and results from the negative evaluation (whether real or imagined) of others; guilt, on the other hand, comes from one's own negative evaluation of oneself, for instance, when one acts contrary to one's values or idea of one's self.' For Jasvinder, the guilt of bringing disgrace and shame to her parents in the community was all the more sickening. Jasvinder had violated the socio-cultural norms that any Punjabi Sikh mother of those times would have imposed on her daughter making the whole family experience embarrassment, dishonor, disgrace, humiliation, or chagrin. A melancholic and pensive propensity developed in her too when she realized that she had failed to be a diligent daughter, obedient wife, a dutiful daughter-in-law and a model Asian citizen. Jassey had built a house for her that any other Asian girl would have wanted, but she still could not love him. Perhaps, in order to punish herself she denied herself all the pleasures of life due to guilty feelings until she saw that the cracks in her marriage with Jassey were widening that she finally decided to leave him and move on with Raj Sanghera. She believed:

'There is no lonelier place to live than in a dying marriage' (164).

So driven by helplessness and hopelessness and questioning the supremacy of men, Sanghera founded *Karma Nirvana*, a feminine legroom with a philanthropic motive to all such women like Jasvinder

Sanghera where none could measure them on the yardstick of coercion and fear.

Mindful of both cultural stereotyping and the moral dimension tied to it, Deepa Narayan, a social scientist, gives a similar account of saddening and relatable interviews of women through her non-fictional work *Chup* (2018). Narayan says that being a woman is itself a taboo (8) and the strident tone of male superiority silences her distinct and independent identity. Kate Millet says, "The essence of politics is power and the most fundamental and pervasive concept of power in our society is male dominance." Neera, a resident of Delhi points it out in her interview what her mother taught her about three important occasions in the life of a woman:

When she is born, when she gets married and when she becomes a mother. Every time you make sacrifices willingly. Whether I was born this way or brought up this way, I do not know but I am always ready to make sacrifices...Desire has no place in a good woman's life, it interferes with the performance of her duty in life (203).

The androcentric social setup forces women to believe that duty is the core identity of a woman and desire is her biggest rival. The concept of identity relegates her position to the back since closely connected to it is the family honor and is a part of 'cultural ironing and disciplining' (209), according to Narayan. In the past, honor was strongly related to the establishment of marriage. Honor was a forceful form that passed through paternal line in most patrilineal mores and the voice of the subaltern feels ensnared and insulated by the socio-cultural forces where the honor of a family is directly connected with the position of a woman just because she can be easily influenced and forced into a union to which she may not want to approve but the moral obligation forces her to approve of. Her sexuality is controlled and the idea of '*thoda adjust kar lo*' (92) is repeatedly reinforced though women try to display signs of retaliation, resentment and non-acceptance at individual level, later in life.

Deepa Narayan examines the long-established misogyny and the structural inequalities experienced by women belonging to diverse backgrounds, class and culture throughout India. Drawing parallels from the experiences of Loveleen, Pallavi, Surbhi and many other third world women who are still brought up with an idea of '*padh likh ke kuch ban jao phir jo chahe karna*'(109) for the sake of family honor as their parents would not permit their sexual self to exist outside of a marriage thereby carry a lot of 'baggage around sexual expression' (149) they still situate themselves in a monolithic category where the subaltern is time and again silenced. Deepa Narayan's *Chup* is remarkably manifested with gender issues. As old as the human race, the

cultural phenomenon of marriage is believed to be essential for a stable society. It must be nurtured with attraction, communication, commitment, enjoyment, purpose and trust but, generally, in the Indian society women are subjected to sexual violence by the husband thereby making it difficult for a woman neither to escape from her husband's home nor explore the possibility of changing the husband in the name of family honor though there is nothing honorable about it thus forcing the womenfolk to think as what T.S. Eliot said in 'The Rock,'

"Where is the Life we lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?"

To be a woman in India is not easy and not all marriages in India are happy. She is buried under moral expectations of honor and shame and is expected to fit into the frame of an obedient daughter, goody-goody-daughter-in-law and a shy and dutiful wife as deference to authority is her only *dharma*. Her potential is trifling. Being ambitious is viewed as troublesome and 'dirty' (216). So under the garb of tradition, girls are subjected to honor crimes, violence and bullying not only within families but also at their workplace. Women are deprived of opportunities and perks, and are conscious of it as are Divya or Shravanthi in *Chup* as they hold themselves back from confronting their boss out of deference and fear. Feminists such as Lin Farley and Catharine MacKinnon exposed sexual harassment as a serious problem of sex-based supremacy that affected women's capability to achieve parity. MacKinnon's 'Sexual Harassment of Working Women' emphasizes on two theories by which sexual harassment can be well thought-out as sex discrimination: the inequality theory and the disparate treatment theory. The two women Shravanthi and Divya were victims of the latter - the disparate treatment based on their gender because of their Indian upbringing that compelled them to be polite, patient and peace-loving.

Dealing with the complexities of domestic life, women are forced to believe that honour and shame are interwoven within the labyrinth of socio-cultural norms. Women, according to Narayan, are trained to disguise or shrink their bodies as the society wishes to diminish their presence. The gendered representation of shame promotes coyness, vulnerability and dependence shifting the attention of women from physical to mental constraints as the so-called society 'owns women's bodies' and takes control of their bodies fails to realize that no society can live on devoid of a woman's womb to create new life and despite this she is expected to discipline her body. According to Adrienne Rich, "Female sexuality is celebrated for its power and its supposed capacity to escape from structures of dominance and submission." So women are repeatedly made conscious of their bodily imperfections and are raised to become body-less and voiceless so that they can be subjugated and Narayan exposes the

shallowness of female corporeality comprehensively in *Chup*. Witnessing a torrent of emotions after interviewing women between the ages of 17 and 35 who shared their dilemmas about the unequal cultural world she says, 'After this initial burst of nudity at birth, the body is covered by silence' (17) and the perpetuation of chastity and family *izzat* bring misery for a lifetime and zero breathing space for women where she is proclaimed as a sinner if she tries to spread her wings. Narayan's feminist critique further penetrates deep into the concept of religion in India through one of the lesser known versions of Ramayana, *Abhyuta Ramayana*, which thrives off the notions of a woman being unequal and weak as she gives reference to Sita who assumes the form of Mahakali, the goddess of death and effortlessly beheads Ravana feeling enraged after learning that Rama was mortally wounded. She is praised by Rama later and the Lord even bows at Sita's feet and sings 1008 praises to honor her. So India must realize that a women's movement needs to exist and any power or *Naari Shakti* should not become anemic and enmeshed in ideologies of patriarchy thus negating the viewpoint of Reneta Rabichev: 'A woman's honour is judged by her sense of sexual shame' as the entwining of gendered honour and shame accounts for women's misery.

Having socio-cultural reinforcement, the concept of honour, guilt and shame has vividly been portrayed amongst the various slices of life of the women who were interviewed by Narayan and the autobiographical account given by Sanghera. This imprint of suffering and the war against womanhood bears testimony to the fact that this issue needs to be effective and immediate attention. Both Jasvinder Sanghera and Deepa Narayan believe that women are socialized to think and conduct themselves in feminine ways and in doing so their perception of guilt, violence and abuse develops covertly. Disagreeing concepts of gender identity have been established so far by theorists like June Singer and Julia Kristeva and in this regard it is believed that men have subtly tried to control women, mentally as well as physically by creating such taboos which assign all the rights to them as they fear that if the women do not surrender to them then definitely it would be perceived as a threat to their authority, ego and above all, their subsistence. On the other hand, it is also believed that men are so because they are conditioned to be so, in order to imbibe the masculine qualities. Therefore, shaping an abundance of perceptions women are hostages to customs and share a collective victimhood in every corner of the orb.

This social crusade as seen through the gender lens has a direct impact on the lives of women. Honor and shame are two parallel tags. The mere perception that a woman's conduct brings dishonor is sufficient enough to trigger an attack on her life, and undeniably, in a domineering and restraining dynamics of family, the Indian woman is still in

search of what Virginia Woolf calls 'room of my own'. The strength of these two works lies in negating the conventional cultural code and awakening the feminist consciousness where silence is no more a virtue. This pressing issue of finding a language of assertion for all the women in the world who at living at an edge and are victims of trends, needs to be radicalized.

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Corresponding Author

Riju Sharma*

Assistant Professor of English, Post Graduate Government College, Sector-46, Chandigarh

rijusharma5@gmail.com