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POWER AND RESISTANCE IN MAITREYI PUSHPA'S SHORT NARRATIVES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF "FAISALA" AND "UJRADARI"

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Abstract

Power operates mainly at two levels: repression and hegemony. While repression manifests the direct use of power, hegemony thrives on the subtle nuances of power operation and therefore, more deep seated and challenging. However, the very nature of power operation leaves the possibility of a potential resistance which again could be seen at overt as well as covert levels. The present paper endeavours to deal with this mutually contradictory relationship between power and resistance in two short narratives by Maitreyi Pushpa. The way the female protagonists locate gaps in the prevailing power structures and register a potent resistance in their own individual and yet highly effective ways makes the study not only interesting but relevant as well. While Basumati challenges the rhetoric of propriety and reliability by choosing to be 'unreliable' in a covert manner, Shanti compromises with the traditional concept of morality and transgresses into an immoral sexual relationship to pose a challenge to the operation of power on her in the form of intra-familial exploitation. Such actions on the part of the female protagonists may not be seen in a positive light by the traditionalists, they in fact further accentuate the possibility of resistance against oppression in any form.

Keywords

Repression, Hegemony, Ideology, Resistance, Power Structure, Tradition, Propriety.

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"Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 95)

Michel Foucault rightly claims that resistance exists always in the ways through which power is operated. That's why power and resistance are interlinked in such a manner that power cannot be operated without the possibility of potential resistance. Power is essentially a matter of subordination; a hierarchy, and status. Where power is repressive, it creates many possibilities of direct resistance. On the other hand, when power works at a covert, subtle level i.e. through ideological means, it becomes very difficult to trace and thus resist it. Nevertheless, resistance does register itself in this case also and it is equally subtle. In other words, power and resistance co-exist. So resistance is a response of an oppressed to challenge the exploitative and unjust structures of power. As the modes of exploitation are different i.e. power works through consent, threat, coercion, and force, the nature of resistance also varies from one case to the other. It also depends on the means of power used. The types of resistance will vary according to the acts and what motivational ideas and ideologies guide the resistance. James Scott presents a classification of resistance into two types, which he presents in his "Everyday resistance" in 1985. According to him, resistance may be "public" and "disguised".

In the present paper, the endeavour is to explore these types of resistance, which emanate from coercion or ideological maneuverings and result into open revolts, petitions, etc. For this study, "Faisala" (The Verdict) and "Ujradari" (The Caveat) – two short narratives from Maitreyi Pushpa's collection of short stories, *Das Pratinidhi Kahaniyan* (Ten Representative Stories) – have been selected. In these narratives, Pushpa traces the power operation, not at the macro level but at the micro level. In both the stories, the protagonists pose resistance from their distinct positions. Shanti and Basumati are very different in their nature and temperament and yet they resist in their own unique manner. In these stories, resistance seems to find its way firstly through

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'avoidance' which is apparently visible in the case of Basumati at the time, when she manifests a sign of defiance of not to sign the fake documents of *Panchayat* funds prepared by her husband Ranveer, and pretends that she has no time to sign. In this way, the process of a potential resistance starts by using the primary step of 'avoidance' but seems very slow in both stories. Power acts through the dominant ideology which also gives way to resistance because prevailing ideology and discursive means guide a resistance.

In her stories, Maitreyi Pushpa illustrates that oppression and exploitation will definitely lead to the inevitable resistance and change. In both stories, power is exercised on the same level – on gender level – but the mode of resistance in these stories is different. In these two stories, power functions through the most intense relationships of family, as a consequence of which a strong and potential resistance emerges from the reactions of the protagonists. The stories trace the phase when traditionally, a woman is regarded as a commodity by the male and thus can be possessed like his own property. A woman is conditioned to assimilate and live since birth till death according to her given traditional image of 'Savitri' and 'Sita'. For this purpose, a woman in patriarchal society is repeatedly indoctrinated by the hegemonic images of propriety and customs. She should always stick to the propriety and customs so naturally without questioning the oppressive system of dominant patriarchy. In this way, these stories illustrate not only repressive measures of power i.e. threat, and coercion but also an ideology of unwitting consent as well. Thus, eliciting the consent of the subject is the main target of the power holders, and power can sustain only when the subject gives an easy 'consent' to his/her own exploitation.

Hence, to elicit the consent of the subject, many a times decorum and propriety play their significant roles and in these stories, these measures of power seem to work at a larger level, where the woman is entrapped under the wall of hollow and false traditions and both the protagonists feel compelled to adhere to their traditional images for survival. Patriarchy never allows a woman to have equal participation in society; that's why Ranveer, Basumati's husband in "Faisala", restricts her all the times and preaches her about her duties for her husband: "A woman should never go against her husband's will and she should do what is told to her" (170).

Thus, this type of indoctrination always restricts a woman to pose a resistance against her oppression and because of this, having been aware of their rights both the characters seem to give way to the imposed 'traditional' image that a woman should always be 'submissive'. That is the reason why she remains submissive in spite of being aware of the misappropriation of the panchayat funds by Ranveer. She tries to avoid signing the documents but when insisted upon, she is so terrified of her husband's authoritative nature and wrath, that she signs the documents mechanically. Her conscience continuously pricks her; she wants to throw away the burden of propriety and aristocracy; and wants to be flamboyant like Isuriya, the illiterate goatherd. But she finds no way to come out of the octopus-like trap of power, because she is conditioned in such a way that now she has no courage to go against her husband directly. Ranveer, in his image of 'male authority', is so powerful that he can remind his wife of duties and responsibilities of an "ideal" wife towards her husband, thus successfully restricts Basumati whenever she gathers courage to resist him.

In comparison to Basumati, Shanti of "Ujradari" is a strong and determined character though she is a traditional woman who easily adapts herself to the given image of a widow in the male-dominated society. She is highly aware of the injustice meted out to a widow in the name of false customs. She apparently claims for her rights from the very outset of the story. She is all the time assured by her elder brother-in-law that she depends on him for basic needs and social security. This type of indoctrination takes course in the story continuously and takes Shanti in

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even if she is conscious of the maltreatment of her elder brother-in-law not only towards her but her son Somu as well. However, later on, Shanti takes a shift from a traditional widow to an untraditional independent woman and poses a threat to the prevailing false moral standards meant for the middle-class widow in rural society. Her mode of protest lies in being unconventional towards the patriarchal society. Her resistance against the repressive forces manifests also in her transgressive activities, she gets involved in an intimate relationship with a *Pradhan* of Azadpur and breaks all the codes of morality which are made for a widow. However, she justifies it by saying that “I am collecting all the weapons bit by bit to earn the life” (65) (Translation mine). Hence, the protagonists of these stories seem to move away from their traditional image of “meekness”, where Basumati covertly and Shanti overtly seem to rebel against the traditional, patriarchal structures of power. Unlike other protagonists of this collection, these two protagonists are very strong and somehow exhibit enough potential to raise their voice against the imposed ideology and the cruel web of power. There are the customs, propriety, and ideology that determine the social codes and role of a woman in a patriarchal society. In this type of society, it is considered that a woman needs a patriarch for social security and protection. The same type of undercurrent flows in both the stories and in the case of Basumati, is represented by her husband who audaciously denies her the right to enter the *Panchayat*, despite her official position as the Sarpanch:

‘You’d better go home... Didn’t you hear what I say ...I am here to manage all the Panchayati work. And it is not a good place for a woman, the vicious people of the village will get a chance to conspire against us. Do you think your being on the panchayat chabutra would have been good in taste? You must not lose your sense of propriety. Does our status, our standing, mean nothing to you anymore? A woman is respected only as long as she keeps within her bounds’ (105-106).

At this point in the story, Basumati shows her reaction against her husband but “being his wife, my anger remained mute, my words of protest subsiding like forth on boiled milk” (106).

The same impression seems to find a way in *Ujradari*, when Shanti’s elder brother-in-law, while addressing the old neighbouring *kaki* (aunt) makes Shanti understand the importance of joint hearth: “Four scamps will spoil her ‘honour’. I have a great knowledge of the world that’s why I am denying her a separate home” (58).

Shanti, who has been indoctrinated into subordination ever since her birth in the name of the rhetoric of family traditions and propriety now recalls: “I sat in veil with head lowered. Father-like *jethji* was counseling me. Unknowingly, all frowns fell down like weapons one by one. Perhaps I got scared of the future. To serve in other houses of the village – I had not imbibed such learning” (58) (Translation mine).

Basumati, on a surface level, seems like a weak character, but she is actually a strong character who very covertly raises her voice against the oppressive power without compromising on her duties towards her husband. Here is an apparent contradiction between two things: on one hand, she ‘breaks’ her matrimonial vow that she will always stand by her husband in all situations, on the other hand, she goes against her husband’s will by casting a vote against him secretly.

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However, at a deeper level, there is no contradiction. Basumati is indoctrinated that she should never go against her husband's will and do what is told to her. She allows all the restrictions of being a woman and a *bahu* of aristocratic family and the deprivation of her rights and corrupt administration of Ranveer suppress her conscience throughout the story. She wishes to resist her husband many times but for the decorum and her husband's wrath. She feels herself entrapped in a cage: "If only I could have been Isuriya, outside the walls of propriety and decorum. Under the free sky. Beyond illusions, fostered by the paralyzing customs and traditions of genteel society. If only Ranveer did not hold the trump card of belonging to the aristocracy. Then I could have flown away from the cage of that confines my wings" (110-111).

Isuriya represents Basumati's alter-ego, the rebellious side of her conscience. Basumati has internalized her hegemonic image to the extent that she wants to resist but cannot. Even the reversal of the verdict of the Panchayat by Ranbeer and the subsequent suicide of Hardei cannot bring her to direct action. She is still under the impression of her matrimonial vows that inhibits her to go directly against her husband and she decides to eradicate the exploitative mechanism of power covertly and finally does resist in voting her husband out of power. Basumati's resistance may not have the direct, ostentatious character like that of Isuriya, it is a potent way of resistance, nonetheless.

Whereas, Shanti is a rebellious character who has a great strength to rebel against injustice but being a highly traditional woman; she continuously sticks to the traditional image of a widow and believes: "After the death of one's husband, a woman's condition is no better than an animal and she has to yoke all the menial work. I was a woman until the man's hand was on my head" (46).

Hence, both the stories trace the phase of woman's history when a woman was regarded as a commodity and a man possessed her like his own property, and in the absence of male patriarch a widow has to compromise with very adverse situations. Shanti seems to maintain her given image at the outset of the story but by posing a strong and unconventional resistance, she comes out of this hollow image. Unlike Basumati, she somehow manages to live separately by getting rid of the cruel clutches of power which is operated through the 'male authority' and raises her voice against the most intimate exploitative relationships of the family. She resists her *jeth* publically and legally claims her equal right in his property. She is highly aware that if she overtly goes against her *jeth*, and by doing this, she has moved away from her morality, which might affect her image in the society. In both the stories, the protagonists adapt to the prevailing hegemony but it the unfair use of power that forces them to resist and reveal their image that is hidden under the traditional structure of power hitherto.

In "Faisala", it is Hardei's suicide and Isuriya's rebellious nature that serves as a catalyst for Basumati to go against the prevailing 'male authority' and in *Ujradari*, it is Somu's victimization that gives Shanti courage to resist against the whole setup of power. She presumes that if she doesn't come out of this exploitative world now, then she will be responsible for Somu's victimization who has become so used to obeying the orders of his *Tau* that he gives more importance to his *Tau* than his mother. It is Somu's plight and Shanti's own deprivation of

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her rights that propel her to resist and she poses an unconventional resistance. She, many a times, protests against the power holders and reacts violently in the situation, in which she sees her son's subjection and decided to get rid of this "It is like the burden of Somu's slavery that I tossed in front of my *jeth*.....and Somu has no more power than a mosquito to resist against this exploitation" because he considers his exploitation as his destiny.

Thus, we can say that both the oppressors operate their power through different means of power forgetting conveniently that where there is power, there is resistance also. Both the female characters pose their resistance in different ways. Even considered as being 'reliable', Basumati manifests her 'unreliability' for her husband. On the other side, Shanti who involves in transgressive activities by having an intimate relationship with the *pradhan* of Azadpur, on one hand, breaks the codes of conventional morality that should be retained by a widow, on the other side she justifies it by saying "How I explain to you *pradhanin*, that I am collecting all the tools to win the life" (65).

Here is a deep contrast of resistance and their tools to resist the unjust power structures. Basumati resisted by living under the impression of the traditional structure of power but highly affected it in her way of resistance. Basumati is an educated woman and she wittingly uses her secret weapon that is sufficient for change, by casting her vote against her husband. But Shanti is an uneducated rural woman and she has to gather all her power, in acquiring this power she unknowingly excludes from the sphere of conventional morality and becomes the victim of sexual exploitation but she takes it as a mean to win the support of Pradhan. In this way, Shanti's resistance is for an individual, without denying the male superiority because she takes support from other male characters from time to time. So, in this way she holds the idea of male superiority because the story is couched with the numerous instances of how she takes the support of Bhola Ram and *Pradhan* in her adverse situation. Thus we can say that Basumati poses her "disguised" resistance by living in the sphere of morality and her resistance comes into a traditional manner whereas, Shanti goes contrary to it and poses a "public" resistance by filing a caveat to have her equal share in the property. So, her resistance emerges in the sense of an untraditional way of a traditional woman because after crossing the threshold of morality, she seems under the impression of a contrary reaction of society for her.

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