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INCARCERATED PSYCHE: A STUDY OF USHA MAHAJAN'S SHORT STORY - "SHE TOO IS AHALYA"

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A gender study is a field for interdisciplinary study devoted to gender identity and gender representation as central categories of analysis. It investigates sex, gender and sexuality based on sociological perspective combined with power structure such as race, class, ethnicity, location and nationality which intersect with the society at both micro and macro level. This field includes women's studies, men's studies and queer studies. The main focus is on historical, cultural and social events shape the role of gender in different societies.

Usha Mahajan, a contemporary prolific writer has written several short stories for adults and children to her credit. She has extensively translated Khushwant Singh's works to Hindi, as well as authored his biographical profile. She received the Delhi Hindi Academy Award for Children's Literature and the K K Birla Foundation Fellowship. She brings to light, the grotesque predicament of a woman in her short story "*She too is Ahalya*". She unveils the heart of Biji, the protagonist who yearns for love from her beloved son Ajay, her inner self concedes with the modern world that trends with using the loopholes as a source of escapism and the trauma of her marital life that unleashes her soul. Usha Mahajan projects the conflict between the woman's dreams of having an affair in secrecy but the reality strikes her hard with the thoughts of generation which considers this as a sin.

This short story reveals the inferiority complex of Biji belonging to a generation that has discipline, decorum and dignity held high. She is forced to a state of accepting the trends of modern world, Ajay's living together relationship with Ira and her tormenting past life torments her to live life as a mere existence with regrets. Biji reveals about the wall of silence that rose bond between herself and her son as she laments, "This was the same Ajay who as a baby, taking one of my breasts in his mouth, used to knead the other with his tiny hand. Whose pee-potty she had cleaned whose naked body she had bathed for years. And here she was today, trembling before asking him one little thing" (Mahajan, 2003).

After puberty, gender roles change the lifestyle of an individual drastically. Men do not express their emotions as a result they tend to self-torture themselves. This could be seen in the short story as Ajay stops expressing his thoughts, emotions and feelings to his very own mother. Modernity seems to be a stake of danger in the eyes of Biji. She believes too much of intimacy is not healthy in any relationship. Ira lives all alone in the city owning a flat. She is bold and open minded, admits her relationship, as there was no question of marriage which was not devoured by Biji.

Biji relates her past life to the lives of women in today's world. She got married when she was still playing marbles with her friends in the lane. She was sent to some stranger, had to call him her husband, let him treat her as he liked which tormented her soul to deeper levels of disgust and hatred. Women those days treated their husbands as Gods, their "*pati parameshwar*". They were merely treated as servants and commodities. Biji had given birth to seven children, as it had never ever crossed her mind that a woman could lose qualms about surrendering her body for her husband's pleasure as and when he desired. They were never treated with respect and never given their space. She questions this part of her life as, "Whether looking after

the house and rearing children was an act of slavery or of duty?" She could neither perceive nor feel any difference between the two.

Biji talks about the modern generation as men tend to pour out their emotions in their way of writing and women expose their emotions in the form of painting. But, those days' women had to only slide their emotions down the chain in the form of subtle tears. Women would be represented in various ways of holding deep emotions and the words unsaid speak by breaking the silence to bits. "Of women floating on still waters, women suspended upside down from the heavens, women impatient to fly like wingless birds, fleshy women with the horns and eyes of beasts, Durga like women, stern unrelenting Kali like women destroyers" (Mahajan, 2003).

Women have become so important in today's world, as they are fortunate enough to be free to do what they like to do. Biji thinks that they are women with thwarted desires pondering between dreams and reality. When she questions about the plight of women these days, Ira says, "You would not understand Biji, in your time women were anesthetized by man to suit himself" (80). Ira nails the fact that till man does not change his attitude nothing would change in the life of a woman. She also points out the secret behind her painting – Ahalya – A woman with a famished heart and body, whose mind and body have not been stirred or nourished. She had been turned to stone for ages. Anxiously waiting for the touch of "*maryada purushottam*", an ideal man.

Freud believed that events in our childhood have a great influence on our adult lives, shaping our personality. Usha Mahajan had portrayed the same in the story through the character Biji as Biji's personality traits are based on her childhood experiences which shapes her adult life. Anxiety originating from traumatic experiences in a person's past is hidden from consciousness, and may cause problems during adulthood. Freud's ideas have since been met with criticism, in part because of his singular focus on sexuality as the main driver of human personality development. Biji explores her past, her marriage life and the ill-treatment she received. The hatred she possesses continues throughout the story as her husband never bothered about her mind, there was never any consultation as he only thought about his own needs and her body. "He would come in the dark, take his due and leave" (Mahajan, 2003). The modern world accepts and provides a way of escapism through the loopholes to men and women. Biji, reverts to her past when her conscience reproached her as it was a sin to dream of another man other than her husband. She could only dream of a man who would approach her with love and tenderness, as if it were an act of veneration.

According to Freud, our personality develops from the interactions among what he proposed as the three fundamental structures of the human mind: the id, ego, and superego. Conflicts among these three structures, and our efforts to find balance among what each of them "desires," determines how we behave and approach the world. The protagonist has a capricious mind frame having her desires in the structures of id, ego and superego with regard to the relationship she shares with Ira. In the beginning she thought Ira was disconcerted had no manners. Biji saw Ira as a wayward woman, puffing a cigarette, throwing a casual look at Biji, as she was some unwanted entity. She feels insecure when her son fails to understand the duties of a son but he strives hard to fulfill the needs of his partner. Biji exclaims, "This is how men treat their own parents as they understand only one kind of relationship with a woman" (Mahajan, 2003). Soon her thinking towards Ira changes when Ira starts visiting Biji in Ajay's absence. They became so close that they began to share their secrets frankly like friends.

What balance we strike in any given situation determines how we will resolve the conflict between two overarching behavioral tendencies: our biological aggressive and pleasure-seeking drives vs. our socialized internal control over those drives. Women were considered to be stereotypes with such behavioral tendency, as Biji expresses her hatred about how she wed locked with a man who was double her age, his status which was bestowed on her. He never understood her desires nor did he let her do as she pleased. She led a life through a whole regimen of rules and regulations. Today's world provides opportunity for women like Ira to choose their life partners and lends hand to stay open minded in order to express themselves vividly. Things start falling apart in the case of Ira and Ajay. Ajay fails to court Ira and as a result they end their relationship. Biji, tries to confront the ego between Ajay and Ira but she learns that both are not interested to even talk about it anymore.

With this note Biji realizes that her own son cannot understand the sentiments of his mother or the tumult in her heart. Men tend to be so self-centered even in the times of grotesque. She also learns the fact that a disaster had blown out the life of her son by making him the father of Ira's child. Yet, they depart without having any concern for the child. Biji tries her best to make things fall in place between Ajay and Ira for the sake of then child but Ajay accuses Ira as he says," She says the child is hers, hers alone... that I should not try to claim it... bloody bitch! She's not a woman but a slab of stone!" (Mahajan, 2003).

Biji is dazed as the thought about the child pricks her conscience. She wonders about how is it possible for her to love her son unconditionally and the same is not applicable to the modern generation. The psyche of men in this story is unimaginable which does not match up with the deeds of the women. Biji weeps as she watches her son move out of the house disheartened, disturbed and discouraged. She says, "You too must have failed to be the maryada purushottam whose touch could have infused life into that slab of stone" (Mahajan, 2003). Thus, gender roles play an important and a massive part in the society. The value and equality of both the sex keeps fluctuating, never constant. "*She too is Ahalya*" is a story that triggers the life of every woman, withstanding the silence to break the vacuum that prevails in subtlest form.

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