
Behind The Threshold and beyond: A Study of Anjana Appachana's Short Stories

Dr. S.S.V.N. Sakunthala

Associate Professor

Dr. L.Bullayya P.G. College, Vishakapatnam

ABSTRACT

It is an accepted fact that the entire world admires the strong family system that is prevalent in India. But the strong bond appears to be at crossroads with the increasing rate of divorces that the attitudinal change of the younger generation towards marriage and the responsibilities. These factors question and threaten the value system and reiterate the necessity of upholding the tradition and change in the midst of the younger generation.

Anjana Appachana's short stories focus on sensitive issues such as education and emancipation of women, double standards prevailing in Indian society, attitude of men towards their wives and daughters. She seems to highlight the fact that an empathetic attitude can solve these problems. There is a dire need to change the mind set of both men and women in the 21st century.

Key Words: Double standard, Emancipation, Empathy, Mind-set.

The status of women in Indian Society always has been secondary and marginal in spite of their devotion, dedication and sacrifice for the sake of the family. They have been the unacknowledged and glorified servants of the family in which they lived - either maternal or marital. They have remained objects of violence at various levels at home and in society. They were treated as commodities that could be bought and sold. They had no control over their bodies, life and death. Their movement was confined to the house and they were denied the basic facilities like education, economic independence and freedom of speech. Each stage of their life was associated with and was dependent on the kindness and consideration of men. The evil and unethical practices such as child marriages, sati and widowhood worsened their situation. With the advent of Europeans and the consequent colonization drastic changes occurred in the Indian society. With the efforts of social reformers like Lord Bentinck, Macaulay, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswathi and others the Indian society underwent remarkable changes. Gradually women were allowed to be educated and in the post-colonial Indian context women were given privileges that were hitherto prohibited to them. The concept of emancipation of women was spread throughout the nation and accordingly women

crossed the threshold of the house and attempted to take equal part with men in all walks of life. Education seemed to have become the key to unlock the age-old superstitions related to women. It broadened their outlook and extended their scope in society. However, even today the question - did education bring emancipation of women or not - remains unanswered. It is evident that though women have taken various roles in society most of them are controlled by the men in the family - be it father or husband. Consequently literature of the post - colonial India has become a vehicle to propagate such women's problems. Writers of this era dare not to be aesthetic, they are bound to be socialistic. Women writers like Anitha Desai, Nayanatara Sehgal, Sashi Deshpande and others shouldered the burden of highlighting women's problems pertaining to their status, education and identity in the society and family. To voice their views they chose different genres like poetry, novels and short-story. Of these, short story has a place of its own for its brevity and its scope.

Anjana Appachana graduated from Delhi University, is one of the Indian women writers who has chosen the short story as a medium to express the conflict in the mind of women. She has written a novel "Listening Now" and a collection of short stories "Incantations and other stories". Most of the

stories are narrated by women who are caught in the whirlpool of modern India. They struggle for an identity inside and outside the house - behind and beyond the threshold. A study of Anjana Appachana's stories reveals that the author has been successful in bringing out a remarkable contrast in the attitude of Indian women of yester years and the new generation. There seems to be an implicit question - whether education of women is either personally or socially beneficial? Has education brought any change in the life of women? Is separation from the husband the only way out for a career oriented woman?

Especially, in the Indian context, the sociological and legal aspects and problems of separated couples are major issues. India, basically, is a country where certain cultural values and traditions are being upheld for centuries. One of them is the strong family bond which has been protecting the individual and the society. The advent and emulation of European culture seemed to have resulted in the slow and steady deterioration of social and moral values. The impact of such a change may lead to many consequences, like degradation of social and moral values, increase in the number of single parents, proximity of juvenile delinquency and crime rate which are major problematic issues of the western world.

Therefore women have to think twice before they choose a profession and a life partner. There are instances where men too are becoming aware in sharing the responsibilities of women at home with an empathy. But the number of such men is limited. It depends on one's individual attitude towards life and career. Moreover a responsible parenthood has been one of the major criteria in the successful Indian social life. The legal implication of this problem will ultimately be divorce. This is evident from the increasing rate of divorces in the recent past.

Appachana also tried to project the difference of attitude of men as fathers and husbands. As a father man tries to support and encourage his daughters and treats them as intellectuals whereas the same man discourages his wife and cares not to recognize his wife's intelligence and to give her equal importance in planning the career of children. Such an attitude of men was tolerated and accepted even by educated women of the yester years. But the educated, modern young women of today no longer seem to tolerate such an attitude and are prone

towards an independent an emancipated life devoid of male domination. It is high time to focus on this problem since it may ultimately lead to the demolition of the culture bound, traditional Indian society.

Appachana's stories not only project the problem but also prompt the younger generation of India, both men and women to think about the impending social and cultural crisis which can be avoided through a humanly possible empathetic attitude towards their fellow beings, especially in a family for the sustenance of a harmonious society against the pitfalls of the impact of the western social values. In Indian society there exists a prevalent attitude among men to attribute the success of their children to themselves and failure to the mother irrespective of their role and concern for their children. Very few men sincerely recognize the woman behind the success of the children. Such social problems have been projected and probed by Appachana in her short stories.

The story 'Bahu' is a fine example of a woman whose dreams of an ideal marital life seem to be shattered because of the unsympathetic attitude of the lover turned husband. It is taken for granted that she is the 'Bahu of the house and has to cater to the needs of all the family members - the parents-in-law, sister-in-law, and her husband and her eight year old son who come to stay for two months a year. In spite of 'being a working woman, she is compelled to do the household work without the help of a servant maid. Her mother-in-law keeps commenting that the 'Bahu' has to take more care of the house and she could also give up the job for that purpose. The 'Bahu' knows that 'adjustment is necessary to marriage'. (13). But it becomes intolerable when the husband is uncomprehending. She craves for help, sympathy and protection from her husband but in vain. "He could have stopped it, protected me. Only he could do that. I needed protection. I needed him..... He just had to say to them, she's tired, let her rest..... He could have said." I'll help you with the work and so will my mother and sister." Instead he said, "You never smile." (p.20).

In her pre-marital life she had observed her parents and found "my father would never know that- my mother had dreams other than those of being a good Wife and mother." (P.14) She thought that hers would not be one of 'those' marriages like that of her parents or any other couples whom she know

because she saw in Siddhartha (her husband) a kindness and gentleness which attracted her. "He was what I had always dreamt of, the man who would be my friend, my companion, my lover. (P.14) On the contrary, Siddharth turns out to be a typical husband, telling her to spend more time with his family members, to keep her sitar away and to go to her parents only when a servant maid is found. To her horror he even says that she has become a 'nag'- a term used by her father to mother and father-in-law to mother-in-law and which she never even dreamt would be applied to her. He thinks she has to take the responsibility of the entire family but he has no obligation to her parents.

After two years of such a tiresome life without privacy, compassion and empathy she finally decides to leave her husband and his house and decides to lead an independent life. On hearing her decision Siddharth requests her to change her mind and accept things as they are. He even tells her "Abdicating your responsibilities isn't the answer." (P.26) ironically, he himself is abdicating the responsibility of looking after his wife and being empathetic with her. She remains firm and leaves the house hoping for a better and independent life. Thus the story ends on an optimistic note as far as the 'Bahu' is concerned, though she is very much aware of the problems she will have to face. But one cannot either support or comment against her decision in view of the tradition and customs of our society. Indian society is healthy and strong because of the sanctity of marriage and the institution of family which has given stability to it. On the other hand, the Bahu needs to take care that her identity is not lost. Ideally the solution would have been at least empathy and offer of help from her husband, which seems to be impossible. It is his attitude which makes her feel disheartened rather than the hard work at home.

The 'Prophecy' is the story of two teenagers. Amrita and Hemalatha, who live in a college hostel and go astray in spite of the strict rules implemented by the warden. They both have a boyfriend Rakesh, both go out and spend time with him. Amrita, becomes pregnant and she wants to get the foetus aborted without the knowledge of her parents and Rakesh. On hearing the news Rakesh was shocked but was ready to sell his motorbike and pay the money for Amrita's abortion. He even assured her that he would protect her, from her parents. Meanwhile Amrita gets measles, bleeds due to an unforced

abortion. Her shocked parents take her away. Both the friends go to a prophecy teller. That man prophesies that the stars of Amrita will change after she performs Puja. He says "you will marry a handsome, fair, rich influential man". You will have two sons..... You will also travel abroad many times". (P.52) at that juncture, it seems a far-fetched scenario. Years later, Hemalatha was informed by her aunt that Amrita did get married, to another man. Later she receives a letter from Amrita informing that she has two sons and her husband is a nice man. She writes to tell Hema that the prophecy came true and her stars have changed. There was not even a word about Rakesh. She is nonchalant about her Past life and has erased the image of Rakesh from her mind. One wonders is this the new morality? A sign of changing times? Without being judgmental, the author leaves it to the reader to ponder the issue.

"When Anklets Tinkle" shows the double standards that are prevalent in our society. The 27 year old daughter of Mr. And Mrs. Srivastava, Namita, working in Madras as an engineer, comes to her parents in Delhi on a holiday. To her surprise the upper portion of the house (barsati) has been let out for half the amount it is worth. The tenant Mr. Rao is smart enough to make them believe that the house is haunted by a ghost, and the sound of anklets is heard in the night. It was after Namita's arrival they all realize that the sound was nothing but the sound of anklets of the girls who visit Mr. Rao at night. But for her mother"...men would be men and if he had girlfriends it was none of their business to interfere".(P-77) But Namita says "Double standards, if her mother had a female tenant who was visited at night by numerous men, would she be so callous?" "That wasn't the same thing, her mother replied. (P-78)

One night Mrs. Srivastava sees Namita coming from Mr. Rao's room. Namita tells her mother she knows what she was doing. She had wanted to do it.would her mother react the same way if she were a son? What about her brother, Nikhil? Wasn't her mother aware of his affairs? She was sick of this hypocrisy". (P-83) She even refuses to marry Rao because, "he wasn't a virgin". (P-86) Her mother is shocked that even after physical intimacy Namita is not keen on marrying Rao. The story ends tamely with the rebellious Namitha falling in love with Rao and agreeing to marry him. Even Mr.Srivastava approves the match though Rao was younger than

his daughter. The story in its earlier stages is quite bold as it touches the taboo subject of female sexual urge. Namita, to the shock of her mother, admits that when she had spent the night with Rao had no plans for the future. All she wanted was sexual gratification. It is only later that the story ends on a conventional romantic note.

The story 'Incantations' is about the experience of a twelve year old girl, who, during the course of the narrative becomes 30 year old woman. The perspective of both the child and the woman is given. As a child of twelve, being a voracious reader, she goes through many books. Out of the curiosity she even goes through some pornographic literature and was aware of 'rape', intercourse etc. Her sister's life ends in a tragedy and her mother is always struck to the household work. Amid these circumstances she has an ideal figure - her aunt Mala Mousi who is a gynecologist. Mala Mousi is a spinster of 30, who smokes and drinks. She is strong-minded and 'radical' in her views. Though Mala Mousi fascinated Geetha she "didn't aspire to be like her because to do so would mean no marriage and no babies and I wanted both. However not to be like her would mean to be like my mother Totally, completely unromantic. Was there no in between? (P.100) Mala Mousi is as much of a stereo type as the mousy docile house wife. After twenty years, being a Surgeon, Geetha says that there is an in-between. She herself is such an example. "Yes, I am the in-between; not married, fat, discontented and accepting like my mother, or unmarried, uncompromising and independent like Mala Mousi, but separated for the time being from my uncomprehending, angry husband." (P.107)

The author seems to suggest separation from the husband and breaking the marriage as the only means of living a life in-between. Unlike her mother and Mousi, who are the representatives of the women behind the threshold and beyond, Geetha is in a dilemma. She is unable to comprehend whether her mother is correct to her Mousi is. Geetha - typifies many of today's young women who want the best of both worlds. They are not even sure of what they want. In a way the longing for a husband and child even by women libbers is very much in tune with what is happening in the western feminist movement.

Another story which won an O. Henry Festival prize in 1989 is 'Her Mother, which reveals the attitude of a typical Indian mother. The mother

expresses her anxiety in a letter to her daughter who has gone to the U.S. for higher studies. She is affectionate, compassionate and anxious about her daughter. She is already worried about the older daughter who continues working in Bombay while her husband is in Delhi saying "commuting marriages are inevitable. (P.131)

Now the mother warns the younger daughter not to marry an American because they don't know the meaning of the phrase, "Sanctity of marriage". She showers her motherly love and affection and advises her on the do's and don'ts of the American life. She also says "a daughter will always regard her parent's home as the only home..." (P.135) She vainly hopes that her daughter will return.

Appachana's stories reveal that the author has been successful in bringing out a remarkable contrast in the attitude of the mothers and daughters. In most of the stories the clash between the ideas of mother and daughter is significantly evident. The motherly figure in the stories is a representative of the older generation or the life behind the threshold whereas the daughters represent the life beyond the threshold.

Though they were educated and longed for an identity the mothers adjusted themselves to the social bond of marriage, succumbed to their husband's wishes and accepted life as it came and shifted their attention to their children. The fathers or men were indifferent to their wives. "The women, they endured, they had much to endure. Like my mother. Only my sisters and I knew my mother's anguish.... My father was oblivious to her pain.... He would never know that my mother had dreams other than those of being a good wife and mother. She realized some of her dreams through us, her three daughters". (P.14) But the attitude of men towards their daughters was different. "He spent time with us, encouraged us in all our different interests and in all that we wanted to do. But not with my mother". (P.14) When it comes to her, the daughter could not bear the indifference of her husband. She wants independence, a life of her own. "... imagine what it would be like to have all the time in the world for each other. Blissful solitude. Wonderful, wonderful independence. It could never be. Siddharth did not want it". "...why had he married me? If it was for someone to attend to the kitchen and relatives every day of her life, someone who had to conform to all the traditional expectations of a good bahu ... Then why me?"....

Had he no dreams for us? (P.23) The Bahu never imagined that her husband and in-laws would treat her in such a way because they were all highly educated. She realizes that it was her fault to have assumed that education implies enlightenment. Her husband has accepted it but she doesn't want to accept it and leaves the house for a life of her own. Had her mother done the same thing what would have happened?

Mrs. Srivastava, mother of Namita faced a different kind of a problem. In any difficult or awkward situation her husband simply withdraws to the puja room. Did his prayer get the seven hundred rupees a month that helped pay for their Children's college? While he prayed, she had tutored the children, managed the house, worked as a school teacher and saved.... His prayers had kept him in ignorance of her suffering, in ignorance of her pain, in ignorance of the injustice of it all. She was not behind the threshold but simply went ahead to manage the household. But her attitude was entirely different compared to the youngsters of today who are impatient, intolerant and emotionally detached.

The mother in 'Her Mother' advises her daughter to go for an arranged marriage because in an arranged marriage you will not be disillusioned because you will not have any illusions to begin with". (P.137) Her's was a love marriage. In spite of the dislike and disapproval of the in-laws she survived being accommodating. Though an educated woman she was stuck in never ending household work and never had the solitude to think. "Her thoughts jumped to and fro and up and down and in and out as she dusted, cooked, cleaned..." It was the mother who taught the daughter discipline and cared for her. But the same mother was considered as an ayah who did all the work for the daughter, never her intellectual equal. It was the father whom the daughter loved. As the mother once wrote to her daughter. "With all your talk about women's rights, you refuse to see that you father has given me none. And on top of that he says that I am a nag". (P.135) "Perhaps when you marry you will realize that fathers and husbands are two very different things." (P.137)

Appachana makes the point that from the so called successful marriages, Women who have accepted to remain behind the threshold were not really happy. That is the reason for their support for their daughters to cross the threshold and reach the goals they themselves could not. But in the process the

daughters have gone beyond the set standards of society. Sometimes they have misused the freedom given to them and are ready to usurp the life they want irrespective of the social norms and consequences. It is not a healthy trend as far as the Indian context is concerned. The women themselves suffer the consequences more than the men.

It is true that education has brought emancipation for women but not at the cost of their family. Separation and abdication is not the only solution. As one of the characters says there should be an in between behind and beyond the threshold-not a life of separation but that of understanding and empathy from both sides. In the increasing tendency to emulate the western role models the young men and women of India are in danger of losing their 'Indianness', their, own culture and value systems. Education and financial independence are a must for all women. It is said that if a man is educated only one person is educated, if a woman is educated the whole family becomes educated. At this juncture Indian youth need to react positively to dedicate themselves for a cultural upheaval through their education and not to leave values at stake. This becomes more emphatic as the whole western world has turned its eye to India to imbibe and inculcate value - oriented life and education and is astonished by the family system prevalent in India.

Emancipation of women through education is not the solution to solve women's problems. An attempt to bring about a change in the mindset of both men and women is necessary in the present Indian scenario. A woman should be recognised as an individual and human being with a right to live like men. She is first and foremost a human being before being a woman or wife or daughter or mother. The state and status of women can be uplifted, only with a change in the mind-set of men.

As our former president and visionary Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan said "A uniform code of morals for both men and women requires not a leveling down but a leveling up. Instead of women degrading themselves to the level of men, men should lift themselves up". (Kalki P.P.63-64).

References:

-) Anjara Appachara : Incantations and other short stories, Penguin books, 1992.
-) Kalki or The Future of civilization, Hind Kitabs, 1953.