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## **Locating Gender in Social Space: A Study of Sudha Murty's *Three Thousand Stitches***

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**Abstract:** Elaine Showalter advocates a separate literary, critical and cultural space for females in her theory of gynocritics which, for her, is a study of “the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history. It is also concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience, especially in popular culture and film” (146-47). The critic prefers a separate space for females, which contradicts the male space, denoting domination, hierarchy and power. Elaine Showalter is not alone in this charting out of a female space counterposed against male space; most western feminists depict the schism between the two genders, which is always within the scope of continual warfare between them. Despite the attempts to give a more nuanced reading of gender as transcending sexes, the more powerful impulse within western scholarship under feminism has been not only on advocacy of irreconcilable differences between male-female spheres but also a tendency to see gender in biological terms, thus separating it from the contextual social, cultural arena. This battle of sexes gets modified in many cultures, which prefer a more nuanced understanding of these differences and locate them primarily in the socio-economic ladder, thus preferring a co-existence of shared values and goals.

The exclusivity of the concept of gender is subverted through its intermeshing within the socio-economic ambience. That gender exploitation is sometimes part of a class/ideological oppression is noted by Spivak in her second case study and acknowledges: “The subordinated gender following the dominant within the challenge of nationalism while remaining caught within gender oppression is not an unknown story” (2202). Sharmila Rege makes an essential intervention in this debate when she vouches for differential experiences and repressions of women belonging to the various matrix of caste: “While the incidence of dowry deaths and violent control and regulation of their mobility and sexuality by the family is frequent



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among the dominant upper castes, dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the workplace and in public” (92).

It can be argued that gender partakes in the larger cultural contexts that both enlarge and define nuances of its conceptualisation, operation, and motifs. To see gender as simply a set of biological attributes and study it in isolation from its defining arena produces a truncated idea of its multifarious implications. The othering of female subjectivity is situated in a complex pattern of gender peripheralisation in cultural livelihoods, its encoding in a pattern of attributes which stimulated this subordination and needs of a socio-economic model of modern societies. To see gender subordination as a part of conscious victimisation based exclusively on the attributes of a conscious male agency is to neglect the role played by social and economic forces in her exploitation. It is required to see females as part of the male culture to fully understand her position and the forces at work in her domination. ‘Gender’ as a sign read by post-modern feminists and post-structuralists loses much of its sheen when counter-posed against the condition of working-class women living in third-world countries. Here, gender is not an exclusive determining condition but one of the many factors responsible for woman’s marginalisation.

The location of gender in the social space while questioning the post-modern understanding of gender as a sign reveals that concepts like gender cannot be read in isolation as they live in the community space and are transmuted as per the transitions in the community. Along with this mutability and fluidity of gender, it is also important to note that other factors such as community, caste, religion, education and urban/rural location also play a decisive role in both creations of gender identity and its transference. It would be futile to search for gender as a defining identity marker and more prudent to see it as a cluster of traits in all its possibilities of change and contestation. Walby’s discussion of six interrelated patriarchal structures reveals how patriarchy is a complex social structure. According to the critic, these are a "patriarchal mode of production in which women's labour is expropriated by their husbands; patriarchal relations within waged work; the patriarchal state; male violence; patriarchal relations in sexuality; and patriarchal culture" (220).

In ‘Sexuality, caste, governmentality: contests over 'gender' in India’, Nivedita Menon studies two divergent trends in understanding gender in India. While the first trend is towards challenging the notion of gender through caste and sexuality, the second trend congeals the notion of gender by giving it fixity and stability: “The second trend, arising from the governmentalizing drive of the state, has attached gender to



development, so that gender is stabilized and looped right back to become a synonym for women - that is, 'women' as they are located in patriarchal society” (95). Matrayee Chaudhary, in her write-up ‘Indian Modernity and Tradition’, argues in this context that the concept of gender in Indian society exists between the notions of tradition and modernity, which owes mainly to colonial intervention in Indian culture. The colonial-mediated modernity of Indian society gets further complicated due to the intervention of nationalist politics through media-created images. According to her, in India:

A colonially mediated modernity of a society marked by diverse religious traditions, the gender question got doubly implicated. The women's question became a site of many contesting processes. One, the status of women became one between "tradition" and "modernity." Two, the process got compounded because the conception of "tradition" itself was contested. ... Third, since India has been marked by distinct religious, linguistic and ethnic communities, there was a contestation between the communities about whose tradition, whose culture ought to be the model on which the "national" Indian woman had to be imagined. The gender question thus became a potent site of conflict. (285)

The complex layering of socio-economic conditions, the subjectivity of the narrative voice and the desire to intervene positively for the betterment of females situated in both the contemporary and tradition bound past are revealed in the short story collection *Three Thousand Stitches* by Sudha Murthy. It is a collection of autobiographical short stories in which the narrator discusses the underbelly of gender discrimination in Indian society. The narrative situates these deprivations not on an exclusive, existential distinction of the female body but on the systematic exclusions as part of Indian culture and society. Further, the examination of the gender discrimination in these stories is neither static nor tradition located; it is seen as dynamic in its partaking of changing dynamics in sociocultural and economic fields. Additionally, these tales focus not so much on the condition but on its transformation through an active intervention by a human agency based on an empathetic female observer.

Sudha Murthy's collection of short stories, *Three Thousand Stitches*, is located on the personal experiences of the celebrated social worker cum proprietor of Infosys company which seeks to make positive changes in the lives of women who are handicapped by their crippling circumstances. The autobiographical sketch of the real lives of women in the book delves deep into the events which make such exploitation



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possible and the attempts of the foundation to ameliorate them through its positive intervention. The first story in the collection, 'Three Thousand Stitches,' recounts the narrator's experiences with the uplifting of Devadasis. When the attempts of the narrator to 'educate' the devadasis through a higher moral positioning fails, she realises that there cannot be any meaningful intervention in the lives of ordinary women till a bond at the level of lived life is established with them. The arguments of the father of the narrator represent a cultural/social positioning against the strictly 'feminist' one:

'Look at yourself,' my father said, dragging me in front of the nearest mirror. 'You are casually dressed in a T-shirt, a pair of jeans and a cap. This may be your style, but the common man and a rural Indian woman like the devadasi will never connect or identify with you. If you wear a sari, a mangalsutra, put on a bindi and tie your hair, I'm sure they will receive you much better than before.'"  
(TTS 6)

The eventful success of the narrator in creating a bond with devadasis reveals that the prop of gender-sharing remains an insufficient tool till a connection with the real problems of females, such as schooling of their children, employment, unhygienic conditions etc., is made. This understanding of the inter-meshing of gender with the social existence of females makes the narrator connect more intimately with the devadasis who gift her with embroidered bedspread containing three thousand stitches, representing the lives of women affected by the narrator.

Another story, 'How to Beat the Boys,' puts the persistence of the narrator to take admission to an all-male Engineering college. Despite the objections of the parents of the narrator, the discouragement from her relatives and the unwelcoming attitude of her male classmates, the narrator passes her degree with flying colours and slowly gets the approval of her male classmates. The story does nowhere points to the gender wars, but instead pins blame for her disapproval of the male domain of Engineering college on the segregation of males and females in our society, the lack of courage and general curiosity among boys for girls. The narrator muses after her graduation from college:

College had taught me the resilience to face any situation, the flexibility to adjust as needed, the importance of building good and healthy relationships with others, sharing notes with classmates and collaborating with others instead of staying by myself. Thus when I speak of friends, I don't usually think of women but rather of men because I really grew up with them" (TTS 29-30)





These reminiscences of the narrator reveal that the 'sister-hood' of all females can be challenged through the conception of a more gender-neutral world in which mutuality of relationships across genders can create healthy bonds based not on the antagonism between sexes but the level of cooperation and understanding. The usual note of approbation towards the marginalisation of females in Indian society is hedged by the narrator's desire to change and transform, not by fatalism or rebellion.

'Three Handfuls of Water' describes a conflict between the weight of traditions and individual aspirations. The story reveals how the narrator was affected by her grandparents' sincere devotion to the Ganges and a desire for renunciation as a pilgrim to holy Benaras. The story rises above gender concerns to reveal a vision of life in which the older generation is a repository of ancient traditions. The narrator relishes the glow of affection and warmth in her grandparents and is nostalgic about her childhood days spent in their company in a tiny village in Karnataka. Her vow of sacrifice related to all unnecessary shopping during her visit to Kashi makes her adopt a persona which goes beyond the trappings of feminine longings for saris:

The truth is that the vow turned out to be a gateway to freedom. The desire to acquire has vanished over time. Once a year, a few known friends and sisters gave me saris of their choice and I continued to wear them happily for a long time but as the years flew by, I lost interest in that too, and requested them not to gift me anything. (TTS 63)

The penchant for Banarasi saris which connected her with the life of common women, gives way to a life of commitment and renunciations, thus moving away from strictly female concerns to the more humanistic concerns of a social worker.

The story 'Cattle Class' describes this pull through an incident where two female executives hankering for funds from Infosys are rejected due to their false notions of the dichotomy between common people and elite/cultured ones. The narrator, who wears a salwar Kameez during her flight from London to India, is castigated for standing in the 'wrong queue' by two smartly dressed women in silk outfits, a Gucci handbag and diamond bangles. The narrator remains unfazed by their assumed superiority, and the ironic twist to the incident is given when the same women appear before her to fund their school's building. The narrator finds their insincerity appalling and refuses to consider their requests for funds. She tells them:

There are plenty of wrong ways to earn money in this world. You may be rich enough to buy comfort and luxuries, but the same money doesn't define class or give you the ability to purchase it. Mother



Teresa was a classy woman. So is Manjul Bhargava, a great mathematician of Indian origin. The concept that you automatically gain class by acquiring money is an outdated thought process. (TTS 68)

The story hovers around the notions of culture in fashionable elite classes as based on outer appearances and emphasises the value of sincerity and humility. The story goes beyond the concept of gender solidarity and finds the desire for false appearances ingrained in human nature, be it males or females. The correctives required are the application of hard and objective truths and confidence in one's worth.

'A life Unwritten' focuses on deeds of kindness and their repercussions in life. A young unmarried mother and her newborn daughter are saved by the narrator's father from her cruel family when he is a doctor in an outlying district. With the help of hundred rupees given by the doctor, the girl becomes a nurse and educates his daughter to be a doctor. When the narrator's father meets them after a long period, he realises that his small help has saved two lives and given them a positive direction. By focusing on the stigma of illegitimate daughters and the danger they face in a masculine society, the story reveals how accidental acts of charity can become a source of life for those in unfortunate positions. The story focuses on the acts of charity as the highest goal of human life, and the kindness to females in their most vulnerable movement is revealed to be the highest service to humanity, as noted by the narrator:

My father was an atheist. 'God doesn't reside in a church, mosque or temple,' he would often say. 'I see him in all my patients. If a woman dies during childbirth, then it is the loss of one patient for a doctor but for that child, it is the lifelong loss of a mother. And tell me, who can replace a mother.' (TTS 80)

Through its gender-neutral tone and emphasis on the kindness of the male doctor, the story reveals the nature of kindness to be more specifically situated in the human agency to go beyond narrow considerations of selfishness and fear.

'No Place Like Home' graphically presents the exploitation of poor women who go to foreign countries to seek employment. Through the stories of Nazneem, Santosh and Gracy, who go to Middle East countries to seek greener pastures, the narrator describes the tortures, deprivations and threats these women face under their cruel masters. What is revealing here is the equal role played by their female mistresses in their incarceration. Despite being females, their mistresses and their managers are equally cruel to them and



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show no compassion towards them. It appears the concerns of class outweigh the gender bonds and do not carry much weight in a situation of unequal power relations. While Nazneem is branded with a hot spoon by the female manager when she is unable to undertake hard domestic work in her sickness, Gracy is rebuffed by her employer when she complains about the lecherous moves of her son's friends: "Yes, Gracy, you are so beautiful that many men will desire you. In fact, I won't be surprised if my husband does too" (TTS 99). The claims of the sisterhood of all women seem to fade here when faced with the unequal footing on which diverse females reside in our society.

As is apparent from a brief discussion of the stories in Sudha Murthy's *Three Thousand Stitches*, the writer intermeshes gender concerns of Indian women with the social ambience in which they exist. Feminism in the sense of western radical awareness of the specificity of femaleness gets a muted treatment in her stories which present concerns of females in a patriarchal set-up in their totality of factors. The embeddedness of females in human society is seen here as both a biological uniqueness and a part of more significant human concerns of survival and competition in a brutal world. In this competition for resources, it is the skills of struggle, perseverance and hard work that ensure the continued existence and relevance of females, not their essential femininity. Secondly, Sudha Murthy's awareness of females as situated in their socio-economic matrix makes her notion of females contextual and local. It resists the universalistic notions of females as a homogeneous category without specifics of the class, region, colour, caste etc. The broad pattern of female characters in her stories is a testimony of her awareness of the diversity of concerns with which females in Indian society have to struggle with. In a nutshell, Sudha Murthy's portrayal of females goes against the grain of western feminism in its focus on women's lived experiences in deeply conservative societies like Indian ones. These portrayals are also in tandem with the changing facets of Indian culture in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Her commitment to social work and her experiences working with most downtrodden sections of Indian society makes her an insider to the difficulties and challenges they face. It makes her portrayal of females more comprehensive and situated, thus giving a groundedness to her understanding of the concerns of females in her short stories.

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