



A STUDY OF PROF. SMITA AGARWAL'S SPEAK, WOMAN! AS A SPEECH OF A WOMAN TO THE WORLD AND TO HERSELF

Dr. Amita Anand Dubey

Assistant Professor

Shree L. R. Tiwari College of Law

Abstract- One talks about women-empowerment and feels that women have received too much in the name of suffering and still they keep on mourning to get more. One does not realize that there were and still are innumerable women who have stitched their lips about the sufferings they were forced to bear. Professor Smita Agarwal's book *Speak, Woman!* is an invocation to all the suffered souls to speak about what they had to go through. It makes a woman feel in a safe harbour, that she is no longer a lone sufferer; thousands are standing in solidarity.

Keywords- Eco-feminism, child-widows, molestation, misogyny, feminism, women empowerment

Introduction- A woman's heart is considered a deep ocean where lies hid so many gems of secrets. It's almost impossible for anyone to dig deep or fathom the depth of a woman's heart. But whenever huge waves of tsunami come this ocean recedes and throws out gems as well as debris of so many ages-old past. Prof Smita Bahuguna Agarwal's every poem is a gem and it needs a connoisseur to understand the thoughts and emotions that these poems contain. Her poems are not limited to herself only rather their content is often universal and touches every heart. She speaks through her writings and invokes other women also to have the courage to speak up. It is very important sometimes to speak up whether to raise a voice against wrongs or just to lighten up one's mind and heart. We all need to speak up.

Title- The title '*Speak, Woman!*' is a pun intended to encourage women to break the silence and live their lives to the fullest. Originally the title was "The Rapist at My Door" which was altered due to the visual illustrations given in the book. It was during the course of editing and analysing the content and title that the title was changed to '*Speak, Woman!*'. There is a prerequisite need to speak as across generations nothing much has changed since Ahalya and Sita. There is something wrong with society in its treatment of women and subjects related to them; they are still considered as a thing, as a possession that does not have a say of their own. So, there is a dire need of speaking of women for themselves as this needs to be mended; this patch of patriarchy or male supremacy needs to be replaced by equality, and it is not restricted to any one culture only rather this problem has roots in each and every culture.

Representation of the various shades of women- Prof Agarwal's poems represent and show various shades of a woman's life; be it as a daughter, mother, sister, or wife. While she celebrates womanhood, she raises her voice against the dominance of patriarchy also. Her poems depict various walks of life of a woman who has been made to suffer at the hands of rotten rituals and taboos. The very first poem of this collection 'Guru Mantra' shows a woman who has been molested by her music teacher and keeps on vailing through her songs the pain she is not able to be vocal about:

"He asked me to unhook my blouse.

He placed his palm on my throat.

'Sing,' he said.

I saw, *National Geographic*:

the sparrow paralyse before the swaying hood of the Cobra.

I felt nothing. Nothing moved. And I've been singing, since!"

There are so many women who had to go through a terrible incident like this and they keep on suffering in the years to come. The predators neither think nor can imagine the disastrous after-effects of their just-for-fun act upon a woman's mind. Most of the women and kids suffer at the hands of familiar people. Sometimes it's due to the shock and sometimes it's the society that does not let them speak about it. 'Guru Mantra' reminds us of Philomela, a woman tortured by a familiar person she trusted upon:

"The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king

So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale

Filled all the desert with inviolable voice

And still she cries, and still the world pursues,

"Jug Jug" to dirty ears."

(poetryfoundation.org the wasteland)

Prof Agarwal often becomes nostalgic about her childhood and remembers those old golden bygone days. While she floats in the steam of sweet memories of her childhood, she gives glimpses of other characters also. She makes us acquainted with the old women of her family or acquaintance and makes us familiar with the lives they were bound to live. They were not bound only to bear those hardships rather they had accepted those hardships as their fate and duty. She quotes lines from Toru Dutt from *Savitri* to showcase the harsh reality of widowhood, "And think upon the dreadful curse of widowhood; the vigils, fasts, and penances;...". Widows in the early ages, especially in villages were bound to live life like a hermit. They were not allowed to marry again or to lead their lives as other human beings. They were cursed and sinners and they had to follow a strict lifestyle to achieve redemption. The poem 'Old Houses in the Sun' is dedicated to such widows whose sufferings were not unseen from a child's eye and who remembers them to date. The poem is divided into two parts: the first part is dedicated to her paternal aunt whom she called "bua ji". Bua ji was a childless widow following a very strict routine. She devoted all her life to the service of Lord Krishna:

"Every year, her pilgrimage to Allahabad—

her walk, barefoot, to the Sangam.

Other than a set of clothes,

and her Rudraksh rosary,

she would carry banana leaves

in her cloth bag,

wind them round her feet,

tie them with twine,

since, by the time she returned,

the tarred surface of the road

was a furnace.”

In the second part of the poem the poetess talks about another child-widow; Nani ji, who devoted all her youth to the memory of her deceased husband with whom she didn't even get the chance to consummate their marriage:

“My husband... He was 14. I was 9.

We never set eyes on each other,

except during the wedding ceremony...

Then, he died, while I was

still in my parental home...

I don't remember him at all.

My mother gave me this photo.”

Nani ji, like so many other contemporary child-widows, never got married again and was bound to spend all her remaining life worshipping and repenting for the sin she never did. Things were so different for males and females: a female had to spend her whole life lonely and devoid of any charms accepting that as her fate while on the other hand a man could marry anytime and many times whether his wife was living or dead. Things have changed much now but still, people's perception of widows or divorcee women is hostile.

Misogyny –Prof Agarwal's poems show how she keeps herself up to date and aware of her surroundings. Misogyny is a deeply rooted problem in a patriarchal society that showed up in one of its weirdest forms during the lockdown imposed upon us due to Covid-19. So many women and girls as well as children had to suffer as there was no way out. In her poem 'Lockdown' she narrates an incident where not only the wife but the child also suffers due to domestic violence. The child watches his father beating up his mother each night, and the mother has no way to go out. Each time his father beats his mother, the child also becomes a silent sufferer, and the night when his mother succumbs to injuries he shuts himself forever:

“Now, he gazes into space

seldom uttering a sound.

Since the day her head

was hit against the wall,

the thud, the crack, her ever-

so-slow slump to the ground,

he shut herself in, he shut himself out,

hunkering into a lockdown.”

She reflects on one of the most talked-about issues nowadays: triple talaq. It's so easy for a man to throw these three insane words without thinking once about the consequences; sometimes due to some trivial reasons and sometimes there is no reason at all. These men can easily get rid of the relationships using just three words, but for a woman, her whole world comes upside down:

“The old man said

to the sari-clad woman in her forties,

I’m sorry... I’ve changed...

A twig cracked underfoot.

It was hot.

There was no sign of rain.”

There seems to be no end to misogyny while males treat females just like an object upon whom they have full authority. Prof Agarwal quotes the devious remark made by M L Sharma, the defence lawyer for the rapists in the most talked-about Nirbhaya case, “A girl is just like a flower...a man is just like a thorn.” But these misogynists just do not stop here; they keep on raping the body, the soul, and even the very existence of being a woman. They want to control the thinking process of a woman, even they have objections about the subjects also: how can a woman can speak or even think about a particular subject:

“How dare you think, let alone,

think better than I ?

How dare you write, let alone,

write better than I?

How do you pass critical judgment,

let alone, better than I?”

Such misogynists when not able to fight alone, create a fuss by collecting a gang of like-minded people. They try to shut her mouth and bury her soul, to crush her very existence. They consider themselves sufficient and ruler of the world; the existence of a woman is just to serve them and she is only an asset.

Eco-feminism- Speak, Woman! is not limited to women only rather it talks about the suppression and exploitation of nature also. Prof Agarwal’s poem ‘Earth Day is a satire upon the people who consider every aspect of nature and its being has been created to serve them only. These exploiters since the ages have tried to suppress and control every phenomenon of nature in the same way as they tried to control and own women. All our social rules and taboos are made by patriarchal societies who tried to infuse the minds with the rules fulfilling their vested interests; with their illogical stories, they proved that females are subordinate to males and their existence is for the service of males only. In the same way, they modified the fact that human beings are a part of nature rather they tried to prove that nature has been created to serve humans. The poem ‘Earth Day’ shows the exploitation of nature at the hands of human beings; rivers, mountains, trees, flowers, fruits, vegetables, insects, animals, and birds all are being exploited to the extreme point. There is pollution everywhere and there seems to be no end to it. Women, who are most near to nature, have been manipulated to accept that their existence is for the service of males only, and if they are molested or raped it is their choice to be treated in such a way.

Feminism- Prof Agarwal supports women and their well-being in a society full of conservative-minded people. While she wants the upliftment of women, she is never in favor of competing with males as she finds females self-sufficient and even superior to males. She is bold enough to talk about reproductive organs and sexuality. In her poem ‘Inverse’ she compares male and females reproductive organs and announces the victory of female organs over those of males. She gives the example of the act of intercourse of which males are often very proud and base their masculinity based on their endurance and performance during the act. She makes fun of the phallus who although swollen with pride at the beginning has to surrender as soon as it reaches its zenith while on the other hand vagina remains unaltered retaining all its glory:

"I don't quite understand, why we feminists,

at all, bother to holler at the authority
of the phallus, poor creature that must,
like the puffer-fish, swell to soon face
the vanquishment of deflation.

Better, the breasts that inflate
and remain thus: balls, arcs,
twin crescents or seagulls' wings.
And, the cunt, a forested cave:
Muscular, moist, susurrating..."

Prof Agarwal reminds one of the well-known poetess Kamladas whose every word was drenched with femininity and oozing the essence of womanhood. It feels good to see women breaking the chains and talking about their feelings, and their bodies which is often considered taboo and ironically a territory restricted for women.

Prof Agarwal's poems are often autobiographical where she reflects upon the things related to her daily life. The poems like 'Grandmother Diaries', 'Mammalian Milonga', 'Approaching Sixty-Two', and 'At Sixty Three' are a few of such poems where she finds her physical beauty declining due to old age yet she possesses a young heart thriving underneath just like Jane in 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop'. The poetess like Jane finds her breasts not as intact as in her youth and though her body refuses to help at this stage of life, feels full of energy and tries to find out the means to rejuvenate it:

"I accidentally happened to see myself
looking at myself in the mirror;
my boobs hanging down to my knees.
I refused to keel over,

And then, quite unwittingly, there was
this sharp intake of air, a sudden gasp,
as in Baba Ramdev's Bhastrika
or Kapaal Bharati; and, my bazookas
popped out, pulsated and heaved,
from below my salt and pepper hair,
through my failing eyesight, I perceived,
if I wore a tight blouse, or, a body-hugging
kameez, these dangling duds would do
the dance and jive to the tempo of Dilbar, Dilbar!"

She ends her poem with a comic note and says that now her heart wants more and wants to master "to move, independently, one breast and then, the next".

Women empowerment- Many poems seem to be autobiographical yet these consist of universal truth; the horrendous treatment of women in society as well as in their homes themselves. These poems are not just autobiographical rather there is a polyphony of voices saying the same things and experiences. The problems raised in the poems, and the experiences shared are not of the author's only rather these tell the stories of various women students the writer came in contact with during her life as a teacher as well as as a warden to a renowned woman hostel. The author is aware of the fears lying there outside in the society so, in her poem 'To a Daughter on Raksha Bandhan' she invokes all the daughters to stop looking towards someone else to protect them and rather tie the sacred thread to their wrists to protect themselves:

“ Look after your body.

Take care of your mind

and heart. Tell yourself,

time and again, that

you are all you need.

Be your own friend.

Nurture your strengths.

Teach yourself the hard way

Never to expect or require

from anyone, other

than your own self.”

She further says that one girl has to face and bear all the physical and psychological pains herself and if she does it always then why should see someone else and beg for her protection when she is her biggest support:

“Then why delude yourself?

Realise and accept

you alone are your best bet!

Build for yourself

Brick upon brick

your mansion of abundant

self-sufficiency.

This Raksha Bandhan,

dear child, wrap around

your own wrist this sacred thread,

this Rakhi.”

The poem reminds us Pushyamitra Upadhyaya's lines “ Suno Draupadi shastra utha lo, ab Govind na ayenge”.
(poeticremnants.wordpress.com)

Conclusion- *Speak, Woman!* is not only a collection of poems but it is a showcase of collective memories of the women of ages gone and to date. Prof Agarwal invokes women to be a voice and support each other while pouring their hearts out. This book is not only a collection of poems but also a bouquet of experiences; some experienced by the poetess herself and some shared and corresponding with the experiences of other women of the world. The poetess sometimes giggles with the little lives around her and sometimes wails in empathy with the tortured souls she is in acquaintance with. While this book makes us shed tears in sympathy with the tortured souls, it provides an anchor to stand tall and unaltered however strong the wind of dominance is.

References

- [1] Agarwal Smita. *Speak, Women!* Pub. Red River. New Delhi. 2021.
- [2] thebookreviewindia.org (24 May, 2022. Sameen Ali)
- [3] timesofindia.indiatimes.com (28 March, 2022. Basundhara Roy Chatterjee)
- [4] <https://www.differenttruths.com> (January 26, 2022. Mamta Joshi)
- [5] [https:// www.hindustantimes.com](https://www.hindustantimes.com) (14th January 2022. Keki Daruwalla)
- [6] poetryfoundation.org
- [7] poeticremnants.wordpress.com

