

Plight of an Educated Woman in Swarna Kumari Devi's *An Unfinished Song*

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Abstract

Subjugation of women discriminations, mortification, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence are predominant in large parts of the world. Women experience prejudice and disparate treatment in terms of education, employment, power and decision-making because of the patriarchal constructs. Western Feminism led to movements for educational opportunities and equal rights for women. Swarnakumari Devi, in her novel An Unfinished song challenged the sensibilities and concerns of a nationalist patriarchy. She depicts the conventional ways of world and the plight of her educated and confident protagonist Mrinaline. Her constant revolt against the patriarchal standards and institution of marriage to establish a life of her own portrays her as a self-sufficient woman. Swarna kumari's Mrinaline is an exemplar of the new woman combating the clutches of patriarchy, love and marriage between the two opposing thoughts of modernization and tradition.

Key Words: Women Education, Patriarchy, Love, Marriage, New-Woman, Emancipation, Tradition, Modernity.

Subjugation of women to men is predominant in large parts of the world. We come across experiences where women are not only consider as subordinate to men but are also subject to discriminations, mortification, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence. Women experience prejudice and disparate treatment in terms of vital right to food, physical condition, education, employment, power over productive resources, decision-making and living not because of their biological dissimilarities or sex, which is natural but because of

their sex differences which is a societal construct. Gender based unfairness and exploitations are rampant and the socio-culturally defined characteristics, aptitudes, capabilities, needs, personality traits, position, responsibilities and behavioral patterns of men and women contribute to the discriminations and hierarchies in society. Gender disparities are manmade and they get legitimized in a patriarchal society.

Simone De Beauvoir observes:

..... that since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that the secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men. (9)

In 1792, Western Feminism rose as a protest against patriarchy, and the subjugation of the female sex with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. By 1848, the entire world had already witnessed movements for educational opportunities and equal rights for women. If Wollstonecraft considered education as the force to enhance their rational and ethical capacities, giving ascendancy to reason and rationality over emotion; J.S. Mill in the following century advocated for political, economic and civic liberties for women. But maternity and domesticity continued to remain the primary assertion of the female sex. Socialism and women's suffrage demand the acceptance of the 'second sex' at par with the first sex, i.e., the male authority. Women, questioning customs and patriarchy, did not blindly admit to the Western notion of things; rather they meticulously moved towards restructuring and reforming their female self. But the inherent female conduct along with deep ethical values is not subject to change. In the process of self- renovation, these women gather strength from the precious Indian cultural heritage.

Jasbir Jain acknowledges: Women gain experience through being thrown on their wits for survival.... These women, who are whether by choice or circumstances moved out of family constructs, are also shifted from roles to character and from family to a larger sense of community. They learn to question conventions and find a way of rebellion. (67)

The woman's search for self-definition is restricted by the roles dispensed to her through inheritance and tradition, social beliefs and patriarchy. Her feelings of helplessness arise from her longstanding imprisonment to the narrow alleys of unawareness and perversion. Women were acutely aware of the demeaning situation of the Indian woman. In order to elevate India to her true level it was obligatory to raise her daughters from the degraded state to their proper position in life. Education was the only key to reinforce the faculties and form the individuality of the Indian woman. English Education introduced in 1835, unlocked new

vistas of erudition and the Indians were slowly exposed to Western Science and liberal ideas. Western Education and influence affected a change in the Indian approach to life. The society, in which Sati, Child-Marriage, Female infanticides and Purdah were in vogue, came to recognize the social reforms, instituted through benevolent enactments and proliferated by social reformers. The initial attempts in female education were made by Christian missionaries. Many social and spiritual reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy (1772 – 1833), Keshab Chandra Sen (1835 – 1884), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Behramji Mermanji Malabari (1853 – 1912), Sayed Ahmed Khan (1817 – 1998) and other made dedicated effort to put an end to the social evils related to women

Suvendu Kumar Mund:

The impact of English Education and western ideas changed the age-old concepts on the position of women in society and man-women relationship. In the framework of traditional values, Indian women are shown preparing themselves for a new world. (117)

A range of socio-economic changes, in the post-colonial times, protected the rights and position of the woman. In spite of the execution of such principles, male supremacy was acutely experienced within familial relationships. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* asserted that, “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (33). Women writers exercised the fictional mode to create speaking positions for women and present vantage points from where an analysis of modern patriarchy could be safely instigated.

Swarnakumari Devi, the most creative of women novel writers of nineteenth century Bengal confronted the sensibilities and anxieties of a nationalist patriarchy that extolled de-sexualized domestic women. Unlike the moralistic manuals which approved love to be a female virtue entailing self-sacrifice, care, kindness, responsibility, and emotional self-control dissociated from sexuality, *An Unfinished Song* gravitated towards a culture of liberal self-interest, individual aspiration and self-actualization through love. It is a story of the quest for an independent identity through an rational understanding of the concept of love. The protagonist of the novel is Mrinaline, who is intelligent, sensitive, educated, fervent, young woman dedicated to certain standards. There are two levels in the narrative, the time of her inscription, and the time of her infancy. Mrinaline is quite successful in modulating her opinion from that of a child to that of a woman whose growing consciousness unravels new horizons. As a mature individual, she weighs submission against sovereignty, desire against responsibility, moral carefulness against passionate romance. Mrinaline is an enigmatic merge of childhood innocence, youthful charm and astuteness that comes with age.

Love for Mrinaline is neither a model to be valorized nor an emotion superior than life. It is a this-worldly sentiment that assures personal gratification through reciprocity. She is not a submissive recipient of love but actively asserts love from her loved ones. The dexterity of the mind of Mrinaline allows her to shift her love from one person to another when betrayed. While women were held accountable for upholding social and ethical economy and prescriptions of perfect femininity in marriage and norms of domesticity envisaged of women as commendable altruists lacking self-assertiveness, Mrinaline did not treasure the ideal of feminine self-abnegation through marriage. She operated the conventional romance form to forge her philosophy of love, which was definitely unconventional during her era. She was nineteen and unmarried and loved before she was married. She treasured a profound and dedicated affection for her childhood friend Chotu and conserves this feeling in the echoes of an unfinished song. She once heard him sing.

A long time later, as a young lady when she hears Romnath Roy sing that song, haunted by the melody of the song she feels attracted to him. Romnath charms her with diligence and she consents to his proposition mistaking her love for the song for attraction for the singer. Also, he bit by bit turned into the perfect ideal. There was yet one feeling, one impact around her, this man was to be her spouse. Marriage affects the life of a Hindu woman. Constant transference of affections and delicate emotions to the one considered the spouse was a consequence of cultural conditioning. "Her husband is the representation of the divine on earth to her, the object of her worship. There can be no mistake whoever he may be he is the only one, and none other ever dare claim a thought in her mind. She has been trained in this conviction throughout the ages until it has moulded her nature and is in itself enough to awaken her love and foster it." (22)

The ambivalent emotional processes and sensitivity mapped the expansion of Mrinaline's mental and moral selfhood that makes her wade through convoluted emotional, ethical and social crisis. On one hand she defines her own notions of love and marriage on the other she adheres to the age old values of marriage. Her emotions were in continuous flux, she was confused between her suitor Romnath and her imagined ideal beloved. She ponders "he had expressed his feelings for me –was I now happy, the voice of my heart did not reply. Something displeased me, I know not what" "it dawned upon me that this was not what I had longed for it was all so short of my expectations" (25) Mrinaline through her monologues makes implicit suggestions about the recurrent change in her thought processes and asserts the sovereignty of her mind. Her gradual unfolding as a social subject, emotional growth as an individual, her changing consciousness shows a vibrant female self. Her views were aroused of stream of issues related to love, man-woman relationship, marriage, construction of female identity, influence of the west, patriarchal pressure and nationalism. She is sometimes found confirming; sometimes contesting these values invariably demonstrate female experience and autonomy. She has to face several consequences for breaching her

engagement with Romnath Roy, Her brother-in-law denounces this as womanly fickleness and drawing from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* says: "Oh Frailty, thy name is woman. Why so much ado about nothing? This is the broadmindedness produced by your education, the fruit of liberty!"(51)

In the nineteenth century Bengal, women education has faced several impediment and criticism. There were superstitions like educated women may indulge in illicit affair, may turn into widow and may be a potential husband killer. In this respect Tanika Sarkar, in *Strishiksha and its Terror: Re-Reading Nineteenth-Century Debates on Reform* mentions: We find that the new woman is meant to be the opposite term of the domesticated, chaste, good wife of old times. If the signification is widened out a little more, then education equals the end of the patriarchal marriage system. (158)

Even her own sister called her foolish and careless for breaking her engagement for such trivial cause. She warned her of losing a perfect man and of social denigration. Man engaged in flirtation and breaking a relationship is acceptable and negligible. Women have no right to reject a man; it was always man's privilege. "A man is not perfect but liable to failings of humanity in general. If woman raises her ideal of him too high she must be disillusioned" (32) Mrinaline is not convinced by her sister's point of view. With ethical corruptibility crawling into her self-chosen love, she no longer recognizes marriage as an institution that perfects a woman, a release from the unbearable insufficiency of an unmarried bluestocking. Mrinaline comprehends and even approves of the virtue of wifely dedication and it is specifically for this reason that she repudiates to give her love to an unworthy man at any cost. However as she learns of Romnath's affair with an English girl whom he has forsaken to seek her hand, she turns away from him. She was perplexed by the demands of her heart and that of society. She felt stressed and dejected but confident of her decision,

"Deceived by him whom I trusted so intensely, I felt as did the beggar saint Durbasa, who, when asking the love stricken Sakuntala for alms was roused to anger, because she noticed him not. Even so my pride was wounded, and I began to loathe the deceiver. My indignation turned upon myself as well why had I been so blind as to take a renegade for a god? Still I felt a grim pleasure at being disillusioned, for now I knew him as he really was..." (29)

By disapproving her marriage Mrinaline disputed against the societal and moral double standards that ignored promiscuity and dishonesty of men but severely chastised women for breach of gender-normative commitment. Swarna Kumari Devi thus forges her feminine virtue of a Hindu woman and sovereignty and self reliance of contemporary English women. Mrinaline states her concept of true love:

"I expected of man what a man expects of woman. As a man wants undivided devotion from the woman he marries, as she is not allowed ever to give a thought to any man but him, so did I want my husband's whole existence to be mine. "(33) She idealizes love as divine and eternal ,she confirms "nor am I satisfied to have my husband's love for one life only, I must

feel in my own consciousness that he had been mine in lives of the past and would be mine again in lives to come.”(33)

She sees love as an all-encompassing emotion and refutes the existence of any differentiation between the filial and conjugal love. She believes love being the same but the idol changes, starting from parents to siblings then to friends and finally love settles with the husband. Love transgresses the boundaries and reaches the next. She depicts patriarchy and at the same time reveals the new woman aspirant o a fair deal in marriage. She gives account of her dedication to her father, her love for her childhood friend Chotu who left an enduring impression on her life and she treasured the memory of their intimacy with great affection. “I was anxious to see Chotu every morning, but at dusk I waited eagerly for my father’s return. I seemed to love him most with whom I was for the time being” (15) I used to frequently tell my father ‘I love you very much...he used to reciprocate with a smile and kiss me, “now Chotu had ever kissed me, so surely it was father who loved me most. Then why should I bestow so much affection upon Chotu? For love expects love in return; of this I was convinced even in my infancy, although no one had told me so” (16)

When Binoy Krishna the doctor enters her life she is once again moved by the warm feeling of love. The compassion of the doctor evokes in her the memories of the tender love of her childhood friend. She now places the doctor at the centre of her adoration. “Ah , the look of tender love was there that I had seen in the eyes of my childhood’s friend, that look for which in vain I had sought in the eyes of my lover. The delusion lasted for a moment only, and I saw it was not he, but the doctor who was bending over me”(27) Soothed by Dr.Binoy’s compassion and care during her period of illness, she falls in love with him and finds a strange semblance between him and her childhood love, Chotu. Swarnakumari emotively depicts the inner tumult and pangs of guilt in Mrinaline’s conflict-ridden mind. But she reprimands herself and decides to compensate for her fickle mindedness by marrying Romnath, but to her disappointment he falls into disfavor with Mrinaline. He dismisses his affair with the English woman as sheer flirtation and even trivializes the English woman’s feelings. He rather counsels Mrinaline to guard her respect in the society as she may be defamed if the engagement breaks. “Let the fault be mine but then; can you marry me still knowing the fault to be mine? Do not think I speak from a selfish motive, think of what you will suffer if this engagement is broken” (48) .The arrogant supposition of Romnath that women ought to grab any eligible offer for marriage and the conventional wisdom of the time that the choice of the bride is a privilege of man were overturned by Mrinaline. Being a self-respecting woman she refused his mortifying proposal when he suggested that considering her own benefit, she should marry him. Mrinaline rejects this offer off hand, for her marriage was not the only destination and she was not to compromise with her husband’s fidelity. “I am not calculating how much I may gain by the transaction. You need not trouble yourself on my account. I do not want to marry for convenience.” (48).

In “The Feminine Mystique (1963)”, Betty Friedan explored and challenged the effects of limitations placed on women by patriarchal Ideologies, gender-stereotyping and assumptions about ‘femininity’. She maintained that combining a career and a family would enable woman to achieve true fulfillment and equality. Under the impact of sound education, women would no longer require “the regard of boys or men to feel alive” (331)

In traditional Bengal society it was a general perception that when a woman’s engagement breaks it’s always the mistake of the woman. But Mrinaline being aware of the fact acts prudently and stands for her own sake. She doesn’t repent for her decision rather feels safe and secured. Marriage was unacceptable to Mrinaline if it involved conciliation of one’s moral principles. Swarnakumari here gives dominance to the woman’s right to refuse over the man’s privilege to choose. Thus she turns towards Dr. Binoy, who fits her ideal perfectly. He is also educated in England, but he brings back positive elements from the west with which he expands his own culture. He has great confidence on competency of women. For instance, he appreciates the brilliance of Gorge Eliot and does not hesitate to place her at par with Shakespeare. He admires liberty and self reliance of English women.

“Day by day their sphere of activity expands until they have begun to invade the realms of politics. The men may laugh at them, but nevertheless they respect their women for it. It is impossible for us here to realize what influence those women exercise in their country and on the individual, and how beneficent that influence is. Our life seems purposeless compared with it” (63)

Mrinaline admires the liberal approach of Binoy Krishna, his respect for women and desire to see them grow. She felt at ease with him, he matched her ideal of love. She herself is independent and liberated in her thought. She felt Binoy Krishna would lead her to higher enlightenment and emancipation. Dr. Binoy Krishna becomes friendly with Mrinaline’s family. Mrinaline’s brother-in-law now suggests that he could be a prospective bridegroom for Mrinaline. Unfortunately, Mrinaline’s sister informs her husband that the doctor was engaged to Kusum. This perhaps is the same Kusum whose father wanted to give a huge dowry to Mrinaline’s former love, Romnath Roy. Unlike last time, Mrinaline was stunned by this revelation. Against the popular conception of the time that resentment and jealousy are inherent attributes of women, true love releases Mrinaline from such meanness. Education and introspection makes her an embodiment of magnanimity connecting her affection with the bigger moral universe of benevolence.

The possessiveness that she has expressed over Romnath’s love had vanished when it came to the doctor. She says when I felt that Kusum is the beloved of my love, I began to love Kusum.(76)

Though the major anxiety of most of the parents, irrespective of their public position remained the marriage of their daughter at the proper time, Mrinaline’s father had groomed her up as a woman with a mind of her own. The restraint of the liberating process in the

varying times is exposed when he too thinks that marriage with an proficient husband is the end a woman's life. She was in dilemma as she loves Dr. Binoy Krishna but her father disapprove of courtship marriage and proposes the name of childhood friend Chotu as the groom. The dreamy hope of her childhood days fills her with anguish. Things became severe when her paternal aunt rebuked her father for not having married her off. People flocked together to see a girl at the age of nineteen but still unmarried, almost as a display. In the Bengal tradition, girls got married at a very tender age but "The Age of Consent Act", 1891 raised the age of consent from ten to twelve. (Geraldine Forbes,)(31).She was far beyond the prescribed age of marriage, both religiously and legally.

Swarna Kumara Devi has probed into the subtle workings of Mrinaline's heart and mind, her reflections and introspections as she feels her life became an unmitigated ruin. However, pondering over this, she determined that it is better to eternally bear and accept this troubled subsistence than to get married to the one that she does not love. Mrinaline writes a letter to her father articulating her unwillingness to get married and endorsing an self-sufficient career of social service to motherland. After much soul-searching about marriage as a suitable form of union, Mrinaline turns to her radical best by questioning the constitution of marriage and family. Though her spinsterhood was viewed as an instance of individual hardship by the people around her, she felt that life could be valuable even outside matrimony. She felt that a single woman instead of driving an internal looking and lone presence ought to search for self-acknowledgment by guiding her ladylike office to a calling that would contribute socially. However, Mrinaline's request falls on deaf ears. Her father told her, "I see you have a mistaken idea about marriage. Must you necessarily remain single in order to serve your country? Even if you did, you could not do much in that direction under the present conditions. You will be able to fulfill the duties of your life far better married than single, and I have not the least doubt you will be happy. For both the temporal and spiritual well-being of woman marriage is the best road."(82)

N.K Jain quotes; In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons! She should not have independence.(12)She was now left with the only choice of abdicating her free will which she had exercised so long. She had to suffer a life as a righteous daughter and Mrinaline laments: "I was after all a weak Bengali girl, I could but obey. There was no alternative." (82)

It is true that traditional societal value is upheld with love finding its culmination in a happy wedding, but this conformist strategy lends credibility to the plot which otherwise appears a bit too unrealistic in nineteenth century Bengal. Swarnakumari gives Mrinaline the strength to revolt against both individual prescription and socio-cultural standards. Swarnakumari here intelligently explains the crisis of individual will, subtle tension in affirmation of agency, incongruity and fissures in the new-born self-consciousness in women of the nineteenth century which stood in their way of asserting strong individualities. The novel ends on a

joyful note when Chotu of childhood days turns out to be Dr. Binoy. Past is recuperated within the present as the focus of the childhood affection becomes her ardent love of youth. However, the interrogative tone continues till the end: “did I love the companion of my childhood and perceived that reflection of him in the doctor whom I met again as a man and a stranger, or did I love the man, and obtain the companion of my childhood by accident? I love, I admit, but the question remains, whom?”(93)

Swarna Kumari Devi concentrated on the diverse persona of the Indian woman. She mirrored the harmony of ideology and imagination. She is also a harbinger of change in the medium of expression. She thus, explored many vistas; from the subliminal to the unconscious, from reality to abstract, from self-denial to self-affirmation, from negation of the self to an assertion of individuality. She projected the intimate experiences, emotional and moral predicaments, along with championing the cause of women in an unconstrained candor. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes: The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways, but they do not succeed in living completely the life of a human being. (30) It might be that Swarna Kumari’s liberal Brahmo background permitted assertion of her freedom of choice, the will to defy socialized dependence on male will. Swarnakumari Debi’s life gives us an insight into historical situations that enabled her to pen her central character as mostly a poised individual who is rarely in conformity with patriarchal principles. Suvendu Kumar Mund says: The impact of English Education and Western ideas changed the age-old concepts on the position of women in society and man-woman relationship. In the framework of traditional values, Indian women are shown preparing themselves for a new world. (117)

The remarkable use of the first-person narrative and personal touch makes *An Unfinished Song* almost an autobiographical narration. The genuineness of the narrator’s voice is established by portrayal of life’s journey through written words, internal monologues, verbalized stream of consciousness, conversations and letters. It creates an effect of realism, confirming both the authenticity of the narrator’s character and her rootedness in the social milieu. Anuradha Roy summarizes the development in the following manner: Indian writers (women) are thus finding new ways of asserting female selfhood, showing increasing courage in breaking age-old strictures regarding a woman’s existence. (140)

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