

# **Yatra - The Ascent of Self Accomplishment**

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**Abstract:** Three women respond differently to a work by a woman writer. This paper, is an attempt to examine how far it is an accomplishment by a woman and to what an extent it is Indian.

**Keywords:** *Yatra*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Three women respond differently to a work by a woman writer. This paper, is an attempt to examine how far it is an accomplishment by a woman and to what an extent it is Indian.

First, about the resemblances the protagonist bears to writer herself. While Shalini Gupta spots just one similarity, "half-Greek, half-Indian, like Ms. Sibal herself. Yet, there the resemblance ends". This reviewer would like to add two more both Krishna Chahal as well as Nina Sibal were teachers of English at Delhi and both had foreign visits Krishna had here England visit while Nina an assignment at the UN.O. It is difficult to disagree with Shalini who finds it "complex, many stranded, dense-textured" and multi-layered as onion. Yes, it is an ambitious attempt to undertake portraying, so vast a canvas in one's debut. It is a pot-pouri in the sense that it is a hodge-podge of history, politics, whims, desires, sex, violence, war, partition, environment consciousness and so on. To quote Ira Pande again, "it includes all those masalas make good Indian curry." The bite was too large to swallow; a chunk she could not manage. Had she tried to curb her enthusiasm to include God's plenty, she could have done justice to her canvas. From the style point of view Shalini's charge is that it is a manque her Achilles heel. There seems to be no justification for taxing the reader's patience and memory because most of the journeys into past or present contribute nothing to plot or characterisation turns out to be much ado about nothing. Her camera pans at Bombay, Greece, Delhi, Punjab, Dagra, Kohat, Hyderabad, Bangladesh "hurtling back and forth in time and space". Probably, the recent wave of Post-Modernism to move ping-pong like in time and place, to undertake distant journeys, to traverse land and sea swept the writer off her feet and she tried to undertake what requires the calibre of a Margaret Atwood or a Robert Kroetsch.

While the protagonist in Atwood's "Surfacing" had just only one generation to explore and, therefore, she could manage; Sibal compounds (confounds) her task by probing several. While the Anna in 'Badlands' had only one desire to demonstrate how idiotic had been her father's quest for eternity; Krishna is all set to prove her father's innocence. In order to do so they had to undertake arduous journeys to distant places. The fathers in "Badlands" as well as in "Yatra" have no tender feelings for their wives both pine for their husband's love all their lives. Naturally, both rely greatly on their paramours. Both male had their own illicit relations Dave his Anna, Paramjit his Dhiraj Kumari. While Anna's mother in "Badlands" has just one; Sonia in "Yatra" has two the Greek one and the Indian one. In fact, this fact prompts us to realise that women in Yatra have extra-marital relations almost as habit (not an abnormal perversion), a poor reflection on women. Swaranjit Kaur, Prakash, Krishna, Anu's mother have lovers. And by what interpretation of the collective racial unconscious can one explain this unusual resonance in which generation gap simply evaporates: "Krishna went elsewhere into the past, straight into the arms of her aunt Kailash Kaur, everywhere that her green-eyed lover, Prakash had gone. She nosed up under heavy breasts, sprang through the shoots of her pubic hair, blindly felt the tender skin and fair young flesh of the body which lay under Prakash and the final bliss of her wet cunt with a sudden leap and arch of recognition." (p. 37).

My male "sensitivity" fails to comprehend such a commonwealth of cunts!

Sibal begins with a traveller's guide how to approach India:

"Slowly, by sea, so that you have a sense of land coming to you with its arm held out, reaching for your life" (p. 7) because the landscape in India is horrible to an outsider:

"Sewage, sandalwood, spices, a dead pariah dog, burning gnats when she had looked from her window she had seen a line of bare female bottoms defecating on the edge of a drain" (p. 9) Oh! what a landscape welcome India, Salaam Bombay!

As pointed out earlier, the novel is more a work of fancy than of imagination applying Coleridgean distinction between the two; or is more like yoking together of diverse ideas and images through violence in terms of Dr. Johnson's notion of metaphysical poetry. There are excellent narratives, caravan of images, dreams and yet the unnecessary wanderings back to pre-partition period or emergence of Bangladesh like jute patches in a velvet garment.

Time and again do we come across an experience in which a character identifies herself not only with her parents and grandparents but even with distant relatives as if it was something shared together simultaneously. Yes, the racial consciousness can explain it. But, how can a person foresee through her experience the ecstasy of her descendants in future generations?

"Horses were racing through Kailash Kaur's veins. They carried her outside the walled city, past the lawyer's houses, beyond the law which would have pleased Swaranjit Kaur's heart. The horses were racing across the earth; they sent shudders through the wheat fields, connected Sonia Chahal's back, bedded by Surjit to Kailash Kaur, drawing Prakash her nephew down upon her showing him how to enter." (p. 52)

Similarly, we find the riddle of Bibi Chinti something unpalatable. How can the same vicious figure haunt people belonging to different generations separated by time and space. Shalini Gupta tries to answer:

"at Poonam's death, she weeps paradoxically for her dead buffalo, - In the final chapter, she is present when dogs tear apart Chaman Bajaj. She occurs as a false alarm earlier in the novel when Krishna and her lover visit Humayun's Tomb." Should we infer that progenies share not only ambitions and fears but also hallucinations!

Tearing of Chaman Bajaj into pieces by his dogs. When they attack him they had been with him for pretty long and naturally should have allegiance to the new master i.e. Bajaj himself. But instead, the dogs forgot their loyalty to the new master and "remembered" their loyalty to the old one.

Chaman Bajaj kicked out at them viciously in his anger and they turned upon him. (p. 311 emphasis mine). This puts a serious doubt about the loyalty of dogs. Could a veterinary psychologist explain this "memory" which can dominate behaviour of dogs to such an extent?

Though there are several archetypal images and myths interwoven throughout the two, Chinti Bibi and Chaman Bajaj are disguised versions of Pootna (who had tried to kill the child Krishna by poisoning her breast) and Kansa. So is the name Krishna borrowed from the Hindu mythology. The change in colour of her skin from "pretty white" to "blue" (black) in early childhood seems to be a plausible explanation. However, this change was quite perplexing to everyone, even to medical specialists. This assumes a symbolic meaning in terms of India, turning "black" during the partitions a degeneration that also defies any rational explanation.

The discussion so far might provoke that "Yatra" can be dismissed as a novice's inept handling of theme and technique. Far from that it has its merits too.

Firstly, it shows the rise of modern woman who has calm of mind and also perseverance and thus can meet any challenge and can emerge triumphant out of a crisis. Her crusade against Chaman Bajaj and her valiant bid to rescue her father from disgrace are two instances. In spite of her divorce (which was more because of his parents' wishes than because of personal disliking between the two) she is able to win the support and good will of her (ex) husband. The lover she takes is not merely a sensual or psychological necessity but a mature woman's capacity to take decisions at appropriate moment. It shows the growth of a teacher (whom everybody regarded a non-entity) into a crusader and champion of women rights.

The modern woman could achieve what her predecessors a few generations ago could not. While her mother Sonia belonged neither to Greece nor to India; neither to her Greek lover nor to Indian and all the time hostile to

husband. Krishna, a witness to her suffering could tide over her own problems and thus escaped neurosis to which her mother sank in. We find Kailash Kaur and Krishna two women who could find their salvation whereas Swaranjeet and Dhiren Kumari succumbed to restrictions imposed by society. The modern woman, instead of whining and weeping, can surmount her problems and assert herself. This is a positive aspect of the book.

The novel also presents women in non-traditional roles Poonam as revolutionary, Shalini as a social worker unafraid of prison and fighting evils with a strong will, another social worker rescuing and helping refugees Pratibha Anand make an impression that women will no longer remain confined to kitchen and shall prove their mettle every where they go. The women associated with "Chipko movement" illiterate yet strong also organise a movement that they are able to ensure final triumph.

It is not an instance of ecofeminism but also a strong verdict against male exploitation. Its non-violent character without the publicity stunt of "women lib" activists demonstrate that they also serve who stand and wait.

In the list of defeated characters, apart from Sonia when have another tragic figure in Dr. Dhiraj Kumari a victim of circumstances. Her suicide though unbecoming evokes pity.

There are moments of beauty, narratives of lyrical quality images and metaphors charged with emotions and feelings. Strewn across the book are passages where probings into psyche of women bring pathos and induce compassion.

The tragedies of Swaranjeet and Poonam and their sordid end evokes sympathy but at the same has cathartic quality.

However, it must be added that the two sub-texts, Satinder and Poonam, similarly of Bangladesh forays could be removed altogether without much injury to the text. That would have given the novel the much needed "compact" character.

Shalini Gupta notices in the text glimpses of Marquezian quality, Rushdien richness and Nayantara Sahgal's localization. I would resist from so rich a compliment; yet would like to add that the writer has golden days ahead! It cannot be dismissed as "indifferently written."

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