

MEERA MAHADEVAN'S 'SHULAMITH': A JOURNEY TO SELF FULFILLMENT

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An author is but a mirror of the society he breathes in. This can be exemplified by a lot of authors as, Dickens, Tolstoy, and more recently and regionally, Anita Rau Badami, Manju Kapur and Meera Mahadevan come to mind. For me Meera Mahadevan's "Shulamith" best highlights, and describes the conundrum of an identity crisis a woman faces in defining herself, in finding true solace. This is not an isolated example, though the image of women in South Asian novels has undergone a change in the last three decades. Throughout this period, women writers have moved away from traditional enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity. The interests of women writers have changed with South Asian society and its relationship with the West. What is worth noticing is that from women who endure namelessly fulfilling the ideal of the devoted wife-goddess, South Asian fiction by women has progressed to a conflicted yet liberating naming of one's experience and that of other women.

Mahadevan writes about her Bene Israel community which was at one time the largest Jewish community in India, in her novel, Shulamith, a translation of the Hindi work, 'Apna Ghar' (A home of one's own). The novel's main character, Shulamith, experiences a "sense of dual fidelity" between her devotion to her husband and to her way of life. She chooses her way of life and remains in India when her husband leaves for Israel, but she withers away because she misses him and eventually dies as he returns. Notable is the trouble she faces, the dilemma and the choice she makes, it is that not of a patriarchal woman but that of a woman with a belief and freedom of her own. At the other side of the coin is Maizie who, based on her beliefs and ideals chooses a life of unattachment and dating but life comes full circle for her too she becomes an image of the suffering woman: her values and personality change as she transforms first into a subdued, abused, barren wife living in poverty then into a hard-working, self-sacrificing nurse.

Ultimately what we find is that be it Shulamith or Maizie, they both follow their hearts and find their own roads to their happiness or what they think would be happiness, the point is not the results of the decisions they take but the right to take them.

Evolution is not only way of science, it's a way of life too. Just like physical evolution, we find societal evolution too. Disraeli had said that, today's extremist is tomorrow's moderate. And the quote makes sense. As time passes old ideas go on the road to redundancy while new ones gain acceptability. As times have changed the doors to houses have opened, and the hitherto trapped, 'Bhartiya Nari' has reached the world. Indian women have excelled in a variety of areas. One of the more prominent ones is literature.

Meera Mahadevan's 'Shulamith' is a riveting tale without being exhausting. It is an intricate web of relations, feelings, emotions woven into the protagonist, Shulamith. She lives a

life filled with events all of which led or directed by her yet keeps changing her ideas, views and perceptions for life, what is the striking factor here is the consistency of her beliefs, that of the love of nation, religion and family.

The story begins with the wish of her husband Michael to go and live in the Zionist state of Israel, she differs with him and feels that they don't need to. She believes that India is their country too, she expresses herself clearly when she says,

“As far as I know we have been in India for the last two thousand years. In these years have we ever been marginalized, mistreated? And the surprising thing is our religion is completely different from Hindus, we eat kosher meat, observe dietary laws and get spaces for our temples, we have never been looked down upon. Remember Germany? All humanity trembles when it thinks of German atrocities. They did not kill us, they did it systematically. They kept us alive to burn in hell. That was Germany, Jews going from there to Israel is fine. But it is different in India...”

She not only loves her country she respects it for its accommodative trait, the way it gave the Jews; shelter, equality and respect, a treatment afforded only in Israel, and India. Moreover, as she had been uprooted from Karachi only half a decade ago she does not want to move again.

Shulamith withers with the loss of her husband, she dries away like a leaf in Autumn, waiting for the sunlight, she decreases her meals and starts getting lifeless.

With Shulamith are her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law Maizie and her son Uriel, and they too like Shulamith, bear the pangs of separation. It is highlighted, when she writes to him:

“I am quite all right here, but when I come into our room at night I remember you. When I enter the room my heart thuds. My eyes wander all through the room looking for something. Though I know the room's empty, I have a feeling someone is inside, I have a feeling that you are lying on the bed and reading as usual and I am just talking to you. But after I have changed and walk towards the bed your face suddenly vanishes; I feel a pain in my chest...”

Michael's brother Umbriel dies in an accident and other brother Daniel moves back to the security of the family after the death of his non-Jewish wife Anne.

As we delve into the novel we find Shulamith and her mother-in-law are deeply religious and believe in customs. But also they are humble and caring, an example of this is Naomi, she is the daughter of one of their tenants in Panvel, where she lives with her brother Issac and her mother Yacobeth. Naomi's husband had left her on the second day of marriage. Her suffering moves Shulamith and she brings Naomi to her house, she is treated well by their family, like a part of it and adjusts well and as a result of her kindness, she is fully devoted to Shulamith and her family. And yet all was not well, Naomi's mother though happy for her now happy daughter was getting worried about her future for she felt scared that Naomi was going to end up unmarried at the 'big house' and destroy her purpose of life.

A compelling undercurrent is the story of Maizie, Shulamith's sister in law, she takes a lot of the brunt of Shulamith's decisions, she is a chirpy, modern girl who plays badminton, goes to clubs and her boyfriend is Baruch, both families know that they like each other and feel satisfied to know that they would end up in matrimony. But while the tale of Maizie continues, Shulamith's mother decides that she wants to marry her psychologically incapacitated son

Shalom, to Naomi. Shulamith is unhappy with this and puts her foot down. Finally Issac, Naomi's brother remarks at the proposal,

“...maybe not lame and cockeyed, Mama, but your daughter is not rich. We are poor illiterate and uncouth. People take liberties with such as we. It was on Bhabhi's account that I said nothing of this in the Big House but by God, I can be a mean man when provoked.”

Shulamith wants to marry off Maizie, but Daniel says it would be better if she gets proper education first. And hence against the advice of all she continues to educate Maizie. On this Baruch's mother feels,

“... people at the big house are a little complicated. They all had to study and have degrees; a quite unnecessary preoccupation seemed to her. All this Sanskrit and fuss about poetry and music. Daniel still read poetry for Ma and Shulamith. And now Uriel was studying Hebrew.”

Maizie, meets Shyam, a friend of Baruch, both fall in love with each other and break the news to the families, Maizie becomes pregnant to his child. Horrified and scandalized, Shulamith, with the help of a local nurse arranges for the abortion in the name of family honor, she is also averse to Maizie marrying a non- Jew man, knowing that it would give a bad name to her and the family. For her, religion and family are the most important things, and she genuinely believes that her sister in law would not be happy with a non Jew. Like a confluencing solution Shulamith discovers that Issac wants to marry Maizie, for her it is the perfect solution, and while Maizie is devastated at the loss, Shulamith agrees in full knowledge that Issac is unemployed, as if punishing Maizie for her misdemeanor. While recovering from the abortion and depression, Maizie slowly became fit, and writes poems that only her nephew Uriel reads. She becomes excessively self conscious and insecure, she grew serious and pensive and lost her chatter. While Shulamith was tortured by seeing her this way, she could do but nothing to help her, couldn't bring herself to say what she felt. Maizie too drowns in guilt of shaming herself, her ma and her family. Issac though is the picture of happiness and doesnot care about being jobless, not in the least.

To Shulamith's horror, life with Issac soon starts to go to dogs for Maizie, as Issac shows no interest for a job and wants a son, for his sake and in hope that he gets more responsible, Maizie wants a son too, but after a year of marriage she does not conceive, and Issac starts getting impatient, Maizie tells all this and more to Shulamith in a heart wrenching letter, she burns the letter her reaction was:

“...is a smell here. It is the prestige of the family, it is the human values I have cast in flames. It is the happiness of those dear to me that is burning right now. I am not familiar with the smell of the pyre; but the letter that I burnt just now all the young hopes of Maizie's life are being reduced to ashes. That is the smell that is spreading out of the house.”

Finally, it all gets too much for Uriel and he has an almighty fight with his mother and blames her squarely for every ill befalling Maizie, criticizes her orthodoxy and goes away. When he comes back they discover that he had gone to see Maizie and was badly shook up in the state he saw his childhood companion and even more to discover that Issac was a mere thug and wife beater. He does all this along with Simha, his love.

And he ultimately brings her back. Maizie tries to pick up the pieces of her life, she takes up a course in nursing and becomes a nurse. Uriel, leaves for Israel soon after and marries Simha. Shulamith is heartbroken but does not dissuade him at all, soon her mother in law dies

and Shulamith feels alone and lonely, she feels guilty for having destroyed Maizie's life because of her obdurate behavior.

Shulamith is ill and her health deteriorates quickly, amidst the gloom, a letter from Uriel informs her that Michael has decided to come back, Shulamith is happy but too tired to show it. Michael comes back but is stunned to see Shulamith in the state she is.

Michael feels guilty and broken to not have been there for his family over tough times and good, not being there when his mother lay dying calling his name, he says,

“...more I missed India, I wanted to speak our language, eat our food but could not, I could not share my pain with anyone, all were living through the same I alone felt homesick, it may be the promised land but it was not my home, I missed my home, my home is in India, in the big house with the big Peepal tree. I missed you ...”

Ultimately as Michael is caught reminiscing Shulamith passes away, and the sand castle he and Shulamith had made together on the sea shore of Clifton in Karachi is carried away by the strong wind. And now the very foundation of the Big House with the peepal tree was sinking into the ground.

We see that at every step of the way the characters of the story especially Shulamith rediscover themselves, Shulamith is kind beyond normalcy yet her unkindness towards Maizie is what society and situation made her, her kindness to Naomi is exemplary, her restraint with Michael and then Uriel going away is impressive and the growth of Uriel and Maizie as people and characters is a fascination to watch, all in all Shulamith really is an epoch of self discovery.

References

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