

A World without Dignity, Hope and Respect: Shivani's *Apradhini*

- Daisy Nehra

Abstract: In spite of being a linguistically diverse country, the literature in India has contributed to fostering a national identity – a national consciousness and a national culture. Shivani's collection of Short Stories *Apradhini: Women without Men*, was recently translated into English by her daughter and an established writer herself, Ira Pandey. The women in these stories are murderesses and harlots, village idiots and child brides, lovers and adulteresses, women marginalized and ultimately defiant. This paper explores how dignity, hope and respect fly away for the women who contradict the constructs of femininity in a patriarchal society, thus making them criminals.

Keywords: Translation, women, criminality, prison, patriarchy.

Indian literature stands as the mirror of Indian culture, exemplary of its exceedingly rich prehistoric tradition. And it's a matter of proud to all Indians that of all nations, India has the richest and most diverse literature. In spite of being a linguistically diverse country, where about two thousand odd dialects are in use and twenty odd officially recognized languages in various states, the literature here has contributed to fostering a national identity – a national consciousness and a national culture. It has been possible only through translations of the regional works from one language into another that the literatures in various Indian languages, though rooted deep in their diverse linguistic peculiarities, belong to a 'greater' Indian literature because they reflect in full measure the specificity of a national Indian style. There have been many translations from one regional language to another and many regional languages into Hindi, the Indian national language, but surprisingly very few literatures from Hindi speaking regions of north India have been translated in other regional languages. Same is in the case of translations of Indian literatures into English. In spite of the fact that English is the global language today and good English translations of the works of regional writers would not only enrich India's national literature, but also contribute substantially to world literature, there have not been considerable translations from Hindi literature into English. Consequently, the goldmine of India's literature remains largely unexplored. So, whenever an English translation of a good Hindi work of fiction appears on the literary scene, it is a much welcome addition. A collection of one of the country's most eagerly read Hindi novelist (since 60s), Shivani's stories *Apradhini* (subheaded 'women without men') has recently been translated by her daughter and an established writer herself Ira Pandey. Traditionally, the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. One factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space,

and women's perceptions of their experience within it. Consequently, it is assumed that their work will automatically rank below the works of male writers who deal with 'weightier' themes. But the women writers did not simply popularize the domestic role of women, they also dealt with women who broke the established norms of society before adjusting to them. One of the most popular Hindi writers of her time, Gaura Pant 'Shivani' (1923-2003) was one such writer. One of the country's most popular novelists, she was given several awards and honours including Bhartendu Harishchandra Samman (1979); Mahadevi Verma Samman (1994); Subramannyan Samman (1995), Hindi Sewa Nidhi Rashtriya Puraskar (1997) and the prestigious Padma Sri award by the Indian Government. (1981). She wrote her first short story, in Bengali while she was still a student, but her fame rests on her large body of Hindi writings. This covers a wide range—short stories, novels, travelogues, newspaper articles and her memoirs. She was well versed in Bengali, Gujarati, English and Hindi, but of course Hindi, was her natural medium of expression. Being a representative Indian woman, Shivani disapproved loudly of what she saw as threats to a 'moral' way of living—marriages outside the community, divorces, live-in relationships, back-chatting elders, questioning unfair traditions. Yet, paradoxically, she wrote novels and stories that had strong women characters who rebelled against all such values and social inequalities. This also accounted for her lifelong fascination with those who lived on the margins—mendicants, lunatics and lepers. Time and again, she returns in her short stories and novels to characters drawn from those to whom rigid social values cannot be applied.

Pablo Picasso, the great Spanish artist of the 20th Century said, 'There are only two types of women – goddesses and doormats'. The irony is that these two types are often the same woman, for the former can end up in the latter category by the bitter bows of fate. A collection of Shivani's stories about such rebellious rather criminal characters is *Apradhini*. As the title suggests clearly, the book revolves entirely around women and twists in circumstances that often make ordinary women rebel against the parameters of acceptability set down by society and step shockingly out of line. It is a collection of stories of ordinary women with extraordinary pasts. This collection of sixteen sketches is a mix of non-fiction and fiction and is divided into three sections. The first begins with the women criminals who were interviewed by the author in prison cells. Shivani writes about women who have been commuted a sentence by the court and are in Jail. She met women who have committed murders – burnt their daughters in law alive, hacked off necks for the necklaces they held, helped the lover in cutting sleeping husband into pieces and flung sickles at screeching neighbors. Their physical appearance is described in earthy detail. These women contradict the constructs of 'femininity' in both behavior and appearance. The second part of the book moves away from the prison setting, choosing instead to explore matters like unexpected meetings with long lost friends, feelings of déjà vu and inexplicable incidents revolving around the phenomena of rebirth and afterlife. Also featured here are stories about tricksters in the guise of innocent women, the ambiguous life of a madwoman and the tragic

results of excessive irreverence. An entire story is dedicated to the hardships faced by the author's mother and the magnanimity of spirit that survived all odds. Part three comes as a breath of fresh air and with a touch of much-needed humour. The fates of temptress Shibi and the beautiful courtesan-in-the-making Rajula make for a fascinating read while the feisty Tope with a succession of boyfriends/husbands is delightful. The protagonists are picked from all quarters of the country creating a heady cocktail of regional flavours that would have been very charming, if only the stories were happier.

Told lucidly and laced around her true life journalistic investigations, the stories in first part of *Apradhini* chill the bone with their stark simplicity and brutal honesty. There is no attempt to sensationalize the author's encounters with prison inmates, no indulging in over-sentimental emotions either, merely a threadbare account of the lives led by women in the shadows of crime. Thus, we have the young Chanuli from Kumaon, a victim of domestic abuse; Janaki, who conspired with her lover to kill her own husband; the gangster's moll whose insatiable greed proves to be her undoing; and the earth-eating Muggi who lured 14 men into matrimony and fell in love with the 15th! Now, Crime, in India, is not a male bastion anymore. Statistics prove that since long, the involvement of women has been there in criminal acts of many kinds. Involvement of women in social, cultural, economic and political crime has become common in the recent past. Women have been reportedly involved in a chain snatching gang, robbery and even serial killing. The gravity of the challenge increases manifold when we go through the latest available data on crime from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The Crime in India Reports reveal that the number of females arrested for criminal activities have gone quite up in the last decade. Crime, as a behavioral or social problem, is complicated and not easily understood. The criminality of women is seen more complicated and less understood. Women are considered as turning crime as a perversion of feminine role whether their causes are biological, psychological, social or environmental. Ceasar Lombroso, who has been the pioneer in the scientific study of female crime, viewed female deviance as rooted in the biological make up or as inherent feature of the female species. Famous neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's hypotheses hold that women who are not passive and content with their traditional roles as mothers and wives are maladjusted. A plethora of writings on sociological viewpoint also emerged including various theories (Equality theory, Economic theory, Opportunity theory, Social disorganization theory and Role theory etc.). Unfortunately, these role theorists have desperately failed to propound any concrete idea about the etiology of crime. Women have of course been seen as preservers of social norms, traditions, customs, family cohesiveness and morality since the dawn of civilization, but they have also been criminals since then. Possibly because Women have been given a position of pride in every religion, there has not been enough literature on female criminality. Thus *Apradhini* shakes the reader's heart on its bleak and joyless journey evoking deep emotions within. The author comments on her first meeting with murderesses, dacoits and armed robbers whose death

sentences have been commuted:

Fate, circumstances and social laws had wrapped these lives in their coils to thrust them into a world where youth, love, desire and hope were barred from entering. However hard I looked, there was neither joy nor hope in the faces before me. These were women grown old before their time: the young looked like middle-aged crones and the older ones were like walking corpses. (*Apradhini*, 14)

One can clearly imagine the fate of criminals, when their crime is proved by law. They will have to live the term of their imprisonment within the four walls where sun refuses to shine or if it shines at all, it gets infected by the miserable lives inside. It's an ambience where trees have "sickly yellow, limp and listless" (*Apradhini*, 14) leaves and no koel sings in the motionless groves. In short, it's a world which can make a healthy and optimistic person, sick and hopeless. It doesn't really matter after the crime has been proved, that the crime was cruelly manipulated by the ones like Janaki or it was a result of an inadvertent action after being provoked strongly, by the ones like Chanuli. Prison is their ultimate goal. But, *Apradhini* does not take us on a tour to prison cells only, it tells us the real life stories of those women also who committed crime but were never caught, still they face punishment – not by the law but by themselves. They are free physically but they have their souls imprisoned. They are the most arresting heroines (or anti-heroines), whose crimes were never discovered but who remained captive to their personal guilt for life. The stories of Alakhmai, Rajula, and Madhu Ben are etched by Shivani so delicately that our hearts fill with sympathy at once. The reader is astonished at the underlying sense of spirituality of the penance these characters take upon themselves in the atonement of the crimes they have committed. They are murderesses who were never seen while committing their crime, no law commuted a sentence against them but they also became prisoners – prisoners of a different order - without iron shackles and limiting walls. Alakhmai was a child bride who became an intimidating mendicant (Vaishnavi) after committing her crime. She had pushed a buffalo, her cruel mother-in-law and husband over the edge of a ravine because of the torment she got daily from them for not being beautiful enough. Nobody had caught her under the act, but she never goes home and spends the rest of her life punishing herself, wandering from place to place, homeless and penniless.

Rajula was a singing girl who had earned much money with her melodious voice. She kills her newborn son just because he looked like his father who was worshipped in the village. To save the child's reputed father, she drowns her son in the river. But immediately afterwards, unable to bear what she had done, she runs from that village, throws all her jewellery and money (including forty *tolas* of gold and four thousand silver coins) into the Bhagirathi river and becomes an alm seeking traveler like Alakhmai, singing 'Kariye Chhima' (be forgiving) in penitence for her heinous crime. Madhu Ben was the fourth wife of her very old bed, ridden husband. Exhausted by the unending nursing, she horrifies him of his coming death by doing tricks. The husband died but not without taking her peace of mind. She dreamt of his telling her that

he has taken birth in another state and she will only be forgiven when she rubs her head against the baby's feet and confess her crime to all. She starts performing her penance by leaving all her expensive clothes and jewels and later on confessing her crime to all and asking the baby for forgiveness. Neither these souls could forgive themselves nor they lived a comfortable life afterwards but they could at least have 'some' peace of mind after they repented in one way or another. All around the world, the religions and cultures have oral or written commandments for sinners recommending them to repent for their crimes. This is so because repentance is considered the first step on the road to recovery of a relationship with God. Almost all religions believe that sins, attachments, and mistaken views must be acknowledged as such; then it is possible to turn away from the old life and set out on the new path of faith. Here are a few examples:

- Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Christianity. Matthew 3.2)
- Truly, God loves those who repent, and He loves those who cleanse them-selves. (Islam. Qur'an 2.222)
- Great is repentance; it turns premeditated sins into incentives for right conduct. (Judaism. Talmud, Yoma 86b)
- If one hides the evil, it adds and grows. If one bares it and repents, the sin dies out. Therefore all Buddhas say that the wise do not hide sin. (Buddhism. Mahaparinirvana Sutra)
- dweller in the body, make reparation for whatever you have done! (Hinduism. Garuda Purana 2.35)

Also, all religions believe that the stronger our sincerity is, the more powerful our repentance becomes. While repentance does not erase our negative karma, it can dissolve its future effects. This is what the aforesaid characters in *Apradhini* do - Madhu Ben does it by going to Kumaon, to dissolve the future effects of her negative karma. Alakh Mai, who becomes free like a bird by getting rid of her torturers, chains her soul and becomes a Vaishnavi to perform the penance told by her Guru - roaming on the land as a beggar. From Roman Catholic Churches to Anglicanism, there have been various forms of penance. *Prāyaścitta* is the Hindu term for penance. It denotes an act or rite intended for the destruction of sin. *Prāyaścittas* are not necessary only for the cleansing of one's own soul, but also for the satisfaction rest of society, as they are not permitted to have social contact with one who has sinned and not completed their penance. Rajula, as described above, touches our heart when she kills her own son not to cleanse her own soul but for the social status of her lover who was worshipped by the whole society. Later on she does *Prāyaścitta* for the sin she commits to cleanse her own soul. Literature around the world offers a vast array of descriptions and insights into guilt that provide compelling illustrations of the experience of guilt, as well as penetrating insights into its nature. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a tale of murder that leads to a ferocious sense of guilt that drives Macbeth to his downfall and Lady Macbeth into insanity and suicide. Similarly, Shivani's *Apradhini* is an account of the lives led by

women in the shadows of guilt. Her character Rajula, who sacrifices all her worldly goods into the river, after drowning her baby, is haunted by nightmares repeatedly. She shudders as she recalls them.

I dreamt my clothes were drenched with the milk from my breasts,
I wanted to scream but no sound came from my throat anymore.
Then one day, I sang "*Kariye Chhima*", the song you love. And a miracle took place. My voice came back! The voice I had lost. Now I walk from home to home and sing "*Kariye Chhima*", Lalli. This is the penance God has decided I must perform, and I bow to His will.' (*Apradhini*, 79)

Now, without any sentimental comments by the author, the reader, more specifically a woman reader, immediately shares Rajula's grief, however much one accuses her of committing a terrible crime. Every soul on earth has invisible chains - the chains of guilt, remorse, repentance and self punishment. What if the crime stays hidden, sooner or later, most of the human beings come into the grip of these and imprison themselves. These imprisoned souls find it very difficult, almost impossible to get rid of their guilt. While most of them find solace only in their religions; some go to their spiritual guides/gurus and perform penance; some even commit suicide. Of course there are a few like Janaki who do not repent at all. She teams with her lover in cutting her husband into pieces so that the palm of the baby sleeping there is filled with his father's blood; she is in jail for life; and still she doesn't regret anything.

'Do you ever regret what you did, Janaki?' I asked her.

'Regret what, may I ask? She retorted. 'What have I done?' (*Apradhini*, 35)

Now, Janaki is an 'apradhini' (criminal) who deserves no forgiveness, but are all women in the stories criminals? Are all women prisoners - criminals? Aren't most of them like Chanuli who were tested for their outer limit of endurance? With the moving stories of such women, whose lives were turned down by men or by the absence of men, Shivani makes one think why one crime was greater or lesser than the other. And though the book - 'the first of its kind' was first published in 1972, it seems that nothing has changed as far as poor rural women are concerned. Four decades have gone and they still become the victims of domestic abuse and immense social injustice. Even the factors responsible for a majority of crimes committed by females are the same. By conjuring the horrors of Indian prisons, the plight of poor rural women who continue to be at the receiving end of immense social injustice and depicting the guilty souls who would live just to perform penance, the author does 'justice' to the real life characters who faced 'injustice'. There might be literature written on female criminality worldwide, but Shivani's histories of the formidable women from the heart of India strike a chord in our hearts even today. Also, these memoirs and stories of Shivani have a lot to tell the world about the oral customs, traditions and folklore of Indian regions such as Kumaon (Uttarakhand), Orchha (M.P.), etc. The stories while depicting the peculiar nuances (or the local culture of these regions) also rise above the merely local, to reflect in full measure something that is national in character.

Ira Pande's translation of her mother, Shivani's *Apradhini* is really going to enrich English-language literature from India and gendered texts. Shot through with gentle humour and wry self-deprecation, and filled with compassion, these non-fiction tales, have been elegantly translated. Considered 'popular' rather than literary, most of Shivani's fiction has not been translated. *Apradhini*, makes for an excellent introduction to her work, valuable not only for the stories themselves but also as a lens on a different time and life. *Apradhini* has characters who are completing their sentences in prison; it has characters who suffer inwardly and perform penance; one wonders of yet another category of human souls – who commit crimes but neither they are punished nor their conscience pricks them. Free, physically and mentally, they roam around on this earth. Let's not talk about the gravity of the crime/sin – but most of us now & then are involved in the things which are morally or legally wrong. But how much conscientious are we regarding these wrongs? The questions and emotions evoked by *Apradhini* are many, for one is at the same time shocked, angry, curious, disappointed, compassionate and understanding. Of course these eponymous women are devoid of all dignity, hope and respect, but they are very much a part of our society. In fact many of them try to follow the social norms, but they frequently fail to make sense of the laws they are supposed to obey nor the punishments they have been given. Considered traitors to the norms of the society, some of them really prove to be very courageous as they are truthful to themselves in the odd circumstances and one is forced to appreciate and help these women who *have* free souls. 'There is no jail on earth that can shackle a free spirit and no spirit so free that its feet cannot be bound in chains we cannot see,' (*Apradhini*, 80) writes the author, and besides containing the enrapturing message that can be imbibed from the book, this line underscores the spirit of the collection on the whole. I would like to conclude with similar lines from Richard Lovelace's poem 'To Althea from Prison',

Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take that for a hermitage.
If I have freedom in my love, And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above, Enjoy such liberty.

References :

- Shivani, *Apradhini* (women without men), translated by Ira Pande, Harper Collins, June 2011
- Ira Pandey, "A Conservative Rebel, Memories of an Unusual Mother", *Manushi*, No.76, 2005
- Kankana Basu, "Evoking Deep Emotions", *The Hindu*, 5 Feb. 2012
- Anjana Balakrishnan, "How Free is Your Spirit?", *Deccan Herald*, 5 Feb. 2012
- Steven E. Levington, "Macbeth and other Guilty Souls in Literature", *The Washington Post*, November 20, 2009
- Unnati Narang, Book Review *Apradhini*, *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, April, 2011
- <http://www.articlesbase.com/criminal-articles/female-criminality-in-india-2514945.html>
- http://thinkexist.com/quotation/there_are_only_two_types_of_women-goddesses_and/168486.html

