

Towards Her “Poetics”: Mahadevi Varma's *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan* in the light of Gynocriticism

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Abstract: If literature is a representation and reflection of society, a society, then comprises both man and woman. It would therefore, be injustice on the part of women if their silence remains unspoken and their agonies persist without representation. The representation of women in literature was felt essential for an authentic representation of society. With this objective many women writers took the responsibility to represent and give an expression to the agonizing, voiceless women resulting, thus, in the role of 'woman as writer' and creator of their body of literature. The present paper emphasizes this aspect. This paper attempts a study of Mahadevi Varma's *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan* as a gyno text in the light of Elaine Showalter's notion of 'gynocriticism'. The paper reflects on Showalter's theory of “gynocritics” and offers a parallel significance of 'woman as writer' in Mahadevi Varma's plea to women to write and create 'a literature of their own'. It also focuses on the multiple issues and problems facing women as described in *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan* and portrays not only the suppression, suffering and humiliation of women but also emphasizes the necessity for articulation.

Keywords: Gynocritics, representation, articulation, woman's language, selfhood.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, the great French philosopher and leader of the French Revolution, once mentioned that a man is born free but he is everywhere in chains. The statement by the well known philosopher can symbolically be applied to the status and existence of a woman in a patriarchal social set up. A woman, though, was born free, yet is everywhere in “chains”. She is stifled by the everlasting shackles of the society. She gasps under the harsh, stubborn and biased social customs, norms and prejudices and is even suppressed by her own family. The paraphernalia of her peripheral existence is demarcated by the hypocritic social order. History bears evidence how a woman has been subjugated and ruled at the hands of her changing rulers - father, brother, husband, son. She is governed by what can be called the law of the threshold which has been imposed on her and which she is forced to abide. A breach of this law brings her doom and her plight can even be more hazardous than 'Judith Shakespeare', the “wonderfully gifted sister” (Woolf, 1998, p.53) of William Shakespeare, as Virginia Woolf mentions in her feminist treatise, *A Room of One's Own*. Commenting on the inferior status and abuse of women, Woolf quotes historian, Professor Trevelyan:

Wife-beating was a recognized right of man, and was practised without shame by high as well as low...the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and

flung about the room...(pp.48-50).

Patriarchal society divided labour between man and woman wherein man was to be the master of the "field" while woman remained confined to the "hearth" reduced to a mere sexual slave and begetter of children. Simone de Beauvoir, too, reiterates the aspect by proclaiming her thought-provoking statement in *The Second Sex* that a woman is a womb. In view of the subaltern position imposed upon women and after centuries of subjugation, oppression and traumatic endurance of suffering, women accumulated the courage to break the shackles and voice their agonies fighting against such biased tyranny. The first dominant voice raised in favour of women in the West came in the form of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft believed that the lack of education has made women slaves. She argued for social and moral equality for women insisting that education is essential to train the minds of women away from enslavement towards a phase of self realization. Educated women, thus, chose as their weapon, one of the strongest media of expression - writing out their Selves. Writing became a tool of articulation and a vent for their emotions and agonies - offering voice to their silence. Helene Cixous, in her famous essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa* also highlights the importance of a woman's writing her 'self' to the text. Similarly, Elaine Showalter, the renowned American feminist has emphasized the importance of women's writing and women's literature while discussing the role of a 'woman as writer' coining in the process a new term "Gynocritics". Showalter adapted the term from the French term "la gynocritique" which focuses on the role of "woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women" (Showalter, 1997, pp.99-100), as she writes in her well known essay, "Towards a Feminist Poetics". She asserts that women should have a literature of their own, thus, advocating a woman's "Poetics" as an instrument of articulation and self expression. Showalter describes "Gynocriticism" in her essay:

In contrast to this angry or loving fixation on male literature, the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adopt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture (p.102).

The function of gynocriticism, thus, is to create a body of literature by women and of women. M.S. Nagarajan highlights the focal elements of gynocriticism according to Showalter:

Biology: To question biological essentialism, that is, the premise of patriarchy that a woman is a womb, a receptacle for male domination. To use the very attributes in women's biological features (childbirth, rearing of children, etc.) as a motif in writings with a view to celebrating it. **Experience:** To portray woman as a source of immense values in life as well as in art. There lie vast areas of delicate emotions and perceptions

of women (subjectivity) that are specific to women's experiences, not available to men. **Discourse:** Women are caught up in a prison-house of language that is male-specific. Contest this and create woman's language (WL) which will be distinctively feminine in its style and structure. **The unconscious:** The female principle is to lie outside the definition of the male... (Nagarajan, 2008, pp.210-211).

In the present century, many women writers have undertaken the gigantic task of acting as voices of the silently suffering women. A lot of feminist literature has emerged, which reaffirms the role of 'woman as writer'. The feminist consciousness and the 'women's movement' did not remain confined to the West. Women writers from the East have also undertaken the responsibility of offering a voice to their suffering fellow women, questioning the exploitation and injustices faced by them. Indian women writers in this crusade do not lag behind. Among the Indian writers, Mahadevi Varma is one such name who contributed greatly for women's emancipation and empowerment. She could be viewed as the Indian counterpart of the Western Liberal feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, advocating women's rights, education and equal opportunities for self promotion. Liberal Feminism raised the 'woman question' and as a result was born "the New Woman" who is mature, refuses to be a passive entity and demands equality, liberty and her right to education, employment, voting and her role in decision making and the progress of the country. Born on the auspicious day of Holi in Farukhabad, U.P. in 1907 in the family of lawyers, Mahadevi Varma was the first Indian woman to have become a major figure in modern Hindi letters who dominated the Hindi literary world in the twentieth century. She is considered to be one of the four major pillars of the *Chhayavaad* Movement that revolutionized Hindi poetry between 1920s and 1930s besides Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala', Jaishankar Prasad and Sumitranandan Pant. Her writings mark the beginning of feminist literature in Hindi and their translation into English provided for a wider readership. She is widely regarded as the "modern Meera".

Mahadevi Varma was a distinguished poet, prose writer, a social reformer and educationist, a freedom fighter and a woman's activist who advocated women's cause in India. Mahadevi Varma became a symbol of Indian women's self respect. She was specifically Gandhian in her approach. A master in Sanskrit from Allahabad University, she was also a translator of Sanskrit poetry. Her limited but outstanding prose has been recognised as unique and inspiring. She was honoured by the government of India with the coveted Padma Bhushan in 1956 and also received the prestigious Jnanpith Award for her poetry anthologies, *Yaama* and *Deepshikha*. She was also chosen as founder-member of Sahitya Akademi. She was the Principal and later the Vice-Chancellor of Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth, a women's residential college in Allahabad. In addition to her literary activities, Varma has played an important role in the upliftment of women, particularly the Indian women, their education and their rights - legal, political, economic and social. She has worked at the grass-root

level attempting to eradicate the ills engulfing the nation. She worked enthusiastically for the education of girls and emphasized their contribution in the development of society and the nation.

Mahadevi Varma was the first Indian woman ever to edit a major Hindi magazine, *Chand*. A comprehensive survey of the progress and problems of women was undertaken in the November 1935 issue of *Chand* known as the *Vidushi Ank*. Most of these editorials were reprinted in *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan*, or *Links in the Chain*, that soon acquired the aura and status of a feminist classic. In these essays, Mahadevi Varma attempts to consider the historical causes and social consequences of Indian women's subjugation and to outline the fundamental changes in attitude and behaviour that are prerequisite if the basic structure of subjugation and oppression is ever to be significantly altered. *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan* presents the misfortune, suffering, suppression and a mute obedience shared equally by the female sex in a male-dominated society. The essays published in this collection take up various issues related to women to whom the book is dedicated. Varma writes about the role of a woman as an important "link" in the societal "Chain", her condition during "war", the "curse of womanhood", the plight of the "modern woman", role of woman at "home and beyond", the complexities of "the Hindu woman's wifehood", the tragedy and trauma of widowhood, child marriage, dowry, female abduction, the pathos of the "fallen women", "the issue of woman's economic independence", the problems facing "society and the individual" and finally the "art of living" in the society.

Shrinkhala ki Kariyan highlights that a woman is a significant "link" in the "chain" of our human society, and as a human being she represents half humanity. Therefore, as a member of society, she has a vital role to play in its progress and betterment. Mahadevi Varma, thus, traces the role of a female member as an individual and a citizen of a nation in its building and her part in the construction of the societal edifice. During the period between 1920s and 1940s there was a wave of women's journals that echo the issues such as the demeaning status of women, their continuous struggle, suffering and abuse that contributed immensely in articulating the position of women. Some of the major journals include *Stree Darpan*, *Graha Lakshmi*, *Arya Mahila*, *Chand*, etc. – all concentrating on issues concerning women. In their struggle for liberation, women, thus, chose writing as an instrument to propagate their ideas and inscribe words of encouragement and motivation. Mahadevi Varma, too, in her collection emphasized the role of 'woman as writer', what Elaine Showalter has termed "gynocritics". In her essay entitled, "Home and Beyond" (1934), Mahadevi Varma, reflecting on the different areas and streams in which a woman can work, encourages women to contribute in the field of literature that will be beneficial both to the society and the individual. Explaining her notion of "gynocritics" and the need of women's writing and women's literature, Mahadevi Varma states:

... from a social perspective, the woman's co-operation in the literary field makes for an essential part of the literary body. If literature is devoid of woman's collaboration it should be considered devoid of the representation of half of humanity...the portrayal of the woman's character by a man can be idealistic but not realistic...The man can only hazard a guess about womanhood while the woman actually experiences it...If a woman is well educated she can devote her spare time to the service of literature. Pursuit of this profession will give her both happiness born of achievement and satisfaction born of altruism (pp.65-66).

Mahadevi Varma, therefore, stresses on a female vision and perspective. She is critical of those women who mime men when they write as in doing so they go against a woman's independent identity. For men, femininity or womanhood is a hypothesis but for women it is an experience, therefore, she is capable to sketch a more authentic and life-like picture of her life which is not possible for men. *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan*, thus, is a gynocentric text. It teaches women to lead their lives with dignity, grace, self-respect, self-confidence and self-reliance. It not only raised questions but also tries to offer positive solutions that would enlarge and improve the prospects of a woman's liberation. The basic problem as she sees it is the fact that women have made themselves through the eyes of men sometimes as goddess and at other as slaves which resulted in a lack of an independent self defined personality. Man and woman are two important limbs of society and the contribution of both is equally necessary for a healthy, progressive society. Mahadevi Varma rejects the "shadow" image of a woman. She says women must develop a strong sense of self, based on the truth of their own subjectivity. She gives the examples of such great Indian women of the past like Maitreyi, Yashodhara and Sita. She says that women of ancient times were able to maintain their independent personality and strong sense of duty. Mahadevi Varma further discusses that there are two categories of women - those who are totally oblivious of the fact that they too are members of human society possessing an independent self, the blossoming or decay of which can cause society to excel or decline. Secondly, those women whose ultimate aim is to imitate men viewing the world from the man's optic. She says: "both behaviors are making the societal chain weaker while allowing individual links to become more solid and confining" (Varma, 1931, p.6). She criticizes the passive acceptance of their distressful position: "Not only is the woman without self, she does not even desire to have a self." (p.6). Varma justifies her call for an end to the shadow status of women on the grounds of its harmful effect on social collectivity. Mahadevi Varma states that a woman since her birth is considered a *parai dharohar* who has to be disposed of in the hands of a stranger whether willingly or unwillingly. She is reared in such traditions and *sanskars* where raising her voice against her husband is considered a sin and it would mean banishment from family and suffering in this world and the next world after life, too. Reflecting on women's marginalized position, Varma (1935) declares: "Like the numeral zero, they are everything when attached to a unit - the man - and

nothing without him" (p.102). While a man is allowed to grow in a free environment, the heavy chains of traditions and conventions are tied around a woman's tender feet. Mahadevi Varma focuses on the notion of marriage and is critical of the manner in which girls are traded off in the marriage market:

She is forced to live only as an exhibition of man's wealth and as a means of his recreation. No value is attached to her life as an individual and as a citizen...whether she is physically incapable or mentally unprepared for married life, she has no means of livelihood other than marriage (Varma, 1934, p.70)

Mahadevi Varma also criticizes the practice of checking out the marriageable girl like cattle or slaves on sale. She encourages women to learn to live their lives with self respect instead of lingering on as the epitome of sacrifice. She says that along with gentleness and compassion it is necessary to have a harmonious blend of courage and wisdom in a woman's personality so that she is able to fight against injustice. She also suggests keeping in view a woman's independence:

Rather than fretting over the marriage of girls right from their birth, it is desirable that the society worries instead about the means for their advancement. If the doors to education, fine arts, business and other professions are thrown open to them and they are free to choose from them according to their leanings, they can become self reliant (Varma, 1934, p.72).

Mahadevi Varma, like Virginia Woolf, advocates economic independence on the part of women and encourages their role in the public life - as teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, writers of women's as well as children's literature - inspiring women to be bestowed with the rights and opportunities to choose a profession of their own interest and leanings and allow their talents to blossom. Unlike the early social reformers who tended to deal primarily with the problems affecting women of the upper castes or the later champions of women's education whose concern was primarily with the women of the new middle class, Mahadevi Varma exhibits a clear picture of the vastly different problems faced by the upper, middle and working class women. She also discusses very perceptively the situation of the new class of unmarried middle class professional women pointing out that they are the most free and most advanced women in the country but are unable to be of real help to other women because of the gulf of mutual distrust that separates them from the mass of married women confined within the boundaries of their homes. Mahadevi Varma suggests that women of the privileged classes should become the voice of women of the less privileged classes.

In her essays, Mahadevi Varma has touched briefly upon most of the central themes in her critique of Indian society's treatment of women. She has thrown light on the traumatic plight of an Indian widow who has to bear the burden of her accursed life till the time she lingers on in this world. There are no chances of reprieve even if the widow is an innocent child or adolescent. She has to continue her life in isolation and that too

with all the colorful worldly temptations. She is buried under the enormous weight of traditions, dogmas and precepts. Varma also reflects on the issue of female abduction. She says that of the abducted women there are many who can no longer bear the suffering inflicted upon them by their families and as a result they escape from one hell into another moved by a few words of sympathy, true or false. There have been several cases reported in newspapers of forcibly abducted women but depressing is the fact that not much effort is made to protect these unfortunate souls. Mahadevi Varma also expresses her concern for a faulty system of education. The distorted form of education is the root cause of all evils. The idleness of the minds of educated people is a matter of great concern. Varma, as a reformer has also focused on the sociology and economics of prostitution. She delineates the tragedy of the prostitutes in her essay entitled "The Trafficking of life". Despicable men take advantage of the weakness and the adverse circumstances of these poor, helpless women. In ancient times, such a woman was offered to the gods as a *devdasi* under the garb of religion. Presently, their state has become more pitiable. Mahadevi Varma considers religion or the religious texts as viewed from a male lens playing an important role in subjugating women.

In her struggle and desperate attempts to bridge the difference between herself and the male sex, a woman is destroying her womanhood. Mahadevi Varma also expresses her concern how the society is compelling women to cast away their feminine virtues in order to become an equal to men. The modern woman regards her sentimentality and natural gentleness as a flaw and an obvious reason for her pitiful state. Mahadevi Varma finds solution in a healthy participation of both men and women in the country's progress. She does not believe in rivalry with the male sex rather she says: "the harmonious relationship between the two principal limbs of society - woman and man - is the soul of all social orders and the basis of its framework" (Varma, 1936, p.113). Karine Schomer, an important critic of Mahadevi Varma, commenting on her methodology and feminist approach says that her approach was different from that of either the well meaning male reformers of the time or the more westernized national women leaders whose foremost concern was claiming for women the basic rights of which they have been deprived. But, for Mahadevi Varma the crucial problem for women willing to enter the literary field was not the objective disadvantages from which they suffered but a lack of faith in themselves and their abilities. Therefore, she motivates women to believe in themselves and to take their fate into their own hands.

Mahadevi Varma, thus, emerges as a feminist philosopher and a true representative of the suffering Indian women. There are writers who have depicted the sad plight of women and their silent, unfulfilled desires. There is, although, no dearth of activists who have worked towards the emancipation of women, yet the balanced, optimistic and holistic approach that Mahadevi Varma has adopted in order to investigate the

agonized condition of women and their liberation establishes her as one of the best reformers in the history of Indian literature. Mahadevi Varma emerges as the charismatic icon of Indian feminism. In her editorials, she not only paints a dark and gloomy picture of the tragedy of the Indian women but also aims at inverting, transforming and turning it into a vibrant and colorful portrait. Mahadevi Varma through *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan* has propounded a new ideology and a new language in the feminist discourse. As an Indian writer, keeping the Indianness alive, she has gone back to Indian history and mythology and has referred to the ancient scriptures and deities and cited the examples of the great women of the past in history and mythology. The essays not only analyze the different factors such as economic, social and religious that subjugate the Indian women but also traces its relevance in contemporary society. She believed that such an exploitation does not destroy human beings but the entire humanity. *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan* helps to understand such oppressive forces and to develop a critical consciousness to fight against such forces and assist the Indian women to recognize their identity and freedom.

To conclude, *Shrinkhala ki Kariyan* not only describes the subjugation of Indian women and the need for women's liberation from the hegemonic clutches and complex structure of the conservative society but also discusses about creating a human society. It also aims at writing the history of the human society from a new perspective. Much of history has been centered round man but now the woman desire to understand the society and culture from her own perspective and that is what Mahadevi Varma proposes to do. Mahadevi Varma, thus, proposes a female literary corpus and advocates the role of 'woman as writer' encouraging her role and participation in the creation of literature fabricating, in the process, "a literature of her own".

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