

Reproductive Rights of a Woman – Myth or Reality?

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Feminist studies accord great importance to the issue of reproductive rights, because the control over her body is the first step that a woman takes towards liberation and freedom from the oppression by patriarchy. Adele Clarke in her essay ‘Subtle Forms of Sterilization Abuse’ comments:

Reproduction is a fundamental human right: neither the state nor the actions of others should deny any person autonomy over their reproductive processes [...] Reproductive freedom is the prerequisite for any kind of liberation for women. The right to decide whether and when to bear children is fundamental to a woman’s control of her own body, her sexuality, her life choices. (Clarke 1984: 189-190)

This paper examines two stories which deal with the right of a woman to birth control and family planning, ‘Daktamma’s Room’ (2004) by R. Chudamani and ‘Giribala’ (2004) by Mahashwta Devi.

‘Daktamma’s Room’ revolves around Devaki and Shanmugam who have been married for sixteen years. Devaki has gone through six deliveries by the age of thirty-two, and has not even realized her youth passing by. There has been no family planning and the deliveries have taken their toll on her body: “Before she had got quite used to the novel fact of having a husband, there was a baby in her arms the very next year after marriage. After that, there

was simply no time to investigate the matter of good looks, since the very word 'years' came to mean 'babies'" (Chudamani 2004: 204).

Devaki visits the doctor when she is pregnant with her seventh child, hoping fervently that her fear of pregnancy is proved wrong. The doctor, however, confirms her pregnancy. When she asks Devaki whether she wants the child or not, Devaki remains silent. Her silence reveals her true desire, but she cannot vocalize her feelings.

The doctor also reveals that she is suffering from various health-related problems (an obvious result of her successive pregnancies) due to which an abortion cannot be performed. However, she advises Devaki and her husband Shanmugam to perform an operation after this delivery to ensure that she does not face any more problems in future. Shanmugam is against the idea of an operation despite the fact that they already have a male child (which could have been used otherwise as an excuse to continue procreation). He states firmly, "However many children we are destined to have, will be born, no matter what". The doctor tries to reason with him, "Think over it properly, saar. You yourself could have done something about it by now. But since you don't like to do all that, let it be. It can be done for your wife. Doing it at the time of delivery is quite easy" (Chudamani 2004: 209).

The conversation continues between the doctor and Shanmugam, while Devaki remains merely a silent spectator, who cannot voice her opinion, but only reveal her feelings through the expressions on her face. Cheris Kramer declares, "Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. So women cannot as easily or as directly articulate their experiences as men can" (Cited in Foss, Foss and Griffin 1999: 41). Devaki's husband does not give her an opportunity to say anything, and speaks on her behalf, taking her consent for granted without even bothering to ask her for her views.

Ultimately the doctor's protests and Devaki's silent appeal through the pleading expressions on her face are proved futile. Devaki therefore becomes a victim of male control who cannot even open her mouth to protest against the injustice being meted out to

her body. Sukumari Bhattacharji had stated in 'Motherhood in Ancient India', "The twin proofs of woman's loss of control over her own body is that, maidservant or wife, she has to yield to the sexual demands of her master or husband, and the husband or master, not she, was the owner of the fruit of her womb... the child did not belong to her but to her husband and/or master" (Bhattacharji 1990: 54). It is significant that while this statement was made with reference to *ancient* India, it remains pertinent even today.

Even the doctor, who may appear to be in a supposedly powerful position, cannot help Devaki fight for her rights. The husband's lack of concern for his wife's physical fitness is a clear example of the sheer deliberate neglect of women in our society. As Gita Sen had pointed out in "Reproduction and Production", the lack of control over childbearing would undoubtedly have an effect on the health of the women, which could even lead to an early death once the body becomes incapable of handling so many pregnancies. Devaki is thus denied access to contraception, birth control and abortion by her husband.

The theme of the right to birth control recurs in Mahashweta Devi's short story 'Giribala' (2004), which is one among the series of short stories written on motherhood. The story is set in Bengal at a time when it was customary for the groom to pay for the bride's hand in marriage. The protagonist Giribala is married to Aullchand, a fraud and vagabond. Giri bears four children in quick succession, and after the birth of the fourth daughter, has an operation to prevent future child births.

She does not discuss the issue with Aullchand who is enraged when he discovers what she has done. "Had an operation, did you? That's a sin. Why did you do it? Go on, tell me?" (Devi 2004: 61) Giri does not respond, and Aullchand reacts with physical abuse. "Aullchand grabs her by the hair, hits her a couple of times with his fists. Giri suffers the beating silently" (Devi 2004: 61). According to the interpretation of Manu's ideas, a woman has no right to take such a decision on her own: "Him to whom her father may give her, or her brother with the father's permission, she shall obey as long as he lives, and when he is dead, she must not insult his memory" (Cited in Saraswati 2005: 211). Giribala's act is an insult to the living man, for she has dared to take the decision of controlling her womb without even consulting him.

The belief that a child is a gift of God and that family planning is immoral is prevalent in many religions. In fact, Mother Teresa, echoing the voice of the Catholic Church, had taken a strong stance against the use of contraception. Tishani Doshi comments in 'Myth of the Mother' that this "has added hundreds to our already staggering balance sheet of millions, and for this green signal towards unrestrained productivity, perhaps she can be given her due as surrogate mother" (Doshi 2003).

Aullchand seems to propagate the same values, and is thus furious when he learns what his wife has done. Although Giri does not protest against the violence he imposes upon her, she indirectly reveals the reason for her decision by asking him to take up the job of a labourer for the construction of a road. Her decision to go in for the operation seems to be based on the financial situation of the family which would not permit them to feed any more children.

However, Aullchand does not fail to remind her of her 'crime' whenever he gets an opportunity to do so, and taunts her constantly. When Giri asks him to think about their daughter's marriage, he retorts, "A daughter means a female slave for someone else's house, after all. When he read my palm, Mohan had said that the fifth time onwards, there'd be only boys. You've gone and turned barren, you want to go astray" (Devi 2004: 62).

Aullchand feels cheated and deprived of the sons that could have been begotten had Giri not had the operation. The prediction about his future sons seems to strengthen his conviction and aggravates his anger towards his wife whom he holds responsible for changing his destiny. His accusation that she has turned barren because she wants to go astray is based on the presumption that the right to birth control is synonymous with sexual licentiousness. According to Petchesky, "One of the major foundations of feminist thinking about reproductive rights [...] is the belief that women as much as men have the right to lead self-determined sexual lives, free of the fear of pregnancy, cultural stigma, or disease" (Cited in Paludi 1990: 183). The movement, however has been misinterpreted

and the right to birth control has been seen (as in the case of Aullchand) as the right demanded by women for promiscuity.

The charge of wanting to sleep around with other men is unfair because Giri's reason for having the operation is clearly economical. She answers him back sharply this time when he makes the comment, threatening, "Speak such evil and I'll slash the children's throats and then my own" (Devi 2004: 62). This silences Aullchand temporarily, but then he begins hatching other plans. He conspires with his friend Mohan to sell off his eldest daughter for a bride price of four hundred rupees. The flesh trade in Bihar is apparently rampant, and girls are taken there on the pretext of getting them married, and then turned into prostitutes. Giri is shattered when she finds out, but is told to remain passive and accept whatever has happened. "A girl's by fate discarded, lost if she's dead, lost if she's wed" (Devi 2004: 67). This statement recurs several times in the story and serves to emphasize the redundancy of the daughter who should never be accorded too much importance since she will be lost anyway.

The decision to sell the daughter seems to be a form of vengeance for Aullchand who vicariously punishes Giri for her operation. In a conversation with her parents, he says, "Look, what a shameful thing to have done. She has an operation, comes back barren, says, 'You can't even feed us, what would you do with a son?' Well, I've shown what I would do. Even the daughters can yield so much profit, see how much money I got" (Devi 2004: 67). Just as sons are produced with the hope that they will offer economic support and security in old age, so also the daughters are being used for generation of income. Children are viewed as instruments for financial gain – and the more the number of children, the greater the financial gain. Since the system of dowry has been replaced by bride price which would be paid to the bride's family, the daughter, instead of being perceived as a burden, is now seen as a saviour of the family. The money generated from the bride price would enable Giri and Aullchand to build their dream house.

If Giri has exercised control over the future children who would have been born had she not had the operation, Aullchand exercises control over the existing children, treating them like commodities to be sold in the market place. His male ego has been hurt to a great

extent, and he cannot come to terms with the fact that he was not consulted before the decision was taken. Although the reproductive rights of a woman entitle her to take the decision about the number of children she wants to have, society does not – because such decisions are considered to be the prerogative of the male.

Giri, however is a strong woman who refuses to accept her husband's injustice towards her children. She takes the remaining two children and leaves for the town where she intends to work as a maidservant. She leaves a message for her husband saying, "he can rot in eternity in his house" (Devi 2004:78). She threatens to lay her body across the railway tracks if he dares look for her. Radha Chakravarty comments on the theme of motherhood in Mahashweta Devi's stories in her essay 'In the Name of the Mother', "Her representations of the maternal [...] reveal a deep ambivalence." She explains, "While seeking to expose the hypocrisy latent in discourses of maternity, she does not reject the values of love, care, and responsibility that are traditionally associated with the maternal role. Instead she reappropriates these values for her radical project, locating in them a moral 'core' that contains the possibility of female empowerment" (Chakravarty 2004: viii). The author presents a society where the woman seems to have scant control over her own body, but allows the character to take a decision that empowers her. The decision is not taken *at the cost of* her children – but *for the sake of* her children, thus emphasizing the maternal values of love and nurturance.

Although the decision taken by Giri is a strong and bold one, she pays a price for it. The villagers blame not Aullchand, but Giri for the situation: "The news amazes everyone, sets their heads shaking in disapproval. What happened to Bela and Pari was common practice these days. But why leave your husband and go away? What kind of woman was that?" (Devi 2004: 78) The woman is expected to remain devoted to her husband despite the atrocities he inflicts on her and the children. These expectations of the villagers have their foundations in myths like that of Sita who bore her unjust abandonment without a word of protest as is the duty of an ideal wife.

Giribala has deviated from the role of an 'ideal' wife not once, but twice – first by performing the operation, and second, by walking out on her husband. The story explores

the suppression of women and their lack of control over their own bodies. It also suggests that empowerment of women is possible, but that a woman who dares to take control over her body must be ready to face the circumstances that follow.

While 'Daktaramma's Room' presents the helpless plight of a woman who suffers from complete lack of control over her own body, 'Giribala' seems to be a counter-hegemonic text in that it offers a protagonist who is bold and strong, and refuses to be controlled by her husband. However, the common factor in both the short stories is that motherhood becomes a social compulsion, and is enforced on the woman against her own desires. Reproductive rights for women thus seem to exist only in theory, but not in practice.

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