



An Alternative Mode Of Living : A New Paradigm In Indian English Women Fiction

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ABSTRACT

For last many decades, women-writing and critical focus on women-writing have come center-stage. Women litterateurs have often been heavily and harshly castigated for their narrow canvas of themes, and Jane Austen's 'limited range' has become a literary cliché to describe the restricted world and vision of women-writing revolving around personal and family life. In fact, one of the dominant themes in women-writing has been the theme of human relationships, especially personal and familial relationships. These relationships have majorly been placed in hetero-normative and androcentric paradigm. Indian English women novelists have generally revealed pre-occupation with Man-defined existence of their women protagonists. However, a different note has been struck by Meenu Mehrotra with her debut novel *Lilacs Bloom in My Backyard*, creating a distinctive Female Utopia. This paper will take up a study of this Alternative Mode of Living and explore the Alternative Matrix of Relationships as portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: familial, hetero-normative, androcentric, Female Utopia, Alternative Mode.

Ever since Feminism became a defining movement of the intellectual, literary, socio-politico-cultural discourse, women-issues have occupied the prime place in international literary scenario. Different phases of feminist movement have found reflection in the writings of women writers also. The dominance of Man-Woman relationship and hetero-family structure, even though vehemently criticized, has continued to be the norm. Women writers have not really come up with any proposed Alternative Mode of Relationships and Family-structures. Even female friendships are not really favourite with writers and most surprisingly, even women writers. Vanessa Matthews, the author of the novel *The Doctor's Daughter* has made a highly pertinent observation:

Men have dominated the friendship scene in books throughout literary history.

Most of these texts lack "a sense of collective identity" (Showalter 122). Not only do the female relationships suffer textual omissions and absences here, but there also exists the negative portrayal, or to borrow Adrienne Rich's term "horizontal hostility" i.e. "the fear and mistrust of other women because other women are ourselves" (12).

In the works of Indian women novelists, Man-woman relationship continues to be the most highly enshrined and cherished relationship. Their women protagonists may walk from one man's arms into another or choose to lead a single rebellious, lonely or embittered life, yet there is no quest for any Alternative structures or constructs. Amid such a scenario, the novel *Lilacs Bloom in My Backyard* (2008) by Meenu Mehrotra strikes quite a distinctive note as the writer goes on to create a Female Utopia with varied shades of female relationships.

The plot is not very complicated. The novel majorly revolves around life of two friends, Ramona and Misha - one a successful business entrepreneur and the other an eminent painter. Just five days before her engagement Ramona calls off the event as she discovers her friend and lover Amit's infidelity. Her friend Misha also undergoes agonizing experience as she struggles hard to salvage her hopeless, horrifying marriage where she is a victim of domestic violence and mental torture. Living through the pain and misery of their aborted relationships, the two relate to each other and their bond grows deeper. The friendship grows into affection, affection into attachment and they decide to spend their life together. Their desire to live like a family of three - Misha, Misha's daughter Astha and Ramona - evokes a strong parental disapproval. Despite Ramona's best efforts to make her parents a part of her New World, she is legally disowned. The two go to Belgium to get

married as a couple where Ramona adopts Astha as her legal daughter and the three live happily ever after, with the child Astha accepting their relationship and happily growing up into an adult in her new family with one 'mom' and one 'mommy'. However, the ache of having been deserted by her dear parents sings Ramona's heart all throughout. Male friends and sisters light up the darkness of their life through their support and affection. The novelist has traced the pains and pleasures of all relationships and their complications in a very perceptive, sensitive manner.

The major strength of the novel is its intense and graceful portrayal of Ramona-Misha relationship. Unlike some precedents such as Shobha De's *Starry Nights* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* where the woman-woman relationship is more or less delimited to the erotic fervor, Meenu Mehrotra has herein presented a beautiful relationship based on mutual love, understanding, caring and sharing. The two women relate to each other at the mental, emotional and even spiritual level. The way these two partake of each other's joys and sorrows is very touching. A few quotes from the text to bring out the feel and feeling will be in place here :

1. *Tenderness in Ramona's voice softened agony inside Misha (64).*
2. *Misha knew every warp and weft of the fabric of Ramona's pain (64).*
3. *The two looked into each other's eyes, sensing the pain that bridged their souls. It was a big moment, the moment when they connected. It was a rare experience for both (122)*

Ramona feels 'reborn' and tells her mother : "I connect with Misha in a soulful way". It is a wonderfully fulfilling relationship for both of them. Ramona feels:

Misha and Astha had filled up her life with a generous dose of affection and tenderness. Her heart had learnt to blossom like a garden in spring and had warmth of love all around" (122)

As for Misha, she had the best of times with Ramona who had taught her to 'laugh and take control of her Won life' and 'glow of her (Ramona's) presence had lit up her life' (142)

Even at the physical level, there is a great compatibility and body chemistry. Ramona feels 'complete', with 'heaven all around' and Misha's 'battered soul and bruised body' loves the 'touch of tenderness'. She feels living 'finally reached shores of fulfillment'.

The relationship is so very fulfilling that these two cherish and honour it as "a gift God bestowed rarely". The last scene of the novel is almost salutary to their bond as both well on the beauties and bounties of their association:

Eight years ...they have passed so quickly. It all seems like a dream.

But you can't deny that they have been the best years of our lives

All thanks to you Rams.

C'mon sweetheart, it couldn't have been possible without you.

Rams, you have been the best thing to have happened to me and Astha. (280)

In fact, their relationship also becomes a means for their self-exploration and self-growth. Their love gives them the guts to be honest, to be true to their own real self and to muster courage to publically accept their bond. The text is strewn with examples revealing this self-evolution process at work:

1. *Suddenly Misha felt her 'fear was dissolving ... the fear of confronting herself' (145).*
2. *Ramona couldn't go against her own self. Being true to herself was more important than anything else. (183)*

Ramona finds 'landscape of her life changing' and feels 'the joy of new self'. Misha also is not the 'same Misha': She had 'come a long way from hesitant, long suffering woman who lacked the courage to stand up against her abusive husband'. Ravi's remark is a revealing and befitting comment on this aspect of their relationship:

It needs lots of courage to be true to one's self! Bravo! I salute you (193).

However, it is not roses all through. Strong conditioning of mind makes both of them experience an acute inner conflict before they finally accept their relationship. Ramona feels 'pulled back by chains of customs and traditions'. Misha also undergoes an agonizing dilemma and feels intimidated by her growing-up daughter's possible reaction to the relationship. Things are further complicated by Misha's husband's atrocities and Ramona's parents' callousness. Ramona's mother Gayatri turns into an abusive bully who violates all limits of decency and goes on to the extent of threatening to liquidate Misha and Astha. The pain is too much to bear:

She (Ramona) had wished to cry her heart out in her mother's lap and tell her about what she was going through especially during moments that called for immense empathy, compassion and understanding but what she gets is abuses and snide remarks (134).

However, notwithstanding the living 'pain of yester year' and the 'infallible deep chasm of heart', the two find 'abundant recompense' in each other's company. "If the want and will is present and most of all love, everything is possible" - this statement of Ramona is as if the declaration of the novelist's manifesto. The three women finally celebrate their life and togetherness in their 'dream home' where only love would suffice for all other inadequacies (259)

In portrayal of this relationship, Love transcends the gender-barrier in a very graceful way. Through Ramona's statements : "Loving someone is perfectly normal, ma. How does it matter whether the other person is a man or a woman" and "Love is neither right nor wrong", the novelist has tried to redeem the Alternative Mode of Relationships. Love is also sought to be an all-inclusive state:

Love is love. Love is what a mother feels for her child. Love is what I feel for Ragini (sister). It's what I feel for hunter and candy (pets) (126)

The traditional concept delimiting the definition of love to man-woman relationship stands revised.

In the exploration of female bonding, the novel goes beyond Ramona-Misha relationship. The novelist dwells on the affectionate bond between the two sisters - Ramona and Ragini. Though temperamentally different, both relate well and provide solace to each other. There is 'a river of affection and warmth'. When Ragini breaks down under pressures of marriage, Ramona feels 'intensity of her pain in her heart' and comforts her. After the initial reservations about Ramona's relationship with Misha, Ragini plays a very crucial role in her sister's attempt to find happiness in her life. In the novelist's vision Friendship holds a paramount significance and the sisters who act as 'friends' can be a major support to each other.

An endearing feature of the novel is these women's fondness for children. There are affectionate and caring mothers continuing in bad marriages for the sake of their kids. Much to the chagrin of Radical Feminists, there is Gayatri fussing over her daughters, Ragini desperately craving for motherhood and Ramona expressing great affection for kids. Maternal instinct is nothing to be ashamed of and eschewed. Ramona - Astha bond is one of the most beautiful relationships in the contemporary literature.

Ramona's heart reaches out to Astha every time she meets her. Having Astha around made up for lack of child in her own world: "She is my child, sweetheart". The 'limerick' conversation of the two, the cooing and the cuddling render the novel a beautiful affectionate flavour. The novel abounds in tender scenes between the two: *Aastha turned around and jumped with joy. She leapt to hug Ramona.*

"How's my baby?" Ramona fussed over her, "I am fine, but I missed u a lot." "Even I did baby" Ramona hugged her warmly (261).

'Liveliness of their relationship' makes Misha's eyes 'moist' who says, "I have never seen Astha so happy and cheerful in any other company" (231). Her concern for Astha's physical and emotional well-being in the broken home of her parents is phenomenal. The affection showered by Ramona as a father-figure is well reciprocated and Astha responds to Ramona's relationship with her mother in a very positive way.

Ramona, Misha, Ragini - all share close relationships with their female servants who are an important part and parcel of their life. They participate in their servants' life and affairs. Ramona's relationship with Maria has many such moments of tenderness and belongingness. With the portrayal of affectionate sisterhood among friends, sisters, relations, domestic-help maids and female-masters, the novel seems to fulfil the lacuna that Virginia Woolf had sadly pointed out:

I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are presented as friends... Almost without exception, they are shown in relation to men. It was strange that all the great women of fiction were until Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen in relation to the other sex. (Todd 1)

Even while not being an aggressive and radical attempt at it, the novel does portray what Alex Clark describes as "female friendship with its additional charge of possible subversion – a world free from male – control". *Lilacs* presents the possibility of an Alternative Mode of Living- a Female Utopia where happiness is possible without a Male. In fact, the two women protagonists find their Woman-Woman relationship much more enriching and fulfilling than their Man-Woman relationship. We find a New Happy family with two doting mothers and an affectionate young daughter, and a set-up where women feel complete in each other's company. However, it is not a world with 'No Entry for Men' as it is enlivened by caring men like Ravi, Yesh and Sid. The novel, however, marks a New Beginning where new possibilities abound and the woman of today shows readiness to make her choices. In the ultimate analysis, this novel seems to fulfil the Quest of Mehrotra's women for a Beautiful and Blissful world where Love, Dignity and Courage blend.

With *Lilacs*, Meenu Mehrotra joins the league of the female authors, a new generation of 'gal pals' who Venessa Matthews points out "are writing about women who can find love, support and cause for celebration in the arms of other girls - girlfriends, sisters, mothers and still other empowering female role-models." A new trend and tenor in the contemporary women-writing, it augurs for a more inclusive and a variegated future society.

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