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A Study of Mental Illness in Pasho in Krishna Sobti's *Memory's Daughter*

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Abstract

Since the second half of the twentieth century, cultural theorists have shown more interest in understanding the interaction between body and culture. This interaction has been studied from the perspective of illness-experience in individuals by Arthur Kleinman and Judith Lorber. Judith Lorber and Lise Jean Moore in *Gender and Social construction of Illness* advocate illness not merely a bodily event but a social experience –a disturbance in social lives without or without physical dysfunction wherein one feels constraints upon body in pursuing the usual tasks of life. Kleinman in *Illness Narrative* studies illness as a cultural construct, wherein some bodily conditions are categorized as illness and some are often passed on as normal because what is seen a normal and natural in a culture is based on the shared understanding in that culture. The present paper aims to explore the role of culture through the lens of illness experience in Pasho in Krishna Sobti's *Memory's Daughter*.

Keywords: Memory's Daughter, Culture, social construction of illness, Krishna Sobti

Cultural theorists working on the interaction of body and culture from the perspective of illness are of view that illness is often 'culturally shaped' because culture regulates the common sense and knowledge about how to 'understand and treat illness' (Kleinman 5). In this way, every culture has its own distinct way to understand illness and it can best be

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understood in its cultural context. For example, in south Asian context, Illness is understood in relation to hierarchies in the society (in the case of Untouchability) and food sharing (in case of menstrual problems in women). What is considered normal and what is abnormal is based on the shared understood in a society. He further writes “conventional expectations about illness are altered through negotiation in different social situation and in particular web of relationships (Kleinman 5). Judith Lorber and Jean Moore in *Gender and Social Construction of Illness* also advocates for broader understanding of illness wherein illness shouldn't be limited to be just a physical event, rather “a disturbance of social lives wherein one cannot go about one's usual pursuits” (1). By applying these ideas, the paper seeks to understand Pasho's mental reactions to the cultural constraints upon her body. The paper problematizes the submissiveness of Pasho and explores for the signs of mental illness in her. By this the paper aims to expose how cultural expectations make women endure even the worst and leave them mentally sick.

The novel *Memory's Daughter* by Krishna Sobti presents a girl who has to endure patriarchal dictates upon her body and is seen as a strong woman as she is able to stay live even after enduring excessive mental torture. Even though the novel *Memory's Daughter* focuses more on the count of the nightmares in the life of the girl by presenting fate changing too quickly that too from bad to worse, surprisingly Krishna Sobti has not given much depth to her character. It is more concerned about the ‘change of guard’ in Pasho's life – she lives at her cruel Mamu's place, then she is thrown at the door of her step father's door by the circumstances, then sent to a old Diwan in marriage, then to Diwan's cousin Lakhpat after his death, then she is sold by Lakhpat to a man to pay off his debt, fate throws her from frying pan to the fire repeatedly. She is rescued by a Sikh. But here too, fate conspires, he is killed at the hands of Firangis/the Britishers and she has to submit herself to her new lord – the Englishman. These nightmares pass one after another in the life of Pasho. She even loses her only child in this struggle to survive, yet so little of her psychological life is shown.

Contrarily, Sobti fills her character with extraordinary exuberance – will to live even in the most heartbreaking incidents like separation from her child. The novelist has focused on Pasho's endurance inspite of sufferings and violent events in her life. Katha Publishers write at soft bound of the novel calling the story “a powerful portrait of a woman who suffers, endures and survives.” Does the novelist really convey that her character is strong enough to

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stand any kind of humiliation that come in their way of survival or she conveys something opposite of it such as cultural humiliation in the name of *Izzat* is too much for women that they have no option than to endure it in full resilience? And can the silence of Krishna Sobti also be interpreted as silence of South Asian culture on the matters of women's depression? There is another type of silence also – uneasy silence of women over their victimization in the name of *Izzat/Honour*.

If Pasho is shown to be completely submissive girl, she is shown submissive at the point of sickness. The study problematizes this submissiveness as shown in the novel. There are clues that Sobti provides here and there in the novel to suggest her state of mind. For example, in the very beginning the narrator girl speaks of her ordeal: “the Girl I once was, is she the one who now returns?” (6). Her thoughts about herself reveal the struggle she must have undergone – now, someone different from what she used to be. This suggested change in her nature points towards all those unpleasant roles that she had to play and that made her sick. It is from this, she compares herself what she was a few years back and what she has become. The change that she experiences makes her sick of herself. As a girl, she had never cared for others' opinion on her. Even if she was mistreated, with initial bad mood, she would bounce back to life again. This is evident when she is thrashed for working at the *tandoor* by her mama. She feels bad for a while but later, she smiles and says “let anyone say anything. I don't give a damn!” (Sobti 9). She reacts when she gets angry, “every inch of me on fire, a retort at the tip of my tongue, I saw my hand pick up a copper katori and strike it hard against forehead” (Sobti 9). The initial reading of Pasho's character reveals her to be a girl who loves her body claiming to be her own:

I would walk down Shah Almi, Flamboyant leather jootis on my feet and bright parandas swinging at the ends of my long plaits, smiling at their murmurs and whistles... when my arms would swing to their own languorous rhythm, to rise and fall, to hug my supple curves, to hold. (Sobti 6)

Pasho resists any dictation in her life by others. “I am fine! I refuse to submit to this humiliation”, Pasho says when barber's wife is asked to “braid her hair as tight as she can” (Sobti 12). This evidence shows that Pasho as a girl enjoys relative autonomy over her life. Even when she gets married, she feels proud of her decision to leave cruel mama “How

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foolishly I had stepped out of the house that fateful night, blissfully ignorant of the consequences. But if I hadn't, Rab knows where I would be today!" (Sobti 54-55).

But what makes her a changed person? A numb, lifeless like a statue! A girl who never submitted to any humiliation even just of braiding her hair in an unfashionable way, gets ready to submit herself to heinous crimes to her body like rape! Not only this, in the end of the novel, she is shown as a person who does not even know whether she is alive or dead? (Sobti 124). Does this not indicate mental illness in her?

The novel is a life journey from Pasho of high will-power to Pasho who becomes puppet at the hands of different men. The confidence the novelist shows in her character in the beginning of the novel is snatched once she takes her steps out of the house of her mama at the dead end of the night. "heart in my fist, I gingerly pushed the door half-open, took the first step, and dying a thousand deaths, I stealthily climbed onto the terrace." (Sobti 21). In order to save themselves from further stigma, her Ma and her Uncle, Sheikh ji, send her off to somewhere else in marriage without getting her consent. She is married off to an old person in need of a family, Diwanji. Pasho is left with no option than to submit to others: "Where was I going? Where? I clung to my brother....someone coughed discreetly, I turned around. It was a man on a horse. I wanted to rush back into the safety of Shiekhji's haveli but was whisked off my feet..." (35-36). It is not known much how she reacts when she comes to know that she has been married to an old man, except this:

"This was the place from where the news of my wellbeing would reach my mother. This, then, was the house" (39)

"My heart leapt inside me. That man in whose baithak I spent the whole night, he hadn't looked like anybody's son. Such a wise, adult face..." (42)

She loses herself after she is subjected to torments in her life, and Pasho, losing her claim on the body, calls herself "Destiny's Puppet". She does not resist, or react when she is raped by Birkat Diwan, after the death of her husband. She behaves like a lifeless creature. She "did not tremble", "did not scream, just lay there like a block of wood left to rot in water. Kept lying" (Sobti 79). After all, why does she stop to bother about her own wellbeing? When she is separated from her son, and sold off to an old man to pay off a loan by Birkat Diwan, Pasho narrates, "There was a moment, an impulse to throw myself at his feet. But it was as if someone had padlocked my tongue. I stood in that dull lifeless courtyard full of dung cakes

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and awaited further orders” (85). Not surprisingly, Pasho no longer struggles with her circumstances and loses her will to claim herself from the social. What padlocks her tongue? She does not struggle to get back to her child. She adjusts in her new surrounding under the new master. Verma claims that she does not leave the houses of her master simply because she needs a house to live which she had lost after the death of her husband. Perhaps this is too simple an answer to a complex character human being is! In her confession, she admits of something padlocking her tongue – is she unable to express why she cannot resist his master? Later in the novel, she admits “Grandmother was right. If your feet stray even once, your whole life turns to dust. Such is destiny” (122). Had she been too simplistic, she would not have made a comparison of her with the rope in the well and say “sometimes slipped around this pot, sometimes that (86). This comparison indicates her state of mind. She is sickened to see herself a bed for everyone. These clues to her mental state provide a gateway to enter her ill-body where all she has is the devastation of her desires. All through these shocks in her life, she behaves as if she were a lifeless woman. Clearly, this shows her to be in mentally ruined state – psychologically depressed woman in need of some relief. If she has to follow the cultural dictates, she follows them by not attempting to run away from people who claim over her body. But she does do without the consent of her soul. That’s why, she behaves like a log of wood, lifeless before her rapist and her buyer.

The blame of mental illness which she recognizes as change in her nature is thrown upon ‘Destiny’. Her illness can best be understood when her life is studied in context of her social and culture environment. Pasho belongs to South Asia of 1840s when Punjab was just annexed in the British India. Pasho’s dis-eased life as narrated by Sobti can be seen as discourse on daily interference of cultural norms in the personal lives of women. They are still expected to be pots of endurance without any complaints of depression and psychological illness. In reality, this happens to be wrong. A girl in the south Asian family system is never an integrated whole personality of an individual person but a social role -a daughter, a wife, daughter- in-law and a mother. She is never allowed a space of herself. Due to this, her emotional life does not fully grow. She does not behave like an independent person just because she is never taught to behave like that. She is not allowed to speak her mind in front of her elders, especially, their in-laws. Once married, she is not allowed to step outside the house without the company of her husband or in –laws. Her needs are not catered

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to, rather she is taught to sacrifice her share of sleep and rest for the welfare of her family or in –law family. She is not allowed to leave her in laws’ family even if she is beaten everyday unnecessarily for the fear of loss of her parents’ *Izzat* in front of the society. Perhaps that’s why, Pasho does not resist any dictates for the *Izzat* of her masters. Most often, south Asian woman is socially pressurized to bear the mental and physical abuses to “settle” herself in the laws’ family and keep mum. She can’t take divorce for it is socially restricted and discouraged. If she takes, she is not allowed to lead her own way of life rather she has compulsorily to go to her parents’ house for the fear of people’s ill- talks about her character.

From the above discussion upon the mental states of Pasho, it can be concluded that Pasho’s mental illness has been complete ignored on the name of calling her a Strong woman. Evidences from the text show the role of cultural constraints in form of *Izzat* and patriarchal codes in making her sick. That’s why in the end, she experiences death in life. Her psychological illness can only be understood by putting her into her social environment because without understanding the notion of *Izzat*, sickness in life cannot be understood. She feels culturally constraint to do what is expected from her.

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