
From Daughter to Dāyan-Daughter-in-Law: Subjugation of Female in ‘Tetari’ by Saroj Singh

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Abstract:

Subjugation of a woman in an Indian society has been an old phenomenon reoccurring till the day partially. The systematic physical and psychological suppression of women operated at domestic, official and political levels in India has paved the way for the subject-matter of the story “Tetari” by Saroj Singh. This research paper argues how the identity crisis and suppressed female voice are the root cause at patriarchal level illustrating through various examples of anecdotes from the story ‘Tetari’. The hollow hypocrisy and etiquette of male-centric society, presented as everyday structure through social and family norms and superstition, are exposed by the story. In a ‘womb-centric’ society, it is usually the males who are objectified and used as instruments to prop up female ego and desire. Such common female issues have been taken up by Saroj Singh in her short story anthology Tetari, along with the titular story ‘Tetari’. Tetari’s birth only as a lucky child, to be a grownup beautiful girl, exploited daughter-in-law and to be a widowed Dāyan ends up with nothing significant in her life at the end of the story. The final ostracization of Tetari as a witch challenges the identity of a male endangering the identity of a female in the society.

Keywords: Suppression, Tetari, Problems, Patriarchy, Woman, Dāyan, Sindoor, Subjugation

Introduction:

The narrative of ‘Tetari’ exposes the value-lessness of a domestic unpaid household labour, sexual violence and rejection of the right of a woman in the society even as a daughter-in-law. The current study explores how Singh’s representation not only uncovers the objectification of women but also criticizes patriarchal dominance responsible for their

suffering. The issues are very much prevalent into the society which needs to be tackled upon because of the complexities it involves surrounding women and the problems personating them. There are many things which needs to be focused upon such as, dowry, migration, patriarchy, domestic violence, sexual violence, gender inequality and many more. 'Tetari', a short story by Saroj Singh exemplifies the subjugation of any woman like Tetari from childhood to old age via adulthood justifies subjugation not as an event but rather as a system that leads Tetari as a representative of as a daughter, as a wife and finally as an outcast widow.

Echo of Society in Bhojpuri Literature:

Particularly in any Indian regional society but most importantly in the Bhojpuri society, in the context of the short story 'Tetari', women remain behind the doors limiting their public interaction and indulging into domestic rules, whereas the male counterpart goes outside the door invoking the presence of patriarchy. They often experience the lack of decisive power and autonomy related to their marital status with burden of compulsory bearing son to continue their clan. The woman always faces such issues but none comes forward to talk about them.

It is rightly said that literature is a mirror of life in all its available forms. To prove literature as a representation of life, many important comments given by various famous critics can be quoted. It is the 'art' that draws the parallel to life. George Eliot offers an appreciation to literature as a form of art stating that "Art is the nearest thing to life" (Eliot 2008: 176). Stendhal defines a novel as "a mirror carried along a high road" (Stendhal 1953: 414). Matthew Arnold defining poetry, another form of literature, says that "Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life" (Arnold 1865: 47). To Aristotle, "Poetry is an imitation of life" (Aristotle 1997: 3) and to Shakespeare also a drama is a mirror of life. M. H. Abrams rightly mentions that "The work of art is conceived as essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe" (Abrams 1953: 8).

Application of all these views about literature is realized in the creation of the Bhojpuri literature. Alert writers of any society like the Bhojpuri ones, do not hesitate to comment on the feudal mentality of the society and the lack of awareness among the women. The closed tight society of India hardly allows the clear air modern change to pass through. Divya Sharma quotes Sylvia Walby who very rightly says, "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Sharma 2023: 2). Thus, such prevalent issues always hinder the actual talent of the women. The creation of such literature as it reflects Indian mentality is necessary to echo the suppressed and hidden agony of the society, especially of women.

The Enforced 'Subjective' and 'Collective' Subjugation of Tetari:

The unhappy married life, husband away from home for earning bread and butter, later on died, in his absence his own brother having an eye on Tetari endangers the life of a woman at the house of her in-laws. The word 'subjective' here refers to subjugation of a

woman in isolation whereas the phrase ‘collective’ refers to that of done by the society itself collectively. Since a human being is a social animal, as it is very largely and collectively believed, in both such exploitations, there is no escape for a woman from either of them. Singh describes what takes place in the life of Tetari, a male of this civilized patriarchal society, finding an opportunity to exploit her, “just as she was entering the closet, someone reached out from behind her and clapped a hand on her mouth. Frightened, Tetari grabbed the closest thing she found, her *sinhora* and smashed it hard into the intruder’s head. In a flurry that hand unclasped from over her mouth” (Shukla). The role of poverty, the negligence of husband in emotional love to be shared with, Tetari as a woman cannot be allowed to have full freedom equal to that of male in society. Singh further while describing the scene in the story writes, “Hearing the commotion, the people of the house came running back. When they saw the scene, they were left astounded. *Sindoor* was scattered everywhere. Tetari was cowering in one corner, sniffing brokenly ... there stood the brother-in-law – blood dripping from his head” (Shukla). Cunning brother-in-law, to save his face, “When he saw everyone, his demeanour changed. Oh, this one – she is a *Dāyan*. A witch. Look people, the *sindoor* everywhere. She has done such a deed with that. Her own womb is barren, now she has set out to curse my wife’s womb” (Shukla). The chameleon role of the brother-in-law exemplifies the subjective subjugation supported by the collective subjugation of people as the members of the society. Mary Wollstonecraft very clearly mentions that after marriage, “Pleasure is the business of a woman’s wife” at present time (Wollstonecraft 2004: 95). Tetari’s not surrendering to the male desire, not participating in the mala-fide intentional ‘business’ of the brother-in-law, results into her being branded as a ‘*Dāyan*’ meaning, a witch projecting the nature of the superstitious society. The expel of Tetari demonstrates how male society, going out of the way converts a simple, gullible and innocent woman into a *Dāyan*. The similar situation is faced by Dopdi (Draupadi), a tribal woman in the novel of Mahashweta Devi, who protests saying, “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?” (Devi 1990: 34). The rituals done as widowhood rituals further heighten the pathos of Tetari who is labelled as inauspicious in the village. Bama notes in the novel *Karukku* about the Dalit woman’s suffering intensified by the oppression of a male domination, “If you are a woman, you must always walk with your head bowed” (Bama 2000: 56).

The narrative of ‘Tetari’ is merely one of the examples only where, there are many such cases happening in the Indian society almost as a routine. Societies differ but conditions of women remain unchanged, the women suffer unchanged. The story ‘Tetari’ exemplifies how cruel a society was to the woman who was not only criticised for her husband’s death but also was labelled as a ‘*Dāyan*’. The immensity of the torture done to Tetari renders her voiceless. Silence turns out to be the language of Tetari. The oppressed and the suppressed perhaps cannot speak. Kamala Markandaya rightly writes in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* through a character of Rukmini, “A woman can do nothing except submit and endure” (Markandaya 2002: 62). Tetari cannot violate the male rules created by the male society for

female to follow. The character of Ammu in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is found "not married well" for violating patriarchal norms of marriage (Roy 1997: 44).

Saroj Singh, while depicting the picture of the story like the bioscope, connects the past with the present throwing the light on the future, narrates some events that stir the whole feminine society. Right from the very birth, the girl having been grown up to be a woman, is treated to shoulder the household duty. Virmati's struggle for education reflects the influence of the patriarchy where Manju Kapur says *In Difficult Daughters*, "A woman's place was not in the world of ideas but in the home" (Kapur 1998: 71). The fact that when Tetari lost her husband, she was unaware because that could lead her to question her existence. Tetari was never rendered minimum good behaviour. Singh exemplifies in the story, "Letters and money orders would arrive from the city, but not a paisa landed in Tetari's hands. One day, Tetari was handed a letter that wiped off the pulsating *sindoor* mark on her forehead. The full pot of *sinhora*, a token of her married life, was nested away in a cubby on the wall. She was now considered bad luck, inside and outside her home" like a Dāyan (Shukla).

Tetari was criticized for her husband's death and was being called as unfortunate. After Tetari's becoming a widow, describes Singh, "everything changed in their home. . . The days' work broke her body and her nights were crowded with the shadows of those dark thoughts that kept her awake. Tetari lost all sources of warmth and comfort in life" (Shukla). The height of the situation is crossed when her own father drops the relationship with her playing the role as a 'male' of the patriarchy. The same is nourished by Tetari's brother-in-law by adding the fuel to fire acting as the innocent. Singh further describes, "It did not take long for her father and brother-in-law's attitude towards her to change at all" (Shukla). Instead of having the situations growing better, the condition of her life got worsened. She was attacked with dehumanized taunts and insults from the society. People attacked her, "You wretched wench, womb up-rooter, you couldn't carry a baby to term, so you ate up mine as well. . . These were words she heard daily" (Shukla). Due to the branded notion of being unlucky "at every good deed or auspicious moment Tetari was kept away permanently." She was not even allowed. . . to present herself even in front of her sister-in-law" (Shukla).

Although Tetari was being criticized, she never left her in-laws' side which leads her into the critical conditions questioning her existence. The similar behavioural character like Tetari has been very rightly presented by Rabindranath Tagore in the novel *The Home and the World*, through the character of Bimala in *The Home and the World*, "I am only a woman. What can I know of the outside world?" (Tagore 2005: 89). After being thrown out of her in-law's house, she settled in the outskirts of the same village without any fear and hesitation. In fact, postmaster regularly gave her the allowance of her husband's job in fear, which allowed her to live peacefully. Singh has described the situation so much meaningfully, through simple words. Singh describes the surrender and submission of a woman to even the

worst situation of life. Singh writes, “Tetari is happy being a Dāyan. Her days are filled with rest and her nights with sound sleep. The postmaster, now scared of the Dāyan, drops off the pension at the Dāyan’s house. Holding on to her *sinhora*, Tetari says, ‘This *sindoor* never suited my head, so what? It suits my door’” (Shukla). By the use of the statement ‘the *sindoor* never suited my head’, Singh deep delves into the tradition of knowing the husband of a married woman as her *suhāg* (a symbol/ an identity of a married woman).

It should not be forgotten that the society that turns women like Tetari into living corpses for its own benefit and greed is the one that never tired of calling them goddesses and mothers. Truly speaking, the issues related to women are not necessarily the issues of women. Rather such issues determine the direction of the society and its future. It is the society, particularly a male society, that makes a woman a woman, making her realize, her own existence and status in the society. Simone de Beauvoir truly says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” through such forced masculine social realization (de Simone 1989: 301). Thus, this short story depicts how the woman is made to suffer in the co-shared society.

When Tetari’s father Kamru decides about getting her educated, “Everyone around Tetari insisted to Kamru” narrates the narrator Singh, not to get her educated as “Kamru’s entire clan and lineage had never educated a daughter before” (Shukla). While rejecting the very idea, the clan uttered, “What is this Kamrua, you want to dry seeds on a wet cloth.... What will you do, having educated your daughter so much? After all, she will manage her stove and kitchen at the in-laws’, right?” (Shukla). In *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai, the character of Anamika is also deprived of education and therefore knowledge. Can any reader guess why Sudha Murthy titled her short story as *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* published in 2004? The answer to this question is not hard to gesticulate as teaching old grandmother indicates that in an ancient India, girls were not allowed to educate themselves. The story by Sudha Murthy highlights the absence of literacy and education imparted to girls in earlier generations.

After her marriage, she became a talk of the town due to her beauty. Her husband was appreciated on saying, “Oh babuaji, your luck has now woken. The girl is like an actual fairy from the stories” (Shukla). However, the darker side is that “Talk of Tetari’s beauty lit up the entire village” making every married woman jealous of the beauty of Tetari as “Every maiden in the village was surely compared to Tetari” (Shukla). Despite serving family after her husband’s death no one came for rescue rather everyone blamed her for unfortunate things happening around them. All her life, she faced problems as no one was there for the help not even her own family could do anything because they only cared till her marriage and later left her to suffer. She was called with many derogatory terms by society just because her husband died right after marriage. She was always deprived of all the rights that too with all sorts of allegations. Allan G. Johnson rightly remarks: “A society is patriarchal to the

degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women” (Goyal 2023: 137). Being a woman was crime for her as it never allowed her to explore in her life to make it more convenient and lessen her talent.

The women in such male dominated Indian society are treated as slaves because no male wants them to be uplifted. “I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (Wollstonecraft 2004: 133). The shift of the power from the male to the female will, for sure, decentre the society as suggested by Wollstonecraft. The society is responsible to make a woman like Tetari very much weak as “Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the examples of their mothers” to follow them, to learn from them and to be like them (Wollstonecraft 2004: 21). Of course, what the girls are supposed to learn from their mothers, the boys learn from their fathers (males) without fail to keep the continuity of patriarchy going on. Man, as a part of patriarchy, has never wished the woman to uplift herself, to get herself educated and to get herself freedom. Mary Wollstonecraft says that “Marriage is the only way in which a woman can rise in the world” (Wollstonecraft 2004: 25) as Simone de Beauvoir also justifies, “Humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him” (de Simone 1989: 26). Man being a head of the house decides everything solely, without the female interruption, and thus, rendering the woman bereft of freedom, doesn’t allow her to participate in the game of freedom to come at front because it explores more into the society. “The fact is Tetari is present with different name, form in every village and street. Even if she doesn’t become a witch” (Singh 2018: 3).

The story of Tetari cannot be a mere story but rather a projection of the reality of the society. The another story of Saroj Singh ‘Kariyathi’ also discusses the same condition of women in the typical Indian society. Saroj Singh says, “Kariyathi has to wash away the stigma on her skin by giving her life. The hypocrisy of society, greed and the mask on the face of man go hand in hand in these stories” (Singh 2018: 3).

The Vindication of Rights of Tetari:

Why should a ‘man’ marry? To settle down in life and relish it. Is the same applicable/allowed to a woman? Is the right to enjoy the life given to her? What forced Mary Wollstonecraft to write a seminal text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*? Why does Mary Wollstonecraft title a seminal text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*? What does Simone de Beauvoir mean by the very title *The Second Sex*? What does Simone de Beauvoir mean by the use of the very word ‘second’ in the title? ‘Whom’ does Simone de Beauvoir refer to? ‘Whom’ does Simone de Beauvoir point at? ‘Whom’ does Simone de Beauvoir signal at? Why? Who forces Simone de Beauvoir do write so? The very much popularity of both these texts have already answered these questions. One obvious answer to these questions is, “Women must marry advantageously, and then submit”, according to popular male demand that leads / forces a female ‘to be supplied’ (Wollstonecraft 2004: 25). A girl whether born, a woman whether a spinster or married or a widow does have no right to “be

permitted to consider herself. . . independent” (Wollstonecraft 2004: 90). The same is explicitly explained in the story when Tetari experiences the married life as well as the widowhood. At this juncture, a few books out of much need to be remembered. Some of them similar to point out at the subjugation of women are: *The Subjection of Women* (1929) by John Stuart Mill, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) by Shulamith Firestone, *The Female Eunuch* (1970) by Germaine Greer and many others. Mill considers female subordination as kind of social injustice advocating for equality, Friedan exposes how women are trapped in the domestic role in the name of formal deceptive equality and identity, Firestone argues that the female exploitation is led by their bodily reproductivity whereas Greer exposes saying how patriarchy suppresses female sexual vitality. In nutshell, it can be concluded that though there is a move of female towards equality, the deep-rooted traditional structure of the society has still sustained the female suppression.

On being a widow and having been declared inauspicious, Tetari is excluded from the common communal life. She is punished to remain in the house and is not allowed to attend “a marriage at the Patidar’s house” (Shukla) when Saroj Singh writes, “everyone left” for the marriage and “Tetari finally had the chance to rest” (Shukla). In the traditional society in India, “The woman in marriage is bound hand and foot to her husband” (de Beauvoir 1989: 451) as if a marriage is a symbol of male ownership and possession since marriage is “the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (de Beauvoir 1989: 445) only because of the “rights of husbands” (de Beauvoir 1989: 7). These arguments made here in case of the character of Tetari very rightly justify the arguments made by the famous feminist critics cited above.

Singh here creates a sad opportunity for Tetari to reclaim the same symbol which was used to oppress her—*sindoor* or *sinhora*. These powerful symbols of female identity, the very idea and the use of *sindoor* renders ‘Tetari’ a useful feminist critique of rural patriarchy. The women “have never been considered as independent moral beings” (Wollstonecraft 2004: 6), as the marriage is “the institution” in the name of which “women are traded” (de Beauvoir 1989: 448) because “The married woman is no longer a person in her own right” (de Beauvoir 1989: 451) as “Woman’s body is not her own; it belongs to her husband” (de Beauvoir 1989: 451). The story projects the suffering of Tetari in a normal way to suggest that this female exploitation is very common, very much common in a patriarchal society where to face the same with quiet resistance for a woman is not abnormal.

Father vs Father-in-Law:

Needless to say, that the father is also a part of patriarchy. However, the story ‘Tetari’ draws a parallel between the two fathers as males. Though a daughter has been nourished with a lot of care and love at her father’s house, she is bound to suffer at her father-in-law’s house. She is treated not as a daughter, not even as a daughter-in-law but rather as a domestic maid / tool to do the drudgery. She cannot be made free from the domestic disputes. Uma

Chakravati notes, “Patriarchy in India is inseparable from caste” (Chakravarti 2003: (9) and “The laws, the customs, the language, the whole past history of mankind have been made by men” (de Beauvoir 1989: 143). “Gender is not something one is, it is something one does” (Butler 1990: 25) and therefore the widowhood of Tetari is never allowed to be treated as a living human being because Saroj Singh writes in the story ‘Tetari’, “Days would pass before she ate even a morsel of food ... and there was no one to ask after her either” (Shukla).

The girl was born into a family of three brothers, where she was cherished and raised with immense love, care, and affection. She received an education far beyond what any other girl in the village had. In keeping with tradition, she was married to a man who had a stable job and had migrated to the city. She had dreamed of a happy and fulfilling life after marriage, but destiny had other plans. Whenever she insisted of going along, her husband would convince: “I’m just saving money for the house, I’ll take you as soon as I can...How will I feel good without you? Take care of my parents right now” (Shukla). Despite being praised and valued by her father and brothers, she was never appreciated by her in-laws. Instead, her efforts were constantly criticized, no matter how hard she tried.

Conclusion:

The female protagonist Tetari from the short story ‘Tetari’ by Saroj Singh is not only a single woman suffering the male domination facing various issues like gender discrimination, dowry, lack of freedom, no freedom of choice, illiteracy etc. because in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her” (de Simone 1989: 26). It can be concluded very clearly that woman’s oppression is not caused by gender alone but also by very poor thinking of the society. A woman is reduced to be a slave inferior to the set of power, the male power turning to be a centre of power. Many critics have confirmed that the long history of “silencing and marginalization” (Tharu and Lalita 1991: xxi) is often trapped” between “tradition and selfhood” (Mukherjee 1971: 132). According to Simone de Beauvoir, “The girl is taught to accept male dominance and her own inferiority” (de Beauvoir: 1989: 283) because the traditional marriage traps the woman in the name of institution whether the woman is ready to accept or not since “Man is the Subject, woman the Absolute Other” (de Beauvoir: 1989: 26). The fruitless effort of being happy of the father of Tetari at the beginning of the novel, “A fourth baby – a girl – was born after three brothers. Her blessed birth was celebrated with infinite joy” results into the sad suffering of Tetari attempting to suit the “never suited” *sindoor* on her head in the end (Shukla). Thus, taken together, it is the time for the society to rethink about the women not as objects but as human beings.

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