



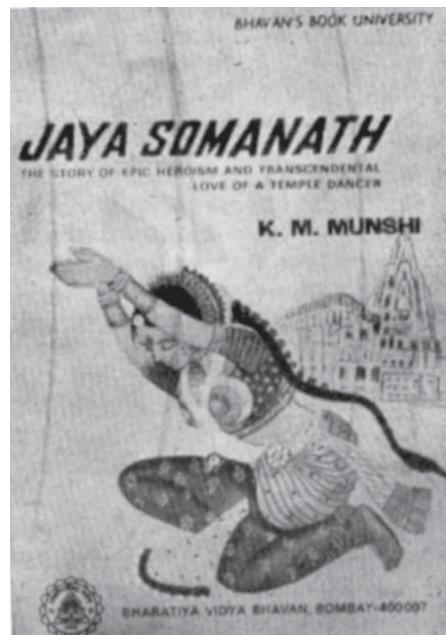
Women In The Novels Of K.M. Munshi

This is the centenary year of K.M. Munshi, who is a symbol of the cultural renaissance in Gujarat. He produced 92 works of fiction and nonfiction, 36 of them in English. One of his major themes was the glory of Gujarat, and in his later years he wrote extensively on Hindu religion and mythology. He was the founder of the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, a cultural and literary centre rooted in the Sanskritist tradition, which now has many branches in India and abroad. He also started *Bhavan's Journal* in English (and Hindi, now defunct) and the Gujarati *Samarpan*, one of the few literary periodicals in Gujarati to have survived. Munshi died in 1971.

MOST of Munshi's novels deal with the favourite theme of Gujarati novelists in the preindependence period—the efforts of the young educated man to be effective as an agent of social change, and the conflicts he undergoes in the process. Munshi's heroes are middle class young men, usually Brahmins, who are unable to come to terms with their mediocre existence, visionaries with natipnalist aspirations. Their experience reflects that of Munshi himself, when as a young man

he lived in the lower middle class locality of Kandawadi.

Munshi's heroes aspire to find a woman who can be a soulmate for them. The novels portray premarriage romance and courtship. This appealed to the newly educated youth which was for the first time breaking the taboo against mixing with unrelated members of the opposite sex. This was the time when the first "love marriages" were taking place in the Gujarati middle class.



The cover of the English translation of a historical novel, originally published in Gujarati

The young hero frequently faces a major conflict when his desire for a soulmate is thwarted by his having been married by his parents to an inappropriate partner. In *Kono Vank*, published in 1915, Muchkund, a poor Brahman student, is compelled by his father, Panu Pandya, to marry his childhood fiancee, Kashi, an ugly and uneducated girl. Muchkund's real soulmate is Maai, a child widow who was seduced and deserted by a male relative in her youth.

Muchkund is generally hesitant and unsure of himself. The first time in the novel he speaks with confidence is when he analyses the marriage system, telling Mani : "Mani, from the moment we gave up the system of *swayamwar*, our lives have been ruined. Mani, I have not been created for Kashi, and you are not created for aimless wandering through life in terrible loneliness."

But the critique of the marriage system is linked by Munshi to his notion of caste purity. Munshi believes that a cosmic law, a *vishwaniyam*, is violated and disaster results when Brahmins do not get appropriate soulmates. The weakness of the offspring of unsuitable marriages is seen by him as the cause for the subordination of the traditional elite, the Brahmins, to foreign rulers. The uneducated woman tends to be made a scapegoat in this revivalist nationalist ideology. Thus, Muchkund tells Mani: "...unsuitable couples over thousands of years have created a disaster. The blood of Parshurams and Chanakyas was filtered through countless Kashis to produce worms like me..." Women's education is thus supported as a means to the end of producing suitable offspring.

Munshi, who himself married a widow, Lilavati, was a supporter of women's education and widow remarriage. Mani is portrayed as an extremely bold and resourceful woman. She escapes from a lecherous *sadhu's math* and from a prostitute's house. She finally becomes a schoolteacher and supports Muchkund through his illness by taking singing

assignments from the prostitute who had earlier made her captive. She also asserts her rights as a sexual being, saying : "I am also human—there is youthful blood pulsating through my body. Why shouldn't I enjoy myself? Yes, I do not want to commit adultery. But why shouldn't I marry (again)?" At the end of the novel, she marries Muchkund.

How Mani acquired her ability to deal confidently with total strangers and to plan strategies for her survival in most unusual circumstances, considering that she was married off in childhood and never allowed by her in-laws to step out of the house, is not made clear.

In heroines like her, Munshi successfully creates an illusion of a powerful woman. This was perhaps one reason why his heroines were so popular amongst Gujarati youth. They were the dreamgirls for young men and models of behaviour for young women.

Most of the novels of Munshi were published during the most turbulent phase of the nationalist struggle. Many middle class women had come out to participate in it. Munshi's heroines are shown as comrades fighting shoulder to shoulder



Munshi's second wife Lilavati, herself a writer and political activist, photographed in 1946

with men, in crisis situations. They are in the thick of action, in the unmarried phase of their lives. Manjari in *Gujaratno Nath*, a historical novel, is a learned woman, beloved daughter of a Brahman scholar and poet. She is arrogant and independent minded. Twice, she is made captive and escapes with help from her lover, Kak. She also helps Kak escape from imprisonment. Loma in *Lomharshini* moves about in the forest with her friend, Ram. She disobeys the commands of her brother King Sudas if she thinks they are wrong. However, all this lasts only until the heroine meets the hero.

The heroines are empowered partly

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because the heroes who are "lions among men" deserve nothing less than the most beautiful and most powerful women. This image of the ideally suited couple is crucial to Munshi's vision of an ideal society. He is obsessed with the concept that husband and wife are two parts of a whole.

To unite and to remain united as indivisible souls (*avibhakt atma*) is some kind of a mission because together they have to lead a race, a nation or a society. Munshi believes that for a man or a woman to strive to unite with the other half, the ideal self, is a cosmic law, a *vishwa-niyam*. But the model is an elitist one, both man and woman usually being Brahmins.

Although the rhetoric is that the united souls are equal partners, the theory of their complementing each other in fact works to the woman's detriment. Thus, in Munshi's first novel, *Verni Vastlat*, Shirin is told by Swam! Anantanand the mentor of Jagat, the man she loves, that she is not suitable for Jagat because : "Only when a soft and timid creeperlike (woman) with a cultured background leans on him in helplessness will he be able to lose his harshness and hardheartedness... you will not be able to complement him in this shortcoming of his. You are intelligent. It

.appears from Siddhanath's (Jagat's) conversations that you are also brave and independent. Siddhanath (Jagat) is not yet a complete being but you unfortunately are not his other half. You are the same half as he." Jagat finally marries Rama, a meek woman who has always loved him with a secret and mind-less devotion. In his later novels, Munshi resolves the contradiction between these two models of womanhood by giving the same woman a different role and character before and after marriage.

Thus, Manjari, who before marriage is the learned and independent heroine of *Gujaratno Nath*, after marriage, in the sequel *Rajadhiraj*, is shown cutting vegetables or singing the praises of her husband, Kak, who is busy setting everything right for his king, Siddharaj, or his friend, Khengar. She totally forgets her earlier pride in being the granddaughter of a great poet. She is only proud to be the wife of Kak. Although she is still respected as a learned woman, her learning is now like an additional achievement of her husband. Throughout the second half of the novel, she is trapped in a fortress, pining for Kak and singing his glory. But Kak, while busy performing diplomatic and military feats, does not remember his wife. It is only right at the end that he rushes back to her when informed that she is in danger, and she then dies in his arms.

Wives of sages or kings or warriors in the novels of Munshi are shown playing a role similar to that of women in contemporary upper class families—pursuing knowledge or doing social work in their spare time, and enhancing their husbands status by their involvement in such activities. Very occasionally, they may provide temporary leadership in times of crisis in a supplementary way. But their adventures are merely referred to, whereas men's exploits are described in great detail. Thus, in *Tapasvini*, set in the 20th century, no details are given of what Sheela does as a "Congress dictator", the leader in an area during the salt *satyagraha*. Her political activity is referred to as a way of escaping from a stifling marriage.

Munshi's novels were some of the first Gujarati bestsellers and they have all the ingredients of bestsellers like romance, passion, suspense and intrigue. The courtship of hero and heroine is portrayed on a canvas large enough to assure the novel's popularity. But the novels do not end with marriage, because acquiring a

beautiful and intelligent woman is only a part of the success story of his invincible heroes. Their main aim is to acquire political power which they proceed to do once they have settled the issue of marrying the fair maiden. But the fair maidens become ghosts of their former selves after marriage.

*Kanaiyalal Maneklal Munshi was born in Bharuch on December 30, 1887. His birth centenary celebrations extend into this year. The youngest of seven children and an only son, Munshi lost his father when he was very young but was put through school and college by his mother. He was married at the age of 13 to Atilakshmi, aged nine. While a struggling lawyer, Munshi published his first novel *Verm Vasulat* which was a resounding success, under a pseudonym.*

Munshi was also active in politics. He became a nationalist in college, but he did not approve of Gandhian methods so in the twenties, he left the Congress to concentrate on his writings. In 1919 he met Lilavati Sheth, a married woman, one of the first Gujarati women writers, who maintained a kind of salon for writers and nationalists. Their relationship enraged many and remained a subject of gossip even after their marriage in 1926, when Atilakshmi and Lilavati's husband had died. Munshi was deterred from joining any political organisation by Lilavati's warnings that his politics might affect their relationship, as she was an ardent Gandhian and an important Congress leader during the active phases of the movement.

Munshi joined the Congress in 1930 and was jailed for two years. In 1942 he had differences with Gandhi and left again, to rejoin in 1946. After independence, he served as agriculture minister at the Centre and as governor of UP.



During the days of BardoH Satyagraha-the Munshis with Sardar Patel

Munshi's model for women is essentially different from that of the *Aryanari* projected by his predecessor, Govindram Tripathi, the social reform novelist. She is like an ancient mythological heroine but has a touch of western education.

Manjari, for example, is essentially a modern woman but is placed in a historical framework. Although she speaks Sanskrit, Munshi is unable to create in her a plausible historical character. Manjari is basically like the rare women from rich and aristocratic families who were allowed to receive higher education in early 20th century Gujarat.

In order to set up his modern woman as a model, Munshi must push her back a thousand years in history. She is a model from Munshi's idealised conception of the golden past of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Either he projects modern women into that past or tries to recreate that past in modern terms. His message seems to be that women had a high status only in the great Aryan civilisation and can regain it only if that civilisation is revived. This is the position taken by most revivalists. □

Female Education

*While learning to shroud their bodies, women
Are taught lessons still more deep, to cover
Thoughts and feelings from the time they talk.
With the air they breathe and the milk they suck
Is the art they learn in fashioning masks
Of sweet little faces and clever winning ways.
They adapt and move in their worldly paths
With the mask held in place by sticky paint
And perfumed sweat. Inside there withers
A thing stillborn within a living body
At its birth.*

—Manju Kapur

Follow Up

Successful Prosecution

In the letters column of *Manus hi* No. 32, I had reported the case of Gouri Kumari, a young maid-servant in Jamshedpur who was raped by her employer, Bipin Kumar Sinha. According to her account, he forcibly raped her on more than one occasion and threatened to kill her and her parents if she told anyone. It was only after her mother discovered her eight month old pregnancy that the facts came to light. Mahila Mukti Morcha took the case to court when Sinha refused either to marry Gouri or to pay her Rs 13,000. Sinha was taken into custody for 19 days but released on bail after a medical report declared Gouri a major, aged 16 to 17 years. Meanwhile, Gouri had a son, Bikas, in May 1985.

The police delayed submitting the chargesheet in the court, and the case then remained pending in court for 19 months, because Sinha's lawyer evaded summons. The Morcha pursued the case and it was transferred to the court of the third additional sessions judge S>ed Mohammed Mahfooz Alam in March 1987.

Sinha denied the rape charge under section 376 of the Penal Code. He tried to show that Gouri was bad characterised and might have had relations with other men and that the Morcha activist had tried to blackmail him, but could not prove either charge. However, the prosecution could

not prove that the sexual relations were without Gouri's consent, because she had continued to work at Sinha's house for several months afterwards, with-out telling anyone.

So the entire case came to hinge on the question of Gouri's age. Under the law, sexual intercourse with a minor, under the age of 16, is rape even if she consented. The Court concluded that at the time of sexual relations between Gouri and Sinha, Gouri must have been under 16, and that Sinha was guilty of rape. Sinha was sentenced to four years' rigorous imprisonment, and his bail was cancelled.

The sessions court rejected his bail petition so he applied to the high court which granted him bail and refused the Morcha's plea for cancellation of his bail. In January 1988, the Morcha filed a case for maintenance of Bikas, now two and a half years old. Gouri is prepared to fight for her child's rights and to educate him, with the Morcha's help.

Gouri's parents are not supportive of her so she is supporting herself, working as a maid-servant, earning about Rs 200. She had to drop out of school. But she wants to leave Jamshedpur and live elsewhere because her commu-nity makes her life difficult.

Renu Dewan