

Tracing the Female Psyche in Molly Daniels

The Salt Doll

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Abstract

The Salt Doll by Molly Daniel reveals with a graceful informality and fluency, the concealed consciousness of a female leading to self-exploration and the feeling of worthiness. It examines the boundaries of patriarchy and stereotypical image of a woman related to it. The exploration is personal as well as universal at the same time. With an unusual ease *The Salt Doll* relates a personal tale which holds true for the reader as well as for others generating a creative vision as well as self-confidence. The novel points out that within patriarchy women has to conform to male directed principles and way of life thus occupying a marginal position in the society. She is supposed to follow the ethics of sacrifice and surrender her own self for her existence. Through the character of Mira Cheriyan, Molly Daniel has created a real character who seeks to realise her own self in the backdrop of a negative protocol. Mira is both a witness as well as a sufferer in the novel who tries hard to be true to her inner voice and to be alert About maintaining her own identity without it getting distorted or dissolved. This paper makes an attempt to unleash the journey of a symbolic woman who evolves into a new identity by self-realisation and a deep understanding of her life and relationships.

Keywords: patriarchy, self-realisation, self-confidence

The novel *The Salt Doll* does not glorify women in traditional roles or stereotypes approved by men. These expectations have been considered to be highly enriched, unrealistic and unrecognisable. Instead, the story distinctly illustrates the ordeals of a woman who confronts the traditional mindset of the society with a unique self-confidence in order to establish her individual identity. Molly Daniel has taken up the story of the protagonist Mira Cheriyan who tries to falsify the definition of the feminine and the characteristics associated with it. Mira initially tries to acclimatise with the feminine way of life resulting in her becoming a salt doll which dissolves in the sea and loses identity. This metaphor of doll has been commonly used in Literature to symbolise the cultural construct of a female as a commodity but Molly Daniel deals with the image employing a fresh psychological subtlety and spontaneity

imparting the novel a fresh flavour. Mira is a female hero in the novel depicting the strength of femaleness as well as that of an individual human being.

Mira Cheriyan is an intense personality who is both an actor and observer. She represents the new woman who is aware of herself as an individual. She struggles in the personal sphere, effaces the image of a submissive and repressed woman and emerges as an emancipated individual, a person who is assertive, uninhibited and confident of her choices even if they are rebellious. Abandoned at the age of four by her mother, Mira finds her father uncooperative and compares him with Hitler. She finds solace only in the company of her grandmother. She is annoyed with anyone who treats her as an object or commodity or uses power over her. Mira is a victim of circumstantial disadvantage. She resists stereotypes and any kind of control exploring the unique contours of her life.

Mira Cheriyan has been portrayed as a rebellious girl since the beginning of the story. She's taken to see her parents to Eden and join them. But she finds her father to be jerky and commanding and chooses to address him as high command. She makes several attempts to run away and even gets on to a passenger boat but is caught by the police. Seeing her defiant nature she is sent to a boarding school in India. Breaking each cocoon Mira changes her school each year. She cannot bear being under the thumb of any authority and resultingly does not last long in any of the boarding schools. Mira aspires for freedom and denounces the impositions of the nuns at the boarding schools. Relating a small incidence of plucking mangoes the novelist expresses how Mira defies the conventions coded by the nuns which do not appeal to her. The nuns consider plucking of mangoes heinous whereas the Indian priests do not label it as being against religion. Mira chooses to ignore the nuns and continue with her crusade of plucking mangoes. She is punished for her act along with her friends and created a sensation by enjoying even her stricture. Mira is committed to herself, not to the demands of the world. As she herself says:

“ I thought to myself, madness is when a person is herself, not what the world wants her to be.”(9)

Mira's nature is contradictory to the picture of a traditional woman. She loves to swim against the currents. She strives hard to keep an identity of her own. She witnesses a sensibility different from others. Although Mira is a part of society but owing to her strange behaviour she is outside the system. She establishes and thrusts her individuality upon those who are not ready to approve and appreciate her. She represents an alienated individuality which finds expression in opposition against the cultural construct of the image of a woman. She believes in the true experiences of life. Travelling on a freedom

road she defies the conventionally accepted male perspectives imposed on a woman. She loves to swim against the currents and considers herself outside the system. Outrageously anti-traditional she thrusts her individuality upon those who are not ready to approve and appreciate her. Upholding the honesty of her desires Mira embodies the apogee of an exalted woman who is different from others and celebrates her identity.

Mira expresses a total rejection of the dominant culture and conventional modes. In one such act of defiance she, with some of her own kind, stood on the tennis court with onion slices in armpits. Their body temperature soared high and were sent to the infirmary. They were happy to bear the torture as it meant having their own way at the place they wanted to be with their favourite companions. It is easy enough to see in such a stance a dislocated mind, a self-willed and unbridled woman with a bewildered sense of rootlessness. The quality of consciousness in the novel is different from the one encountered in majority of literary texts. The inner world of the protagonist does not remain her personal domain but acquires a profound symbolic significance for the triumphant surge of a highly energetic creative spirit. The true picture of a woman is projected with a psychological subtlety. A woman becomes the sea once she steps into it while a man enjoys the freedom to wade through the sea and explore it. She is expected to and mostly does adapt to the environment she is put into. She is just like a hole, an emptiness waiting to be filled by others. Her voice is diluted by the noise of the social and cultural construct. Her response to life does not matter. Her participation is highly restrictive. The personality of a woman is highly neglected and her wishes are overlooked by the family, society and also by herself. Her instincts are also suppressed by not providing legitimacy to her wishes and emotions. Thus a woman suffers both physically and emotionally.

Realising this antipathy of the society Molly Daniel projects the character of Mira who dismisses all the imposed fortifications of the society and acquires an understanding of her own self and personality. Mira emerges as a woman hero who intimidates almost everyone in her life with a spontaneity. Mira is not melodramatic in her interactions with the society, but, with a simplicity she protests any encroachment on her freedom considering it as her right. She believes that she is not an object but a living being of flesh and blood. Ready to face everyone and anyone with an air of finality Mira approaches her seniors with confidence and a sense of liberation. In her food boarding school she does not fear the principal and confesses calling her 'Billy' without fearing any kind of punishment that maybe rendered to her. This being a rare act makes her a heroine in the hostel. Mira's personality radiates the strength of a woman hero which gradually builds up with the moving plot. The story investigates how a liberated being in the mould of a woman yearns to break free from her manacled

existence and prefers a lonely life free of impositions. She has no fear of any rejection and does not search for an anchor in the form of a man. The story does not in any way become a mere tale of female bitterness and protest but portrays the importance of female consciousness and self-realisation amidst all odds. Without a man's assistance Mira dares to create a small world for herself refusing to live a circumscribed life. Authenticating her own existence Mira reveals the perception of a woman who develops an understanding of life and has an alert self-awareness. Swinging between tradition and modernity Mira chooses to disregard the shallow duplicity of the social norms and safeguards her self. Her character emerges out not as an affectionate adorable woman who is a relic of the old culture but as one who revolts against the society following her own instincts resorting even to adventures branded as immoral and unacceptable.

Mira's art of survival lies not in accepting the constraints defined as legitimate by the society but in cherishing her identity even if it eventually leads to isolation. The major issue for her is not to live in accordance with the moral structure of the society but to be able to exist establishing her own identity. What is interesting is the way in which she takes pride and feels dignified in her bold and unconventional way of living. The story is optimistic in approach and is truly a saga of a woman who rejects a life of subjugation and incarnates a resoluteness and determination to lead life at her own terms. Owing to her sterling virtues she is able to stand all the trials and tribulations with total devotion to herself and her freedom with a unique rigidity and authority. Thus, *The Salt Doll* is a remarkable depiction of a woman who successfully spares herself from torture, victimisation and exploitation in every conceivable way and fetches an identity of her own.

With spontaneous narration *The Salt Doll* tells the tale of a woman with an ease and unpretentiousness depicting the contradictions of a woman who tries to realise her own self in a male oriented society. The true experiences and struggles of women have been depicted and distinguished from that of the men. Men, she says, do not have to face the danger of dissolving in the sea, that is, they are away from facing the existential crisis. However women are at a disadvantage and are constantly judged by the male stereotypical perspectives. Thus, they are caught in a whirlpool of one danger leading to another. *The Salt Doll* is a literary work which articulates the evolving feminist consciousness. Mira cherishes her own idea of freedom and goes by her instincts rejecting the pre-set framework of an ideal woman by the society. The writer's own experience as a woman also defines the form given to the novel to a large extent. The novel moves naturally with an unbiased approach which makes it a highly remarkable text. The writer does not assume the role of propagator giving prophetic

messages but what she does is unfolding the consciousness of the contemporary Indian woman and projecting the scope of her freedom.

Works Cited

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