

# A DECOLONIZED GAZE: RE-READING OF URVASHI BUTALIA'S SELECT SHORT STORIES THROUGH THE LENS OF POSTCOLONIALISM

**Prof. Dr. Kishan Pawar, Ms Annabel Rebello**

Principal

K. J. Somaiya College of Arts and Commerce, Vidyavihar, Mumbai  
principal.kjsac@somaiya.edu

Research Scholar

Maharshi Dayanand College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Parel, Mumbai  
ann.rebello1967@gmail.com

## Abstract

*This paper will examine the works of Urvashi Butalia, whose collection of short stories will be analysed through the post-colonial lens. The characters in the stories are victims of displacement, oppression, and societal pressure. The short stories are a reflection of the subalterns in society. The characters in the stories are women who suffer in the roles given to them by society. This research paper will throw insights into the lives of the characters under the theme of post colonialism. It will attempt to give a decolonized view of women's struggle in a male dominated world, her resilience towards societal pressure and the need to empower themselves.*

**Keywords:** postcolonialism, gender, colonialism, patriarchy, decolonized readings

## INTRODUCTION

Not so long-ago women writers found it difficult to express themselves. In today's times, women writers have found their voice in their writings. They feel a renewed sense of freedom in writing on topics that were once considered a taboo.

Urvashi Butalia is one such writer. Born in 1952 in Ambala, Haryana, founder of India's first feminist publishing house, Kali. Publisher, teacher and activist, she is well known around the world as a renowned Indian Feminist writer and for her work in the women's movement of India. Her well known works include *The Other side of silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, *Speaking Peace: Women's voices from Kashmir* and others. She set out to publish a collection of short stories written by Indian women writers. She recalls in her introduction that pulling out the first volume and locating authors was a task she did not fathom. Having understood that their stories were considered inferior and subordinate, they were never published.

This paper will examine the works of Urvashi Butalia, whose collection of short stories will be analysed through the post-colonial lens. The characters in the stories are victims of displacement, oppression, and societal pressure. It will attempt to give a decolonized view of women's struggle in a male dominated world, her resilience towards societal pressure and the need to empower themselves. The stories may be fictional but are representations of the women around us in society.

According to M.H Abrams, "post-colonialism" is "the critical analysis of the history, culture, literature, and modes of discourses that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European imperial powers." Postcolonialism attempts to challenge the superiority established by colonialism. Post colonial India presented a range of challenges to the women writers. One such barrier was the lack of representation of women writers. Urvashi Butalia's collection of short stories is one such attempt to challenge the notion of patriarchy through the lives of the characters in her collection of compiled stories.

Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak in her essay 'Can the subalterns speak' questions the social formations and gender and sexual differences in society. Despite the challenges of living in the patriarchal world, the women writers of these short stories have found creative ways to amplify their voice and tell their story. By establishing a platform for their voice, they have managed to challenge the mainstream narratives by creating a literary space for themselves.

### A Decolonised reading

The first short story, *How Kava Deceived Kavi and Defeated Her* by Marija Sres, tells the story of Kava and Kavi who fell in love with each other on discovering they were the only two survivors of a deluge. Deva, wanting to have some fun, decided to hold a running race between the two. Since he favoured the male born, he decided to have a physical test of speed and agility, since physical strength is usually favourable to men. In the very first race, Kavi defeated Kava by a great margin. But a patriarchal society would challenge the woman. Deva feeling

ashamed that the man would end up serving the woman, wanted to help Kava win the race if not by strength but by cunning trick. Women are not equally treated as men fail to accept defeat by a woman.

He instructed Kava to give Kavi a pair of silver earrings. He was sure that it would be a distraction and Kavi would end up losing the race. When they ran the race the second time, Kavi won again. Ashamed of being seen a failure, he kept on giving ornaments to Kavi to wear before each race day and every time she wore them and ran, she was slower than before. On the final race day, Kavi was defeated when she was asked to wear a heavy breast plate.

*'You must wear this breastplate,' he insisted. 'It's been made specially for you.' Kavi put on the breastplate of gold studded with precious stones, and was thrilled.... 'But they are too heavy,' Kavi protested. 'Nonsense,' said Kava. 'Imagine how the wind will carry the jhanjhar of your bells when you run!' And so she was persuaded to wear those as well.*

Tricking her into believing that it made her look pretty and beautiful, and forcing her to wear them, she put them on and lost the race due to the heavy burden of carrying them on herself.

Unfortunately, it was the last race that was the deciding factor to the strongest of the species. The story ends with the dominion of the man over the woman, in which the woman accepted her place. The man continues to dominate the woman by showering her with expensive jewellery, not realising that her value would eventually begin to diminish. It further explains how the dowry system in India, brings further suppression to the woman as a property to be owned by the husband. It is also interesting to note that the story runs very similar to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in the garden. Eve being the one who is the victim of Satan's tricks, eventually leading to their banishment from the garden.

The woman being the first to be tempted and deceived which leads to her being portrayed as weak and secondary to the man. Women being able to voice their qualms and fears, has given us a whole new perspective to women's writing.

The *Giantess* by Suniti Namjoshi is the story of a woman is giant in size living among population of men. The giantess is like a mother to them, feeding, caring to their needs without expecting anything in return. The people fail to recognise that she is providing for them until she starts to grow weary, tired and old. She begins to tell them she is exhausted and needs to go. She wants to continue providing for them, but has reached a retirement age and slows her down. The people assume that she is upset on them. They do not understand she has lost her strength and is moving to the final stage of her life. They want to keep receiving love, food, and care from her and decide to pamper her with gifts thinking she will change her mind.

*'We will make you happy. Only please don't go.' 'Do you know what I want?' the giantess asked. They were silent for a bit. Then one of them said, 'We'll make you our queen.' ... 'We'll write you a poem.' ... 'We'll bring you many gifts of oysters and pearls and pebbles and stones.' 'No,' said the giantess, 'No.' She turned her back and crossed the mountains.*

The people then realise they need to make her happy. The giantess assumes they will understand the happiness she would like to receive in this age. But they offer her gifts and ornaments thinking it will make her happy. Disappointed she turned away from the land leaving them to fend for themselves.

Both the short stories portray the role of woman in different roles. Both begin as women and men existing as equals in society. Circumstances either external or internal trigger the causes of discrimination which grows in the course of time. In the first story, *How Kava Deceived Kavi and Defeated Her* by Marija Sres, the man and the woman are shown as existing without the intention of dominion over the other.

As the story progresses, the man is tempted to cause the downfall of the woman and eventually what is visible in society is what is ultimately taken as the believing truth which is the woman is weaker than the man. In the second story, the *Giantess* by Suniti Namjoshi, the giant woman begins her role as a caregiver as mother nature does. But fails to understand the increasing strength of the man. She is ultimately disappointed in their intention of returning the favour with décor and gifts leaving the land heart broken.

## CONCLUSION

The short stories are a critique of the patriarchal and socio-economic system. The subalterns in the stories are the women who have to bear the oppression of their counterparts. They are ultimately bound to obey the wishes of the patriarchal society. The writers present their short stories as a satire on the hypocrisy of the patriarchal system and one that a woman has to accept in the tradition of the family.

Butalia attempts to demonstrate how the colonial and patriarchal mentality have endangered the lives of many women. Butalia brings out the issues related to gender biasness, the weaker sex, domestic abuse, neglect and silence as part of the main themes in the stories. Her collection of stories, opens up many topics of discussions and the conflicts that continue to dominate the world till today.

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