

A Critical Review of Lakshmi Raj Sharma's "We Should Not All Be Feminists"

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Abstract: *Lakshmi Raj Sharma's novel We Should Not All Be Feminists (2024) is a satirical and ironic exploration of themes like love, spirituality, and gender empowerment while critiquing what the author calls "fake feminism." Through a complex narrative, the novel juxtaposes Eastern and Western values, unraveling issues such as the breakdown of marriage, corruption of character, and the exploitation of feminism for personal and social gain. The story follows Emilia and Clarissa, two women who arrive in India to promote feminist ideas but end up highlighting the negative side of feminism that damages relationships and traditional values. The novel also addresses broader social issues like casteism, conversion, and the challenges faced by Indian women under societal pressures. With its humor, irony, and pathos, the narrative weaves a vivid portrayal of cross - cultural encounters, exposing the materialistic and superficial aspects of empowerment as understood by different characters.*

Keywords: fake feminism, women empowerment, cross - cultural conflicts, satire, social critique

About the Author

The author has been a Professor of English at the University of Allahabad. He has several scholarly books and articles to his credit in Indian and foreign journals. He wrote The T. S. Eliot - Middleton Murry Debate (1994), the very first book on the subject. His first novel, The Tailor's Needle, first published by Picnic Publishing Limited, UK, has been published by Penguin Books India in December, 2012. His first collection of short stories, Marriages are Made in India, was published by Writers' Workshop, Kolkata, in 2001. His short story, "Company Garden: A Story of Rebirth" has been published by Sonar 4 Publications, USA, in an international anthology of stories entitled, Whitechapel 13, in September 2011.

Review of the Book

'We Should not All be Feminists' has been written down by Lakshmi Raj Sharma in 2024. It is a realistic novel comprising of satirical, humorous, and ironical hues. The story of the novel centres on love, spirituality, east - west encounter, gender empowerment, fake feminism. The novels also discloses the truth of materialism leading to unethical way, isolation, depression. Apart from this, it throws light on the meditation, yoga, rebirth theory that pacify the depressed, the frustrated, and even the disillusioned. The Indian social issues like dysfunctionality of marriage, suppression of women in society, destruction of marriage by fake feminism, casteism, conversion into Christianity, and corruption of characters in women under the shelter of feminism are raised in the novel.

The author - Lakshmi Raj Sharma's intention to write down the novel is to unmask the true face of feminism being spread all over the world in the name of women empowerment. The real agenda of the feminism is to voice against the androcentric things and even the activities of males. In order to make independent, the 'Women Empowerment Cell' does split the marriage union or make the tie of marriage dysfunctional by tempting women in the name of independency and freedom corrupting their

characters. The author expresses that there are two facets of feminism - one is good that seeks to affect the society to empower the women in real sense and the other one is bad that breaks the sanctity of marriage spoiling women. The desire and ambition of holding power are the means to propagate the fake feminism in India. The Author proclaims in the preface of the novel that it is penned down to unravel the fake feminism. The author declares, ". . . the novel has been pitched against fake feminism." Likely, there is no real intention of awakening of women empowerment in India. The author has imparted the arguments in the narrative to prove that the feminism has led astray from its genuine objective of empowering women and has destroyed the basic institution of marriage - breakup in the name of independency.

The story begins with two women characters - Emilia from California, and Clarissa Hatfield from London. Emilia's lover Neville has ditched her. She is depressed. Clarissa is an unmarried woman who propagates the feminist ideas where the need is visible. Both of them come to India to empower the women because in the West women are empowered, Indian women are left to be empowered yet. In Allahabad various gatherings are held to empower the women through the Women Emancipation Cell with the assistance of Abida and Sanjana by the key speakers Clarissa Hatfield and Emilia. Meanwhile, Vibha, the wife of Rajni Kant, leaves her in - laws' home after being harassed by Manorama, her mother in - law. She is not supported by her husband. She takes shelters under Emancipation Cell and devotes herself to the organisation. She doesn't come back to her home in spite of her husband's persuasion for come - back. She becomes the translator in the organisation, shares room with Clarissa who makes sexual relation with her at night. Vibha also makes romantic sexual relation with Neville, the ex - boy friend of Emilia, who has come to India with his aunt Peggy to heal from the heart - break and depression caused by Julia Hamilton, his girl friend in New York. Furthermore, Rajni Kant leaves his parents and his home and lives with his friend and colleague Rohan at his house. He gets attracted to Emilia and vice versa. He gets Emilia visit to hanuman temple thrice on consecutive Tuesdays to have the

blessings of Hanuman ji who fulfils the wishes whosoever comes to Him to worship with true and sincere heart. Emilia begs Neville her deserted love in prayers. At last, Emilia accompanies Rajni to visit Roman Catholic Church in Allahabad to get her long cherished wish of meeting with Neville fulfilled. Ultimately, Neville and Emilia are united "Neville could awaken her entire being in a moment." (242) and Rajni is left depressed in love "Rohan saw tears in Rajni's eyes. He wiped them away and pressed Rajni to his heart." (243) and Vibha is independent, morally corrupted and devoted to Emancipation Cell never to return to Rajni.

The plot - construction of the novel is well arranged, coherent, and logical. There are two parallel plots western and eastern and they later talk one another. The events are structured in a linear way. On the one hand, the exposition of the plot - construction is done through the depression of Emilia caused by the abandonment of Neville in love, the proposal of Clarissa Hatfield to Emilia visiting India for the women's empowerment. On the other hand, the introduction of another plot - construction is narrated Vibha and Rajni Kant married life not running sound because of the interference of in - laws harassment to her. The plot is developed by the attack on World Trade Center in 2001 in which most of trade businessmen lost their lives and those who are alive they are depressed and frustrated due to the loss of their jobs. The parallel plot moves ahead as Vibha is beaten and takes shelter under 'Women Emancipation Cell' in Allahabad. The two Plots are made complicated and are merged to converse one another. Vibha's desire to be full time devotee to the organisation to be independent, Clarissa's selfish and practical approach concerning personal gains, Emilia's empathetic behaviour and emotional bonding, Rajni's selfless nature to Rohan and his growing attachment to Emilia after assisting her in making her visit to entire Allahabad give acceleration the development of the plot. The plot reaches the climax as Emilia visits Saints Cathedral Church along with Rajni Kant who perceives that someone is chasing both of them stealthily. The action falls as Emilia meets Neville. Both of them are reunited and restored the lost passion of love. The denouement takes place concerning Emilia and Neville. However, the resolution on the part of Rajni Kant left incomplete providing him surprising end in despair.

The plot is full of suspense, anticipation, and surprise.

The author has provided the details and space to develop the characterisation in the narrative. There is a variety of characters in it. They have their own peculiar traits and faults too. Therefore, Sharma's characters in the narrative are realistic and reliable. Emilia is the protagonist in it. Clarissa Hatfield and Vibha are the foils to Emilia. Emilia's own desire and emotional bonding are the antagonist to her that makes her always depressed. There are dynamic, round, and static characters in the novel. Rajni Kant, Neville, Vibha, and Emilia are dynamic as well as round characters. They change as the circumstances alter. They are convincing like human beings. Clarissa Hatfield, Peggy, Manorama, Keshav Dulal Taksona are the static characters presented in the novel. The author has used the apt atmosphere.

The narrative consists of witty statement. It reveals the 'Toilet Scene' in which humour is produced as Father Pramod Emanuel France gets stained his garments with blood due to cutting his cock by Clarissa's nail. Another humorous scene is described by Aunt Peggy who tells Neville that her friend Laura pronounces the letter 'f' to 's'. She speaks 'fack' to 'sack', 'ifpain' to 'Spain', and 'fuck' to 'suck'. This produces the humour and laughter in the readers. Moreover, the laughter and humour is produced as Neville climbs the ladder to peep through the window in the room of Vibha who shares it with Clarissa, the rat also mounts on the feet of Neville. Clarissa sees that someone is spying her. The rat is beaten by Neville while descending. The laughter is generated in the scene.

The narrative marks the ironical situations used skilfully by the author to give fine craftsmanship to the artistic work. The irony is created as Emilia thinks whether Neville is alive or dead in the Twin Towers of World Trade Center building collapse and Neville also thinks whether Emilia is dead or alive in the collapse of the trade tower. Also, there is an irony of fate that Neville falls in love with Julia Hamilton ditching Emilia in despair and depression. Julia deserts Neville leaving him in despair rendering him what he has imparted to Emilia. The wheel of time changes and Neville pines for emotional bonding and love often given to him but he used to reject it. Another situation of irony is noticeable through window peeping of Neville to visit Vibha; he is assumed to be a spy. The book has the ironical touch in the following lines about Clarissa:

"She so obviously enjoyed the pleasures of no longer struggling to remain slim. When Clarissa walked towards the microphone, she did so like a model gliding over a catwalk." (27)

The author has employed the satire to expose the fake feminism at the centre. Other social issues both in Western and Eastern countries are raised to be noticed. The conversion of Indian poor and suppressed people into Christianity, Indian dowry system, exploitation of females by in - laws, giving birth in seven months to Rajni, the son of Manorama's lover not her husband and his upbringing without confession of her guilt before husband, dysfunctional of marriage between Vibha and Rajni Kant, split in marriage, and corrupting Indian women in the name of making them empowerment are the issue the Indian society encounters. Over - ambition of getting power, lacking of sound upbringing shown in the characters of Clarissa Hatfield, Manorama and Vibha are Western cum Eastern social and individual problems. Julia Hamilton's money gaining approach to make or mar relationship is satirised in the narrative. The author has mingled various complicated issues into a single fabric of narrative satirising the corruption of women and growing the spirit of lesbianism among women.

The pathos elements are scattered in the novel. The collapse of World Trade Center in which many lives lost is pathetic. The living persons become jobless to wander here and there in pursuit of jobs. The heart - break of Emilia by the ditching of Neville, abandonment of Neville by Julia Hamilton for personal money gains causing him in depression, beating of

Vibha by in - laws and her husband Rajni, a mute viewer causing much pain to her, Rajni's heart - break while Vibha's rejection of comeback to her home, all these events create pathos and pitiable conditions of the characters in the novel. The author has deftly exercised the pathetic element in the narrative. The narrative reveals the pathos of Rajni: "Then they moved to the sofa and Rohan saw tears in Rajni's eyes. He wiped them away and pressed Rajni to his heart." (243)

The tone and the mood of the novel are satirical, humorous and ironical indicating suggestive note as well. The point of view is third person. The narrator is omnipresent. He describes California circumstances, New York terrorists attack on World Trade Centre. A short while later, the narrator describes the setting of Allahabad and Varanasi. He peeps into the emotions of Western individuals and Indians persons as well. He mentions actions, reactions, feelings, desires, ambitions of the persons.

The story telling is executed in a linear way. Sometimes, it possesses the elements of flashback technique as Emilia in the beginning thinks of dead mother's conversation with her that she does not take care of her only busy in pickle making and plants caring, no importance is given to her physique. The author also applies the prolepsis or flashforward technique as Vibha thinks that if she returns to in - laws home, they will mistreat her. Moreover, the epistolary technique is employed to move the story ahead through letter of Clarissa to Emilia inviting her to visit India for women Empowerment. Apart from it, documentary technique in which newspaper publication helps the narrative to progress delineating the western women performance in awakening and spreading the women empowerment in Indian women, is applied in the narrative.

The author exercises the imagery, symbolism, and recurring motif to render the strength to the narrative technique of the novel. The imagery is beautifully described not only in the portrayal of the characterisation but also in the delineation of setting in Allahabad and Varanasi specially Hanuman statue lying on the ground nearby the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna rivers. Saints Cathedral is described as "the biblical scenes on the stained glass. . . to the plains of Bethlehem and Jerusalem." (235) The pictorial quality of the novel makes vivid description of location, events and characters imparting access to understand the narrative easily. The use of symbolism in the novel renders the deeper insight of the meaning to the readers. The confluence of trio - rivers the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the Saraswati at Allahabad deepens the encounter of East and West cultures. The confluence takes place between East and West, East and East, and West and West: Clarissa and Emilia with Vibha and Rajni, Rajni with Rohan, Emilia with Neville respectively. The visit of Emilia along with Rajni to Hanuman Temple in Allahabad and her inner wish to meet with Neville symbolises that Emilia's tension would be relieved as Hanuman stands for shooting the problems and provide happiness to his worshiper. Saints Catholic Church also symbolises the restoration of staggering faith of people. The symbolism imparts the depth to the narrative. The recurring ideas and concepts strengthen the central theme - falsehood of women empowerment and its side effects in the society. The fake feminism splits the institution of marriage in the name of

making women independent. The threatening idea of the Emancipation cell not to make come - back to their homes and if the go, no shelter be provided to them again, is a way to marriage - breakup. The women like Vibha and Poonam are tempted to be corrupted morally in the Women Emancipation Cell. It is noticeable in the following lines, 'Did India afford such severe penalties to the women who left their husbands, and to the husbands who were left alone?' (92)

Lakshmi Raj Sharma uses the rhetoric like simile and metaphor, exaggeration to embellish and simplified his prose style. 'he were a sack of potatoes' (metaphor), 'looking like hurdle' (simile), 'flying to moon' (hyperbole). The narrative has used inane phraseology in 'the toilet scene' like the words 'natural pistol', 'tightly swollen black beauty that kept springing up like a little cobra'. Furthermore, the allusion of Shakespeare sonnet 'Let Me Not marriage to True Mind' and P. B. Shelley's Ode to The West Wind' are employed in the novel. Moreover, the simplicity of Sharma's prose style makes reader to easily understandable his prose because his diction is selective, lucid, clear and fluent.

The novel is praised for entailing various theme such as east west encounter, clash of cultural values, women empowerment, conversion into Christianity, violence against conversion, disillusionment with materialism, heart - break in relationship, split in marriage, dysfunctionality of marriage, western attraction to meditation, Yoga, and rebirth theory and so on. The characterisation is well executed in the novel as well. Also, the plot construction is coherent and logical. The use of rhetoric, allusion, irony, humour, pathos, satire, imagery, symbolism, motif are the technical element skilfully interwoven in the main theme in simple prose style.

The weak point entailed in the novel is that the real vigour of feminism is lacking in it. The title of the novel 'We should not All Be Feminists' indicates that All feminists from the West are not real but fake. Three women characters: Clarissa Hatfield, Emilia Sedley and Peggy come to India. In the beginning of the novel, Clarissa and Emilia reach India to empower Women having the spirit of feminism. Peggy comes later with her nephew to learn meditation. Hence, with two women feminists one is fake other real, the author seeks to justify his title which appears to be strange because no positive change of women empowerment happens to occur in the story due to the efforts of Emilia whereas Clarissa's attempts to change the women are visible. It is an injustice that Poor Rajni is left alone disappointed in love at last. Had Rajni been justified and real spirit of feminism on grass - root level been noticeable, the novel might have been the excellent piece of literature.

Conclusion

"We Should Not All Be Feminists" offers a compelling critique of modern feminism, particularly in the Indian and Western context. It illustrates how a powerful ideal meant to empower can sometimes be misinterpreted, leading to unexpected negative impacts on relationships and individual well - being. Through authentic characters and intricate storytelling, Lakshmi Raj Sharma crafts a nuanced perspective on gender - empowerment. This narrative serves as a crucial reminder of the risks involved in embracing

ideologies without a deep understanding of their implications. By encouraging readers to reflect on how women empowerment initiatives can be genuinely beneficial, the work advocates for fostering unity and understanding rather than division. The readers can enjoy fun, irony, satire, pathos and other technical devices. The unmasking of the feminist movement does attract to the literature lover to go through it.

Conclusion

We Should Not All Be Feminists serves as a thought-provoking critique of modern feminism, examining both its potential and pitfalls within the Indian context. The novel underscores how an ideal meant to empower can sometimes be misinterpreted, leading to unintended consequences for relationships and individual well-being. Through realistic characters and layered storytelling, Lakshmi Raj Sharma portrays a nuanced perspective on empowerment, cautioning readers about the dangers of embracing ideologies without understanding their deeper implications. This work encourages reflection on how empowerment initiatives can be more genuine and beneficial, fostering harmony rather than division.

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