

DECONSTRUCTING FEMALE STEREOTYPES THROUGH ESPIONAGE FICTION: DEPICTION OF FEMALE SPY IN HARINDER SIKKA'S "CALLING SEHMAT"

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Abstract :

Society has assigned prescribed roles to men and women based on their assumed abilities and inabilities. Women are by such notions considered physically weak, dependent, emotional, passive, lacking in opinion etc. Even with improved status of women in the twenty first century, such stereotyping are preferred and propagated especially through literature, cinema etc. The United Nations considers certain stereotyping a violation of human rights if it prevents a person from personal growth and from enjoyment of fundamental freedom. Since its inception, espionage fiction has been male oriented and dominated, with females playing a minor supporting role. They were often portrayed as objects of sexual pleasure or damsels in distress completely dependent on the male. It was only towards the end of the twentieth century that female spies began to appear as central characters in espionage fiction. Such characters broke the hitherto accepted image of women in the genre by being bold, intelligent, ruthless, violent and active. Although less in number in comparison with their male counterparts, female spies in literature also attained wide acceptance. This paper attempts a study of the depiction of female spy in Harinder Sikka's "Calling Sehmat". As a work based on a real life spy, it is much closer to reality and hence makes an interesting study than a work based on pure imagination.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Stereotypes, Espionage, Espionage Fiction, Female Spies

I. Introduction

Harinder Sikka, a former navy lieutenant, first published his debut novel "Calling Sehmat" in 2008 after eight years of intense research and interaction with the real life female protagonist of his work, Sehmat Khan (fictionised name to protect privacy). A spy thriller based on the real life story of a Kashmiri woman, it is meant to be homage to the unsung hero, who risked and sacrificed much in life out of sheer love for her country. The novel is set in 1971 when the ties between India and Pakistan were becoming strenuous. Sehmat's unparalleled courage and determination helped in keeping India's premier flight carrier INS Vikrant safe from an ambush by Pakistan Navy and saved many a precious life.

Born to a Muslim father, Hidayat Khan and a Hindu mother, Tejeswari Singh, Sehmat's upbringing was unique. She was brought up in a secular environment with both her parents giving priority to "humanity, integrity, patriotism and honour" rather than religion (pg:8). Her father was the greatest influence in her life and one sees her trying to emulate him in every possible way. Hidayat Khan's intense love for his country was legendary and it naturally transferred to his daughter. On their customary evening walks, Hidayat Khan once said to Sehmat:

"We are what we are thanks to our motherland, Sehmat. Nothing can be more disgraceful than to be disloyal to her. I was born here and I must give the best to this soil." (pg: 9)

Being a firm believer of peace and harmony, Hidayat Khan slowly grows into a prominent figure in the community, settling disputes and helping anyone in need. He successfully expanded his business into Pakistan where he manages to win the hearts and gain the trust of many due to his honest and hardworking nature. At this point of time, Hidayat Khan's was approached by India's intelligence agency, RAW, asking him to use his presence in Pakistan to gather vital information for the country. Aware of the risks and dangers of the task in hand, he accepts. The information he transmitted and the documents he painstakingly transferred manually proved to be crucial in India's victory in the 1965 Indo-Pak war. He expanded the business and increased his contacts across various cities of Pakistan systematically transferring vital information about Pakistan's army and their strategic moves. However, he is diagnosed with cancer which had dangerously spread, leaving him with a few days to live. Even at the face of impending death, Hidayat's concern was as to who will continue his task in Pakistan. Refusing the government's offer for better treatment in the US, he proposes the name of his only child, Sehmat, to fill his shoes to the utter disbelief of his wife and the Mir (a top intelligence official of RAW).

Sehmat was unaware of the developments at home as she was away in Delhi for higher education and had fallen in love with a Delhi based boy, Aby. She was rushed back home where she is faced with the devastating news of her father's illness, her father's proposal for her and the possibility of having to end her relationship with Aby. Shattered at the prospect of losing two of the most important men in her life, Sehmat's trauma was beyond words. Taking up the assignment in Pakistan also meant leaving her homeland, which she deeply loved and getting married to the son of a Pakistani general. Aware of the hardwork put into the task by her father and his anxiety that the work could not be carried forward by anyone else, Sehmat relents. Her devotion to her father and her homeland makes her do the unthinkable, although with heart wrenching pain. One sees her taking the step forward, entering the enemy lines, marrying the enemy and turning into one of the finest spies the country has ever seen.

Her stay in Pakistan as the daughter-in-law of the top ranked generals was no easy task. Being on constant vigil to identify any vital information, she was also under perpetual pressure to play the role of a loving wife and dutiful daughter-in-law to avoid any kind of suspicion. She was constantly under the threat of death. In order to save herself and continue her mission in Pakistan, she was forced to murder, Abdul, a loyal servant of the family and her-brother-in-law. These murders turned out to have profound effect on her psyche and almost destroy her mental balance as she could never forgive herself for the acts even though it was for the country.

Even the success of her mission and her safe return to her homeland could not heal the wounds of her mind. She withdraws into a shell and shreds all ties with her loved ones, including her mother, her lover and even her son. She refuses to go back to Kashmir, which she deeply loved and settles in Maler Kotla, the native land of Abdul, where she stays till the end of her life. She is portrayed to be in a constant state of unrest and seeks peace in religion and communal activities.

II. Espionage fiction

Espionage fiction or spy fiction evolved as genre in the 19th century stimulated by the tensions between major world powers and the establishment of intelligence agencies. It was further given an impetus by fascism, communism, cold war and both the world wars. Earliest known spy fiction novels include *The Spy* (James Fenimore Cooper), *Kim* (Rudyard Kipling), *The Riddles of the Sand* (Robert Erskine Childers) and "*The Secret Agent*" (Joseph Cornard). Unsurprisingly, most of the early works of spy fiction were based on real events or persons. The genre flourished during World War I as spies and secret agents began to capture the imagination of the masses. "*The Thirty Nine Steps*" by John Buchan is considered as a monumental work of this period. Some of the spy fiction of this era was adapted into movies and television series which vouches for the popularity of the genre. World War II again gave a boom to spy fiction especially with the publication of works like "*Above Suspicion*" by Helen MacInnes. Other popular works since then includes *Ipcress File*, *The Day of the Jackal*, *The Bourne Identity*, *The Innocent*, *The Kill Artist*, *The Faithful Spy* etc. The popularity of spy fiction continued to sky rocket in the years after World War II owing to its "action-packed" plot and "intricately plotted storyline which revolve around incredibly interesting characters."(April).

Major themes of spy fiction include power, violence, false identities, crossed borders, honey traps etc. Most of the early espionage fiction is male centred and male orientated; "it means entering a world in which it is so often men who see and women who are seen – and seen as sexualised bodies above all."(Walter)

III. Female spies in history/fiction

Female spies are not rare in fiction or history. Mata Hari, Christine Granville, Nancy Wake, Betty Pack, Ethel Greenglass to name a few. Although many countries prohibit the active role of women in combat, their involvement in war and espionage is not a recent phenomenon. Yet in many a case, their contribution, sacrifices and courage remain unacknowledged; they were undermined as “the seductive courtesan (Mata Hari) or the martyred nurse” (Walter). Most often, the motivation for women to leave their comfort zones and enter into such roles including terrorism are “religious, political or personal” (Agara, pg:115).

The entry of women spies into espionage fiction simultaneously reflects the changing role of women in society during the twentieth century. It was only towards the end of twentieth century that female spies began to emerge as the protagonist or heroes rather than the marginal love interest of the hero (White, pg:3). Earlier, female characters were often sidelined by the male protagonist and her character “subsumed into the needs and desires of the male hero.(Walters)”. Such women were characterized by their utmost love, devotion and loyalty to the male counterpart; their characters always limited to a minor supporting role in fulfilling the hero’s mission.

Most critical analysis of female spies are also an examination of “nexus of contradictory ideas such as femininity, power, sexuality and national identity” (White, pg:2). Modern female spies disrupt the popular concepts and stereotypes associated with females like inactivity, nonviolence, and subjugation. They observe, plot, take risks, fight and kill if necessary. The immense courage displayed by them is nothing less than that of their male counterparts. In fact, female spies make spy fiction all the more “compelling” to the reader (Thorpe). Recent studies prove that women make better spies than men due to their high emotional intelligence and their ability to multitask. The involvement of feminine skills like disguising and dissimulation make it all the more suitable for women. As White (pg:4) rightly points out, the female spies maps “the shift in the politics of gender” from the twentieth century into the twenty first.

IV. Gender stereotyping

While the term ‘sex’ refers to the biological characteristics that segregates men from women, ‘gender’ signifies the attributes and parts assigned to men and women by society which are considered appropriate for each, primarily based their normally imagined capabilities. The Cambridge English dictionary defines a stereotype as “a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong.” Whether in real life or in fiction, women are more prone to stereotyping than men. They are depicted as weak, dependent, manipulative, and often damsels in distress. Their roles are frequently restricted to homely ones-loving mother, doting wife, obedient daughter, dutiful daughter-in-law etc. Fiction is abundant with such passive characters who lacks opinions, willpower and are merely ‘beautiful’, nothing more. Men on the other hand are represented as strong, independent, lacking in emotion, brave and active. Even though the status of women in society has improved and changed over the years, there is still a preference for traditional and ‘acceptable’ roles especially in literature.

V. Sehmat Khan – the spy

There was nothing in the life of Sehmat that could predict that she would turn out to be one of the finest female spies of our country. She had a traditional, value based and normal upbringing. The Khan’s prioritized patriotism, equality, humanity and honour over anything else. It wasn’t surprising that Sehmat turned out to be a typical traditional young woman – respectful, mature, reserved and obedient. Like any other woman of her age she is full of dreams, passionate (especially about dancing) and even falls in love.

It is frequently observed that behind every female spy/terrorist, there is a male inspiration- father, brother or lover/husband etc. Her father was a major influence in the life of Sehmat. Being a respected figure in society, Sehmat idolized her father for his unbiased outlook, positivity, belief in humanity and problem solving skills. His immense devotion and passion towards his homeland left her in awe. One sees him taking up the role of a spy in Pakistan without the slightest hesitation when approached by RAW though fully aware of the risks. The safety of his motherland becomes his priority and obsession. He skillfully played his role, building relationships with top army personnel, gaining their confidence and thus transferring vital information to India. His role as a spy however remains hidden from his daughter until a later stage. His devotion was such that even when faced with death, his concern was regarding “the mission” rather than his family’s or his own wellbeing as one might expect. His choice for his successor - his only daughter - shocks everyone including the top officials of RAW. It was beyond their comprehension that Hidayat Khan

would dare to put the life of his only daughter at such grave risk. Sehmat, being a woman, does not falter his faith in her to be his successor.

Nothing could prepare Sehmat for the sudden twist of fate in her life. From a normal college going woman she was required to transform into a spy, a role which her father had played to perfection. Her devotion and love for father and her country makes her accept the assignment. Although heartbroken she relents and the reader begins to see the transformation in her. Says Sehmat :

“My father has sacrificed himself for our nation.....and the least I can do is give him peace as he approaches the last phase of his life. Besides, it would be an honour to serve our motherland.”(pg:59)

This meant ending her relationship, leaving her mother and motherland, getting married to the enemy and living among them. Her transition from a normal woman to an extraordinary spy begins with her marriage and her shifting to Pakistan. From a normal young woman that she was one sees her turn into a determined, shrewd and ruthless spy. A transition a bit hard to digest for a reader but justifiable considering her profound love for her motherland and her father. She changes into a woman devoid of emotions and her only focus becomes “the mission”. Prior to her departure to Pakistan she undergoes intense training sessions and acquires the skills for spying. This included extreme physical drills, learning to handle explosives, arms and spying devices. This she does surpassing the expectations of the officials of RAW.

While it not uncommon for women to be engaged in combat, spying involves greater risks. It means living with the enemy, at his homeland, gaining his trust and being alert of danger at every point. Sehmat did this with great skill and expertise, never shying away from taking risks to attain vital information for her country. She quickly sets to task by gaining everyone’s trust especially her father-in-law’s, with her intelligence and problem solving skills. She skillfully conceals her true intentions with the guise of a dutiful daughter –in-law and devoted wife which she plays to perfection. She quickly becomes an integral part of the family, establishing relationships but never forgetting her task at hand. With the clever eyes of a spy, she gains a deep understanding of all the members of the family, especially the male folk, and expertly plots her moves to gain their confidence.

She doesn’t restrict herself to the household chores and boldly moves into the domain of the family business and gives crucial advice in army related affairs to her father- in- law. Diligently and meticulously installing listening devices at every nook and corner of the house, she was on constant vigil to spot crucial information. She intently listened to the meetings held by her father- in-law with his comrades at the bungalow and transmitted vital information across the border using the Morse code equipment.

In order to have better access to classified information, she manages to impress a top ranking officer of the army and secures a promotion for her father-in-law as Major General. Overwhelmed by the abilities of his daughter-in-law, the General begins to discuss operational details with her which she methodically transferred to the intelligence bureau. Sehmat widens her contacts beyond the household and establishes good relationships with many significant people with the hope that they could provide useful information. With every passing day, she plunges deeper and deeper into the task, plotting and planning to gain significant information.

It was during a routine search among her father-in-law’s file that she discovered a plot of Pakistan to attack India’s premier aircraft carrier-INS Vikrant. Considering the grave nature of the information, she wastes no time in transferring the information. However, in her haste she forgets to conceal the Morse code equipment which unfortunately was discovered by the family’s loyal servant Abdul. Comprehending the impending danger to her life and the mission, Sehmat makes a bold move and murders Abdul by hitting him with an army truck. The transformation from a demure and meek young woman to a ruthless spy who goes to any extent to fulfill her mission and safeguard her country, Sehmat’s transition stuns the readers. Responding promptly to Sehmat’s message, INS Vikrant was moved immediately from harm’s way. Abdul manages to arouse some suspicion in the minds of her brother-in-law, Mehboob, with his last words on the death bed which forces Sehmat to kill him also. Realizing the possibility of a war, she vigilantly scans every document that comes to the house and listens keenly to crucial discussions trying to unravel Pakistan’s plot. Her sharp wit, intelligence and courage were nothing less than that of a male spy. Although shaken with the two murders she committed, she holds herself together, as she is aware that a wrong move from her could compromise the safety of her country. She goes beyond the instructions received from the bureau, risking her own life to gain crucial data regarding Pakistan’s moves.

Unfortunately, the Pakistan Army smells trouble and closes in on her. Sensing danger, she doesn't hesitate to point the gun on her husband and extract vital information regarding the plot. One sees her using him as a bait to escape from the Army. To her astounded husband she says:

"I am here to do a job for my country. And I will not let anyone come in the way. Not even you."(pg:132)

She cleverly uses the previously established contact with the wife of a top army official to escape from the hands of the army. Skillfully fooling the lady, she manages to withdraw the army personnel from her house. To the amazement of the intelligence officers, she even escapes unhurt from a bomb blast.

Sehmat's sacrifice, courage and astounding espionage skills helped India to combat the naval attack of Pakistan and saved many lives. On completion of her mission, she is brought back safely to India where she receives a hero's welcome amidst a small gathering. She refuses to be acknowledged for her bravery opts for a quiet life in Maler Kotla which was the hometown of Abdul. She undergoes severe trauma and withdraws into a shell. The murders she committed, even though for the sake for her country weighs down on her. In this traumatic stage, she even refuses to acknowledge her mother, her ex-lover and more importantly her son. One sees her devoid of any feminine or motherly instincts at this point. It was religion which finally offered her some solace and helped her to ease the burden.

Post her traumatic stage, Sehmat evolves into an enigmatic figure in the village. For the women of the village, she was a savior, fighting for their rights and dignity. She became the last word in solving issues in the village with her "steely resolve and uncanny intelligence"(pg:x). Her arrival at Maler Kotla transforms it into a cleaner place with improved amenities. Like her father, she doesn't hesitate to dedicate her only child to the nation. When he joins the army, she says:

"There is no greater reward than to live and die for your country, knowing that you have done your part."(pg:xiii)

She dies quietly, unsung and unrewarded for the uncanny courage and resolve she displayed in safe guarding her country.

VI. Conclusion

Sikka in his novel, calling Sehmat, realistically depicts the evolution of a normal college going woman into a fine spy - a role not so commonly assigned to women. While the initial part of the work paints a picture of her as typical young Indian woman with feminine attributes, the latter shatters the image. What Sehmat did for the country with her bravery, selflessness and sacrifice was nothing less than that of what one could have expected from a male. In doing so, Sikka rebuilds and deconstructs the female stereotype in fiction. The 'new' female is bold, ruthless, strong, intelligent, and capable; never behind the men but matches his steps with confidence.

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