

Original Research Article

## The Portrayal of Women in Jaishankar Prasad's Plays

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### ABSTRACT

Jai Shankar Prasad is the most celebrated personality of modern Hindi literature who belonged to the Chhayawad/svacchandatavada called as Romantic era, which gave rise to a new facelift in Hindi literature and Hindi theatre. He was an excellent Indian poet, novelist and dramatist. He was very much influenced by the Vedas, Indian Philosophy and culture, which was very well portrayed in his works. He had mixed up art and philosophy in his writings. As we say Literature reflects the images of the society and portrays human life through its characters, Prasad's plays have witnessed the role of women evolving through ages. Jai Shankar Prasad has chosen the title of his writings with different names which ranges from the romantic to the nationalistic. Through his writings, he became famous which lead him to win so many awards in the period of Indian independence movement. He has shown the life history of many great personalities of ancient India through his Dramas. His dramas proved to be the most pioneering ones in Hindi literature. All his plays displayed a vivid range of social, political and personal issues which were prevalent in the society during his times. Portrayal of women in literature was unusual during his times, but Jaishankar Prasad was well known for portraying women in the centre stage which not only glorified them but dignified them too. The women in his plays are individuals who in her own way, are independent, self-sufficient and unconventional.

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### Introduction

The era of Romanticism was the age of women in glory. In the Bharatendu era, the respect towards women and women's empowerment was reflected, but this was glorified in the era of svacchandatavada (Romanticism) in Hindi literature. In the field of social and political sphere, women started to show their mark which inspired the prominent signature of Hindi literature, Jaishankar Prasad who through his plays dignified the status of women. In other words, we can say that female characters played a key role in all his plays.

Jaishankar Prasad composed a total of 11 plays in which he has done an unprecedented depiction of the female character. In terms of the chronological order, the plays can be divided into three periods: First period (1910-15- from Sajjan to Rajyashri), Second period (1921-26 - Visakh to Janmayjaay ka nag yagna), third period (1927 - 33 - Skandgupta-to Dhruvswamini). The creation of female characters of these plays is grand and unique than male characters. Looking at the woman's intensity, psychology, sensitization and her problems have been the centre of Prasad's plays. His woman is the store house of all human qualities such as compassion, service, reverence, penance, sweetness.

Prasad's feminine spirit is the result of the study of Indian texts. It is the definite notion of the study of various Vedic, Vaishnava and Shaiva literature. Prasad's feminine emotion is influenced by the ideal and reformist tendencies. In the creation of female characters Prasad has shown amazing skills. Their representation has been more successful than male characters. The best part of the female characters that he portrays is emotionalism, sacrifice, service, dignity, and the ability to sacrifice everything in life. The characters that he presents has two shades one, a picture of a brutal malicious woman with furious temperament, and the other, picture of a women who arise after being distorted by the male characters, becomes alert and fight for their rights.

Seeing the injustice, atrocity, pathetic, and futuristic position of women in the social system, and the cruelty they face at the hands of men, Prasad broke away many ancient beliefs and traditions prevalent in his era and introduced women with a new image. Prasad's play thus brings the feminine character who are aware of their responsibilities and position in the society. He has created the female characters of his plays with great care. They were influenced by the age-old ideas. Ancient history was the building block of all his plays and through these Prasad wanted to find solutions to the problems that are present even in the present era. His female characters are full of lofty expressions and are conscious of their rights. They gave importance to freedom of the soul by preserving the cultural pride. They do not burden the society, but made a personality by being independent, without leaving the traditions that they were brought up in, and stood in front of us in the new form. In presenting their characterization, Prasad has understood their feelings by going into the depths of their heart, which helped him in expressing their true feelings and emotions.

### Methodology

The present study analyses the plays of the famous playwright, Jai Shankar Prasad in portraying the female understanding and ideology. Jai Shankar Prasad, depicted women as strong and glorified. He became famous for his strong portrayals of women. To do these the plays of the writer with strong feminine characters are going to be concentrated on descriptively and systematically.

### Discussion

All female characters have abundance of form and elegance, in whom all emotions are infused. These characters have compatibility in the age-old contexts. There are many female characters in his plays, who present the reality of life. There are few characters who showcase the common weaknesses present in women like selfishness, jealousy and ego. There is no shortage of female characters in his plays. These characters are the representations of unity and national sentiment. They not only are the inspiration to men, but they also actively participate in the political conflicts and wars taking place for national interests. Normal activities are visible in female characters such as *Draupadi*, *Dasi*, and *Karniliyah*. '*Rajashree*', is a character who is represented as a pious and a devoted wife and a forsaking Kshatriya. In the play titled '*Vishak*' the attraction of the enthusiastic heroic youth like Vishak is visible to women like *Chandralekha*, and *Iravati*. Prasad has entrusted the responsibility of protection of women's existence in the hands of this young man. In the play '*Ajatashatru*' female characters displayed by *Vasavi*, *Padmavati*, *Chhalna*, *Shaktimati*, *Mallika*, and *Bajira* sends the message of women empowerment.

In '*Janmayjaay ka nag yagna*', women like *Vipusthma*, *Manimala*, *Sarma*, *Mansa* etc. have represented themselves as the best examples who shoulder the responsibilities equally along with men in showing the national awareness and emotion. The playwright has tried to explain the present context through the characters like *Kamna*, *Leela*, and *Vanlakshmi* in the symbolic drama '*Kamna*', and in the other end in the plays like '*SkandGupta*' there is a message of the golden era of the Gupta period. *Devaki*, *Rama*, *Kamala*, *Devasena*, *Jayala* are the best examples portraying women's existence. *Chandragupta* is a unique play of playwright Prasad wherein we can find the direct involvement of women in the national integration and struggle. The characters of this drama *Alka*, *Kalyani*, *Malvika*, *Cornelia* are the criterion of pride. On the other hand, in the drama '*Dhruśwamini*', *Dhruśwamini* and *Mandakini* are exploited by males as an object of entertainment and property to be gifted to others and later on we see that the women oppose these men.

Prasad has got more success in characterizing a person. He has been framing the female caste on a huge canvas in a diverse way. Through them, Prasad has defined the social and political life. These characters have been able to express the feelings of love and culture, love and nature, in a very subtle way. In his plays, females are depicted both in historical and fictional background. Prasad has given momentum to the characteristic development of the woman.

In the play '*Ajatashatru*', Emperor of Magadha's eldest queen *Vasavi* is simple, soft-spoken by nature, kind hearted woman, but is a woman aware of her rights. *Devasena* is the backbone of '*Skandagupta*', a hero dedicated to serve the nation. The female character *Alka* in the play '*Chandragupta*' is an inspiring woman who set norms for women empowerment throughout the play. So is Selucues daughter *Cornelia* who establishes herself by bringing in the concern of humanism in her father by removing the spirit of war. She also by displays unwavering faith in Indian culture. '*Dhruvswamini*' is a play which showcases the problems that women face and also portrays women empowerment. This play presents the helplessness and the suffocation that Indian women face in her life, and also features woman who attempt suicide to preserve her femininity in the first half of the play. The second part shows Dhruvswamini showing her wrath against men like Ramgupt and Shikrswami, by challenging them and inspiring the world through the social values. She says that "If men cannot save the dignity of women in their clan, then they cannot even sell her." ("yadi purush varg apane kul kee maryaada naaree ka gaurav nahin bacha sakate to use bech bhee nahin sakate" –Dhruvaswamini)

In the play '*Janmayjaay ka nag yagna*' Ved's young wife, is hostile towards *Vasavi*. The second wife *Damini* is in love with the disciple Utank. But later, in the play we can see that Prasad has tried to bring in a change in the characters and also connect these characters with the main stream of society. *Vanalakshmi*, *Leila*, *lalsa* the characters of the play '*kamna*', *Banalatha*, *Premlatha* the characters of the one act play '*ekghunt*' are allegorical. Prasad has depicted the materialistic women through *Kamna*, *Leela* and *Lalsa* and on the other hand has raised the problems of unrestrained love after marriage through *Vanlatha* and *Premlatha*.

Prasad has portrayed child marriage, unmatched marriage, polygamy etc. in his plays. He has made it clear that the woman, is not a wife or a maid but is a friend and a partner of man. Practice of dowry system is not mentioned in any of Prasad's plays, but there is an indication of this system in the play '*Ajatashatru*'. In the play '*Skandgupta*' *Devsena* says in one place - "People will say that Devsena is being married to Malva." (Log kahenge ki maalav de kar Devasena ka vivaah kiya ja raha hai –Skandgupta (P.96)

His plays mentioned about divorce and remarriage, a great message for women in today's society. The marriage of Ramgupta and Dhruvswamini in '*Dhruvswamini*' is an example of unmatched marriage, which Prasad has opposed. Prasad has dared to mention about broken relationships during his era itself. Separation with an unworthy husband has been mentioned in this play, wherein many situations are given by Jaishankar Prasad through the character Purohit where he says that a person like Ramgupt who is an ineffective and effeminate king, so Ramgupta has no right over Dhruvswamini. The remarriage of Chandragupta and Dhruvswamini points to Prasad's excellent thinking. This shows how Prasad has successfully introduced radical feminist thoughts to the Indian society by granting permission to divorce in his play. Though remarriage of widows were legally permitted under the Act of 1856, it was not accepted and practiced in Indian society. By introducing the remarriage of Dhruvswamini with Chandragupta, Prasad attempted to socialize the above Act and tried to introduce radical changes to the society. Inter caste marriages have also been supported by Chandragupta. Prasad through his characters has also opposed the practice of polygamy. When Shakraj sends a message to Ramgupta that if he sends Dhruvswamini as a gift to Shakraj he will not conquer his country. Prasad emphasized that women were treated as the property of men in Gupta period. It is opposed by kmaand, Mihirdev who says to Shakaraj: "This will be your tyranny against your future wife." Jaishankar Prasad has criticized polygamy and women's condition under patriarchal dominance which caused domestic oppression of women through this play.

Participation of women in the Indian independence movement has been active. Prasad has portrayed woman as a woman with a political sensation playing with fire through his plays by bringing them out from her seclusion of her

house. *Alka* the character from the play *Chandragupta*, reveals her independent personality by becoming a heroic ally. *Devsena*, *Mandakini*, *Dhruvswamini* etc; are also the characters containing indomitable and political sensitivities. The best example of women empowerment and awakening has been portrayed through these characters.

Establishing the feminine personality, is very well mentioned in the play '*Ajatshatru*' where '*shaktimati*' express: 'If a man can do these things, then why should not women? Do women not have their own existence? Is everything owned by women, alms got from men? What right does someone have to ill – treat me like this?' (Yadi purush in kaamon ko kar sakata hai to striyaan kyon na kare? kya unhe nantah karan nahin hain. kya striyaan apana kuch astitv nahin rakhatee? kya striyaan ka sab kuchh purushon kee krpa se milee huee bhiksha maatr hain? mujhe is tarah padachyut karan ka kisee ko kya adhikaar hai? *Ajatashatru* p.123-124). The heroine of *Dhruvswamini* familiarizes the readers about the age consciousness, saying that she is not the cool gem and gift to be presented to others."

"*Her father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth, and her sons protect [her] in old age; a woman is never to be left unprotected.*" (*Pitā rakṣati kaumāre bhartā rakṣati yauvane | rakṣanti sthavire putrāna strī svātantryam na arhati*). This line from *The Manu Smriti* or *Laws of Manu* is the best example for women's position followed in Indian culture, where women is always dependent on her father, husband and son from birth to death. Prasad through his writings has broken this shackle and never accepts it and challenged these thoughts. His canons have showcased women in all the public domains which was meant only for men, where the playwright has honoured the women with their fundamental talents and skills. Through the female characters like *Alka* and *Dhruvswamini*, Jaishankar Prasad presents women shining in the field of politics who are the representatives of empowerment and independent female characters. Their purpose is to present human values of great ideals through women's life. In the present - day situation where we see a conflict environment, Prasad's approach towards women is laudable. Presentation of such strong feminine characters through his plays is a healthy mode for the modern women, to know her and her strength in order to create a harmonious situation in the society with the society.

"*Yatra naryastu pujoyente ramante tater devta:*" This line from the Vedas says that where women are worshipped the gods abode there, indicates that the woman had all the rights. She had the right to make decisions in society. But over the time, this mantra lost its importance and woman was considered as an object and the property of man. Reflection of this plight and its redemption was the demand of time. Keeping this in mind, Prasad tried to examine women from various angles. Prasad has shown this through *Vishakhi's* request for *Sarma* and *Devasena* in *Skandagupta*. In '*Dhruvswamini*', Prasad presented the spirit of woman's plight and deliverance, demanding the respect and rights of a woman in a clear word. There is a sense of freedom in presenting, women - free from exploitation and injustice. Therefore, not only does he want to keep his personality free, but free women from this chain of injustice, which is an attempt to end this act which women has been subjected for years.

In the play *Rajshri*, *Rajshri* is imprisoned by *Dev Gupta* present a good example of women - malady and women salvation. On the other hand, *Manasa* the character from *Janmayjaay ka nag yagna'* she portrays her situation to *Sarma*, "I have offered my youth to the elderly ascetic sage for the welfare of Nag caste. Inspired by the love towards religion and caste, I have inflicted this atrocity on myself." (Main ne naag jaati ke kalyaan keliye apana yauvan evan vrddh tapasvee rishi ko arpit kar diya hai | keval jaateey prem se prerit hokar main ne apane oopar yah atyaachaar kiya hai |" *Janmayjaay ka nag yagna'* Pg.15) On the other hand, there is also context of women's emancipation. If women do not mention their point of view, then the cruelty happening to her cannot be presented to the world.

In the drama *Ajatashatru*, Prasad has shown how woman herself exploit woman which is a problem prevailing in the present-day scenario. *Padmavati* is exploited by *Vasavi* and *Magandhi* by cheating. Keeping a baby snake in the Veena *Magandhi* try to trap *Padmavati*. In the other hand in the same drama, we see how women suffer due to polygamy. In *Mallika's* words - "It is the duty of women to suppress the cruel men gently and compassionately,

they need to be educated by women - they must learn the lessons of affection, coldness, tolerance and virtuousness. This is our duty." ("striyon ka kartavy hai ki paashaavavrti vaale kroorakarma purushon ko komal aur karuna lupt karen, kathon paurush ke anantar unhen shiksha kee aavashyakata hai – use sneh, sheetalata, sahanasheelata aur sadaachaar ka paath unhen striyon se hee seekhana hoga | yah hamaara kartavy hai. Ajatshatru, Pg.121). Prasad ji spirit on women salvation is best example here. Women's misery and women exploitation have been mentioned in Vishakha. The atrocities on women have been presented by the playwright through *Chandralekha*. Even today, woman is prone to these atrocities and the best example who depict this are *Chandralekha*, *Iravati* and *the Queen*.

Chandragupta drama, mentions about woman's misery and also women empowerment. *Alka*, *Malvika*, *Kalyani* etc. are characters play a key role in national integration and also represent the progressive woman. Woman malady has been a cause of concern in every age. Prasad says that the only solution is to be educated and financially self-reliant which he has mentioned through his characters. So, he has emphasized on women's education. Working in the council under the supervision of women, learning Indian philosophy and Indian music in Kanneliya's ashram, by *Cornelia*, *Devasen's* proficiency in music, playing Veena by *Padmavati* etc. are very excellent examples of women's education for her development and awakening.

Prasad was very distressed by looking at the status of women in society. Through his plays, Prasad inspires women to step out of the house and not be confined in the four walls of the house. With the help of characters like *Mallika*, *Devsena*, he points out to women that she should not be constrained to any area but has to explore working in the wider areas of life. Through his plays, he has expressed the changing concept of women. He has given woman an independent personality, by not depending on any one or seeking anyone's favour or affection. He also shows that she has the rights like man while demanding, a divorce and remarriage and question polygamy. The playwright has tried to warn her at every juncture about her freedom and rights.

In today's era where we talk of women empowerment, we will know that even today the situation is same as it was during the time of Prasad. Even today, in our society, girl child is considered a burden. Today Women has showed her mark on every area but the mind-set of the male-dominated society has not yet changed. Even today, he is the patriarch of dowry practices, domestic violence and polygamy. Prasad appeals to change our thinking through his plays and believes that there is a need for renaissance in society.

## Conclusion

Prasad's sole goal was to destroy the ill-evils prevalent in the society and bring back the virtues of society and establish a healthy and prosperous society. By linking the past with the present, the importance of renaissance in the society has been pointed out. It can be said that all women character of Prasad are embodiment of moral courage, fraternity and skill, and have the ability to sacrifice everything and be an ideal role. Undoubtedly, we can say that Prasad has given a breathing space to Hindi literature by incorporating this fact through the faces of history. All his female characters are present with all their softness, weaknesses, emotions, but are inspiration to the society. Women who relied on man, was sculpted as an image of independent and self – reliant woman by Prasad. Prasad ji even being a male writer Prasad successfully conveys women's psychology, especially their deeper feelings and he also tried to introduce radical ideas regarding feminism to the Indian society, which is highly believed to be patriarchal domain of men. Therefore, Prasad has said:

"Oh woman! You are honor personified, under the silver mountain of faith, Flow you, like a river of ambrosia, on this beautiful earth." (naaree! tum keval shraddha ho vishvaas – rajat –naag pagatal mein piyush – srot baha karo jeevan ke sundar samatal mein |" Kamayani, *lajja sarg*, Pg.33)

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