

Navigating Self and Society: A Critical Analysis of K. A. Abbas' Bholi

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Abstract

K. A. Abbas's *Bholi* depicts the sad picture of a young girl who becomes a victim of social norms and society that devalues her on account of false discriminatory standards. But in the midst of this profound neglect, this story brings to the fore a powerful paradox that turns out to be a powerful means for her liberation. *Bholi* resorted to complete silence and passive agreement to this incompatible marriage in her society, wherein she is constantly reminded of her traditional role of a daughter whose sole responsibility is to uphold her father's honour at any cost. Her sudden decision not to marry Bishamber is not to be seen as her personal choice or rejection of a groom; it is to be seen as a complete rejection of the age-old patriarchal system that merely treats women as objects of transaction. The teacher's role is not merely limited to academic lessons, but she stands as a powerful symbol of empathy and an agent of positive change in society through education. The teacher's positive attitude towards *Bholi* instills in her the spirit of self-respect and dignity, which helps her to navigate a space for herself that was denied to her for years by her family and society. *Bholi*'s rejection of the bridegroom at the 'Mandap' in an orthodox society is a powerful and dramatic climax wherein one witnesses a girl's confrontation against societal constraints. Education helps her to choose her own path and navigate personal freedom for herself and thus she becomes the embodiment of a dutiful daughter.

Keywords: *Bholi*, Abbas, Bishamber, Ramlal, Norms, Society, Humanity, Teacher Marginalised, Victimisation, Discriminated.

K. A. Abbas is prominently recognized for his tireless, sincere efforts to bring about positive social change for a progressive purpose through his writings. He remained a prolific short story writer, a journalist, and a filmmaker. His writing stands as one of the most influential voices in 20th-century Indian English literature. His most profound contribution in the field of literature is in the form of short stories and novels, which bring to the fore the brutal realities of poverty, the marginalised figure, and the sheer exploitation of the masses across India. The initial phase of his literary career was marked by the Urdu language. Later on, he turned to translate his literary works into English. In almost all his works, the common man remains the protagonist, and the whole story is woven around his life. Marxist Philosophy had a deep impact on his literary works, which motivated him to raise the voice of the marginalised and exploited, as well as the victims of patriarchy, in his works. In some of his literary works, he exhibits the heroic actions of his ordinary but determined character that, through his undaunted spirit, not only survive but also overcomes all the hurdles in life. One of the critics has rightly remarked, "Abbas has a broader outlook and makes his characters able to rise from their personal and pretty interests to the humanity" (Jain 27).

His characters turn out to be his mouthpiece, who squarely criticize the bad or anything which is inhuman in his contemporary society. Abbas is one of those writers who remained conscious of his contribution to society. He writes in his biography:

At the age of nineteen, I did experience an emotional shock, which did many things to me – it sharpened my perception of happiness and sorrow, it made me revolt against conventional values and codes of morality. It challenged my imagination, and it aroused all my latent powers of self-expression (Abbas 7).

His characters remain the ordinary common man and woman of his society who show determination and heroically fight against the evil and inhuman forces amidst the prevailing age old customs and practices. The influence of Marxist philosophy fuels his mind to raise the women's voice through his characters. Some of his successful movies, such as *Dharti Ke Lal* and *Mera Naam Joker*, and his most celebrated novel *Inquilab*, are appreciated in the field of literature due to the depiction of social realities and the emergence of the idea/concept of 'New Indian'. Some critics have equated Abbas with a social realist writer like Mulk Raj Anand, who remained committed to using literature as a tool for bringing a positive social change and establishing humanity. In his autobiography, K. A. Abbas writes, "I am involved in humanity even as humanity is involved in me, as the seed is born of the tree, and tree is the offspring of the seed" (Abbas 5).

Abbas's short story *Bholi* depicts the story of a young girl Sulekha, the youngest of seven children of Numberdar Ramlal. Sulekha's early life is marked by a head injury, misfortune, and her family's neglect. At the age of ten months, a fall from her cot caused head injury to the child, and she "remained a backward child" (ACSS 57). Therefore, she was labeled 'Bholi,' which means simpleton, by her family members and community. Misfortune does not leave the pretty child, and at the age of two, she had an attack of smallpox, which leaves her face and body "permanently disfigured by deep black pockmarks" (ACSS 57). Bholi becomes an easy target of mockery and teasing by others as she is unable to speak at the age of five, subsequently transforming her into an introverted child. The sheer neglect of Bholi in the household of Numberdar Ramlal adds to the misery and pain of the poor daughter. All societal norms prevailing in a patriarchal society are followed in Ramlal's home. Her parents are not hopeful for her future, and she becomes a victim of sheer neglect in her own home. The author further reveals: "new clothes had never been made for Bholi. The old dresses of her sisters were passed on to her. No one cared to mend or wash her clothes" (ACSS 58). The parents are concerned about the marriageability of their daughters, not their well-being and personal happiness. All children of Ramlal, except Bholi, are physically and mentally healthy. Due to her ugly appearance and foolishness, Ramlal and his wife are worried about her future marriage prospects. This story depicts the sad picture of a young girl who becomes a victim of social norms and society that devalues her on account of false discriminatory standards. Bholi is referred to as a "Dumb Cow" (ACSS 60). She never gets the same care and affection that other children in the family receive. Her ruffled hair is never oiled and combed. This constant negligence and mistreatment seem to be her parents' personal flaws outwardly, but a deep analysis of it tells the readers of such a hollow system wherein a girl's worth is solely measured

by her physical appearance, which determines her future in the marriage market. But in the midst of this profound neglect, this story brings to the fore a powerful paradox that turns out to be a powerful means for her liberation. A “primary school for girls was opened in their village (ACSS 58) when Bholi was just seven years old. The Tehsildar encouraged Ramlal to send his daughters to the school and “set an example to the villagers” (ACSS 58). Ramlal’s consultation with his wife about sending his daughters to school gets an unprecedented reaction: “Are you crazy? If girls go to school, who will marry them?” (ACSS 58). This scene has the reminiscence of the medieval ages. The girls in “medieval India and especially Hindu society were not given formal education. They were given education related to household chores” (Sharma and Kumar194).

Such prejudice against the education of marginalised sex is deeply ingrained in the minds of orthodox women in a family and society. Later on, the couple decides to send her daughter to school with utter callousness. Bholi’s mother unsympathetically says, “Send Bholi to school. As it is, there is little chance of her getting married with her ugly face and lack of sense. Let the teachers at school worry about her” (ACSS 58). After due consideration, Ramlal makes Bholi the only suitable prospect for this educational and social experiment. Though this decision was taken by the couple for their own convenience but inadvertently provides an effective tool to Bholi, which later on paves the way for her liberation and dismantling the others’ control over her life also.

One witnesses the complete transformation of Bholi when her parents get a marriage proposal from Bishamber Nath, a rich grocer from a nearby village. Initially, Ramlal is hesitant to accept Bishamber’s proposal. His concerns are quite apparent when he tells his wife that “he is not so young, you know- almost the same age as I am- and he also limps. Moreover, the children from his first wife are quite grown up” (ACSS 60). Bholi’s mother remains unconcerned about her own daughter and takes it as an opportunity to unburden herself. She convinces Ramlal, as the man is wealthy and he is not “asking for dowry” (ACSS 60), and the man does not know about her “pockmarks and her lack of sense” (ACSS 60). Ramlal instantly agrees to this flawed match as it will be an opportunity for them to offload a daughter whom they consider so ugly and a lifelong burden. Such an attitude of parents brings to the fore the intense public pressure to marry off their daughter as soon as possible. The bubble of hope and happiness gets burst on the wedding day, which exposes the harsh realities of such an arrangement. Bishamber blatantly humiliates the family when he catches sight of Bholi’s pockmarked face. The dark clouds of the dowry system cast its shadow on this marriage ceremony, and the bridegroom refuses to proceed with the marriage. Bishamber brazenly says to his friend, “... If I am to marry her, her father must give me five thousand rupees” (ACSS 60). Ramlal, who is afraid of social stigma and humiliation, places his turban – his honor at Bishamber’s feet” (ACSS 61) and offers two thousand rupees in dowry. Two thousand rupees is not a sufficient amount for a greedy man like Bishamber. With utter callousness and hardheartedness, he says, “No five thousand rupees or we go back. Keep your daughter” (ACSS 61). Later on, with tearful eyes and utter helplessness, Ramlal hands over the cash to Bishamber, who instantly agrees to go ahead with the marriage ceremony with an emphatic

voice, “Give me the garland” (ACSS 61). Such an unethical demand highlights the evil of commodification of a daughter whose perceived flaw can easily be monetized by a greedy man in a traditional society that gives undue benefit to men. This scene demonstrates the hollowness of a social custom that not only brings down a woman's dignity but snatches from her personal freedom and choice in such a society wherein women are judged solely on the basis of physical beauty, while a man's flaws are never noticed.

Bholi resorted to complete silence and passive agreement to this incompatible marriage in her society, wherein she is constantly reminded of her traditional role of a daughter whose sole responsibility is to uphold her father's honour at any cost. Bishamber's demand for dowry, public humiliation of her father, and her brazen commodification finally trigger her defiance. Her sudden decision not to marry Bishamber is not to be seen as her personal choice or rejection of a groom; it is to be seen as a complete rejection of the age-old patriarchal system that merely treats women as objects of transaction. In Bholi, Ramlal is the embodiment of orthodox values and reputation, whose world is built on conventional pillars of social shame and false reputation. For him, Bholi's refusal to get married to Bishamber Nath is a brutal attack on his honour, which is his most prized and valid possession. His rage is further fuelled by a fear of social exile, and he accuses her daughter of bringing disgrace to the family, prompting Bholi to say emphatically, “for the sake of your Ijrat, I was willing to marry this lame old man. But I will not have such a mean, greedy and contemptible covered as my husband. I won't I won't I won't” (ACSS 61). People remain wonderstruck by the way Bholi raised voice before all the guests and villagers. This incident also exhibits the deeply ingrained gender discrimination in archetypal Indian rural society, wherein people become deaf and dumb when a daughter, her father, and family members get humiliated and harassed at the hands of such slaves of dowry like Bishamber Nath.

The ensuing silence after Bholi's rebellion deafens the crowd, followed by a torrent of whispers. The wedding hall, which is a place of harmonious celebration, turns out to be a battlefield of moral judgment and values. People, in spite of criticizing Bishamber, start criticizing Bholi, “what a shameless girl! We all thought she was a harmless dumb cow” (ACSS 61). People in society generally expect a girl, a marginalised sex, to bear injustice and discrimination with peace. After watching Bholi's rebellion, Bishamber Nath goes back with his party, leaving behind Ramlal, whose “head bowed down with the weight of grief and shame” (ACSS 61). Ramlal's grief and shame arise out of the age-old preference of sons over daughters, wherein daughters are deliberately kept illiterate and undervalued. Kate Millet rightly observes that society is “basically an oppressive one, in which all human beings are socialised to strict and limiting sex roles, regardless of their individual potentials” (23).

As per Indian tradition, marriages are celebrated and symbolised as the zenith of familial union. Paradoxically, such social events embody the gender schism in the social liberties of individuals. The bride who is considered ‘prayadhan’ is often ushered into a gilded cage wherein she faces frequent constraints arising out of novel expectations and enforced shift in her identity. Brides' enforced demureness and social expectations act as a systematic expression of subjugation and patriarchal control. In orthodox Indian families, marriage

functions as a social mechanism to marginalize and discipline women, whereas men's preexisting social authority is strongly affirmed. Such partiality against brides is quite visible when an old woman criticizes her, and the guests begin to whisper, "So shameless! so ugly and so shameless" (ACSS 61). Even the girl's father, Ramlal, is also unable to understand her daughter due to social pressure and immediately blames her while shouting, "Bholi, are you crazy? You want to disgrace your family? Have some regard for our Ijrat!" (ACSS 61).

This rejection turns out to be the climax of self-realization of a marginalised girl who is walking into such a life she didn't choose for herself. Her primary conflict remains between being a dutiful daughter and the quest for self-truth or individualism. Overcoming this conflict and navigating a space for herself is not an easy task for a girl who has been conditioned for years to be a dutiful daughter. Her silence has been viewed as her acceptance, but the sudden rejection of Bishamber Nath at the 'mandap' creates an acoustic shockwave in the public. Her accumulated silence finds a voice and challenges the concept of a girl/woman as a possession idealized by the patriarchy since ages. It is rightly said about Abbas that "Events and characters of his fiction are never born out of an emotional vacuum; they are born out of some scolding experiences" (Chelliah 6098).

Bishamber's leaving of the marriage ceremony is the outcome of a rigid and patriarchal social structure deeply embedded within the Indian value system. It is the bride and her family that bear the immediate and lasting bitter consequences of such failure. The return of 'Barat' from the Mandap inflicts profound socio-psychological trauma on the bride. It often casts doubts on her worthiness rather than the groom's. In Indian culture, where marriage is considered central to a woman's identity and security, the failure of the same severely compromise the bride's future marriage prospects and subsequently brings dishonor to the family. Apart from losing social honour, a bride's family faces a monumental loss also. The bride's family's lifelong savings, dowry payments, and wedding expenses are also lost. The return of Bishamber's Barat turns the celebration into a humiliating social spectacle. One of the critics has aptly remarked:

Violence against women is present across the world cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity and age. Violence against women does not simply refer to the physical violence which a woman has to bear, but also verbal abuse, emotional torture, economic deprivation and social disregard (Sharma and Kumar194).

The entire episode strips the characters of their mask and brings to the fore the real prejudiced and gender biased attitude of people against women in Indian rural society.

Bholi's first day at school proves to be the central turning point in her life. Her fearful entry and timidity are dispelled when she hears the words of kindness/the emphatic words from her teacher, whom she has never known. Her teacher sees potential in her that her family always overlooked, and stands by her when her own community is against Bholi. While others mock and ridicule Bholi's stammering, the teacher treats her with kindness and encouragement. The teacher makes sincere efforts to overcome her fear and speech impediment while providing her much needed sense of security that Bholi never received at her home. This positive approach

helps her to speak clearly without stammering, resulting in a burgeoning positive attitude in a marginalised girl. The teacher's role is not merely limited to academic lessons, but she stands as a powerful symbol of empathy and an agent of positive change in society through education. She seems to be the mouthpiece of the author who values individual potential over age old traditional gender roles. The story focuses on the emotional and psychological transformation of a marginalised girl. The teacher's positive attitude towards Bholi instills in her the spirit of self-respect and dignity, which helps her to navigate a space for herself that was denied to her for years by her family and society. The end of the story clearly exhibits that education is a powerful mechanism of acquiring liberation and re-humanization. The teacher, who is watching everything from a distance, feels a "deep satisfaction that an artist feels when he is contemplating the completion of his masterpiece" (ACSS 62) when Bholi asserts her liberty and dignity at the end of the story. The journey from Bholi to Sulekha is the culmination of the teacher's compassionate guidance, patience, and labour.

In *Bholi*, one witnesses the journey of a girl's self-realization who, instead of being defined by others, navigates for herself and her society. Bholi's rejection of the bridegroom at the 'Mandap' in an orthodox society is a powerful and dramatic climax wherein one witnesses a girl's confrontation against societal constraints. From a sociological perspective, this act carries immediate humiliation, deprivation, and loss of relation in a conservative social structure. She gathers courage not only to challenge societal expectations of marriage but also the subservient attitude of society. Her deliberate decision of becoming a teacher and looking after her parents in old age is not an act of compulsion but an act of love, affection, and dignity. Education helps her to choose her own path and navigate personal freedom for herself and thus she becomes the embodiment of a dutiful daughter. The whole scenario in *Bholi* presents a powerful commentary on the modern clash with age-old tradition, focusing on the immense courage required for a woman to choose herself over patriarchal values and prescribed destiny.

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