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Manifestation of Pro-Feminism in Vikas Sharma's Novel 'Ashes and Fire'

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Abstract: *Ashes & Fire*, published in 2022, is another feather in the creative cap of Prof. Vikas Sharma who, being a late bloomer, came to the pitch of writing novel by writing '*Love's Not Time's Fool*' (2021) a well-received novel by the readers. He has penned down one after another novel continuously. He is very open minded, progressive, and courageous enough to deal with the social taboo themes – unconditional love, extramarital affairs, homosexuality, bribes, corruption, dowry, and modernization in India and beyond the country. In his novels, he supports feminism to such an extent that he seems to be a pro-feminist man, who actively advocates feminism and its efforts to bring equality of women with men in every field of life. In most of his novels, the protagonist is a contemporary female character who is proactive in her life and does much better than a male partner. In *Ashes & Fire*, Vikas Sharma delineates the protagonist, Suvidha, who is a feminist, practical, and courageous enough to be rightly compared with Rani Laxmi Bai when the former kills two vagabonds in Ghaziabad and two more gets killed in the prison. Though her husband is murdered in the broad day light, yet she does not loose heart and takes care of her three children very well and established her school as the best school of the city in the male dominated society and becomes an integral part of the five persons group that is sent to Michigan District, America to create harmony, brotherhood, and cooperation between Indians and Americans.

Keywords: Feminist, Pro-feminism, Courage, Equality, Desires, Strength, Progress.

Introduction: The term pro-feminism is often used for men who support the cause of feminism and gender equality in economic, political, cultural, emotional, and social aspects of human life. The male feminists critically oppose the ways in which the women were marginalized and exploited by men in home and society due to gender bias or so-called weaker sex; and supports the feminism movement that was allegedly originated in the 18th century when Mary Wollstonecraft argues for equal rights and education for women in her famous essay '*A Valediction of the Rights of Woman*' (1792) and it takes a vast form in the 19th and 20th century through the works of Betty Friedan, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, French author Simone de Beauvoir etc. There are so many other authors who write for the equality of men and women; the delineation of powerful and bold women character in their works in order to reach the desired goals. This movement of feminism has also been supported by the men authors who try their best to add male voices to feminism and are committed to establish a mindset of the people that women are not to be exploited or objects to be used and throw rather they are essential part of this cosmos where man and women must change their attitude towards gender relations, socio-political and institutional structures.

In the latter half of the 20th century, pro-feminists all around the world started involving in advocating for women rights and other issues associated with feminism. They did not confine

themselves to anti-rape and anti-violence activism, rather extended to challenge the sexualization of women in the media. Vikas Sharma is one of the pro-feminists authors and seems to follow Kenneth Clatterbaugh, Raewyn Connell, Byron Hurt, Robert Jensen and Rob Okun etc. in this matter.

Objective of the Study: This Paper aims at exploring the novel *Ashes & Fire* to find out the pro-feministic concept of delineation the protagonist, Suvidha who represents the mindset of the novelist for gender equalization with unique support to feminism.

Research Method: This study assumes a critical, analytical, and interpretive exploration of Vikas Sharma's *Ashes and Fire*, with primary data derived from close textual analysis of the novel itself. Secondary sources—including scholarly books, research journal articles, chapters from edited volumes, and credible digital archives—have been consulted to gather the necessary information. The research adopts a pro-feminist lens to examine key narrative events, aiming to uncover deeper insights into the socio-cultural tensions, rooted in an ancient androcentric society. Methodologically, the study integrates both basic and applied research paradigms to facilitate a nuanced understanding of feminist and pro-feminist approaches represented in the text.

Main Text: The novel basically weaves the struggleful life of an ordinary girl named Suvidha, the protagonist and a student of English Literature as the writer himself is. She is delineated as a bold minded, courageous, and straightforward lady who handles even the adverse situations, created after the murder of her husband by the criminals in Ghaziabad, with her skillful mind and courage. The novelist makes the complete plot of the story revolve around the struggle and progress of Suvidha, an attractive and beautiful girl, is introduced as a postgraduate student of English literature and ardent follower of the teachings of Lord Buddha and Swami Vivekananda. She obeys her father, Dina Nath/Seth Ji, a staunch follower of Arya Samaj because her mother is no more and her father loves her the most. He is always worried about his daughter as a father and as a mother. He always tries to add strength and morality to her personality as the narrative witnesses him saying, "Take training for self-defense, and there is no need to waste time. If at all any young boy teases you, tell me his name. Rest is my job. (A&F 7) She gets freedom to study as per her choice so she wants to continue her study as a research scholar of Ph.D. She possesses a good sixth sense to identify the intentions of someone that looks at her or notices her. When Samyak Garg, a young engineer, intelligent and appealing, worth trying for, (7) notices her regularly for more than a week, she understands his intentions and takes the lead herself to talk to him regarding their marriage only at the consent of her father. She advises him to come to her home and begs her father for her hand. Samyak belongs to a poor family having only a widow mother, Subhadra, and has completed her studies by taking loan, but now he is a reputed engineer in Govt. department so Suvidha as well her father agrees for the marriage.

The marriage ceremony was managed in Hotel Haritage with Indian traditions at Seth Ji's expenses. He gifted enough jewelry, cash to purchase furniture and other things in Lucknow to Samyak and Suvidha but Samyak's mother Subhadra was not happy with the dowry as she expected for a Govt. engineer. The novelist is pro-feminist but he is also aware of the mindset of an Indian lady, whose son is in Govt. service that he must be given dowry in crores. Though she did not demand anything before marriage yet she craves for materialistic things as dowry. The author is honest enough to support the feminism but also to criticize the dowry system in Indian society. For Subhadra, he writes, "She had a hidden hatred against Seth Ji as dowry had not been given. Samyak failed to convince her as a lot of things had been bought in Lucknow. Surprisingly, she thought that her son bought the car with his own money." (12)

In Lucknow, they enjoy their conjugal relationship happily with lots of love, care, shopping, visiting the historical places, churches, temples, *Bara Imambara*, *chota Imambara*, and art gallery of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah etc. Since she is very beautiful and attractive, some of the colleagues of Samyak, get attracted towards her and make light comments but she ignores as she is committed to her husband and "her prudence never allowed her to mix with such lecherous people." (13) The novelist has delineated her a lady of good character, courage and skilled in Judo techniques that she

cannot tolerate anyone crossing his/her limits with her simplicity and dignity. The author reminds the readers of an event, “When Khayali Ram, a senior engineer, tried to overpower her, she gave such a severe blow to him that he had to take medicine for a week to get cured.” (13) Though after death of her husband, she changes lovers one after another.

Both Suvidha and Samyak were dedicated and committed to each other’s love – physically and spiritually. Very soon, they were blessed with a son name Arshdeep, after twenty months of his birth another son Amandeep was born and after a gap of two years Niharika took birth. She happily enjoyed her life with her children, husband and mother-in-law who was “failed to tolerate the hot weather of Lucknow” (15) She advised the couple to construct a house in Ghaziabad where her brother Sudesh lived and they kept ignoring the idea because Suvidha was pursuing her Ph. D in English literature from G.D.H. College Lucknow but destiny had something else in its womb. Samyak was transferred to Ghaziabad by the chief engineer and it was Seth ji who purchased a bungalow for them in Kavi Nagar and at their hesitation, he made very logical and sensible comment, “All belongs to you both. Either you take it after my death or I give it to you now.” (16)

Samyak and Suvidha have been engaged in loving and caring each other and ignorant to the world outside where he was transferred – Ghaziabad, the then city of crime and criminals like Gang of Jaggu, Mangu, Kashi, Tara and Soni were dominant and engaged in murder, robbery, and extortion money. The criminals thought Samyak a hen that would lay a golden egg every month i.e., one lakh rupees per month to be given to Jaggu gang from his income, “earned by underhand means.” (17) but Samyak was an honest engineer and had no extra income so he denied to pay the extortion money. The criminals went back with warning to come back within three days to take their right so Samyak was upset and the conversation was heard by Suvidha. She has been a courageous under officer in NCC, and trained in shooting also so she decided to save her husband and the city from the terror of Jaggu gang. She knows very well that such type of crime is developed only with the blessings of local police and the police officers will not go against them if Samyak lodges an FIR. She as a true warrior collects the first-hand knowledge about the criminals – their strength, support system, weapons etc. and plans to be executed soon. When they entered her house and hit Samyak’s head with the butt of the pistol, Suvidha as if she were the incarnation of *Maa Kali* starts killing the demons, she “aimed at him (criminal) and first fired at him and then at his companion. Within seconds two vagabonds fell dead.” (19) and the rest three ran away from there. Seth Ji informed the police that he had to fire at the criminal for self-defense. It was a hidden help for the police and a bitter lesson for the criminals some of whom were arrested and sent to prison. But soon, Tara and Soni, disguised as traffic policemen, stopped the car of Samyak for checking. As soon as he opened the glass window, he was shot dead in his head. The killers tried their best to run away but arrested and sent to prison. Samyak’s death was an unexpected tragedy; and means a lot for his family, the city environment, the poor law, police administration and even the home secretary U.P discussed the matter with the Home Minister personally – “No leniency, no softness, no mercy and zero tolerance against criminals.” (20)

Suvidha, though grieved, was a very strong and courageous lady. She was failed to save her husband’s life like Savitri but like modern Savitri, she decided and took revenge of his death by giving bounties to an inspector to kill the murders in the prison. Even Dinanath was not aware of such a courage and pragmatic mindset of her daughter.

In real life also, the novelist may advocate such a brave, bold and determined female character as Suvidha who believes in the solutions of the problems and faces the adverse and critical situations in life. She is all alone to take care of her family but with the blessings of the almighty, her father and her mother-in-law shifted to her house to help her morally and monetarily. She started a life of an obedient daughter and cultured daughter-in-law again within the circle of patriarchal belief systems. She was offered a reputed job in Irrigation Department and another job of her choice in an engineering college at a good salary but her father refused with logical and patriarchal appeal, “you needn’t worry about the financial aspects of the family as I can take care of that easily...these three children need motherly affection and attention and only you can do that.” (25)

Now, the reasons may be so many but she is confined to the boundaries of her home; and the facilities given to her, have curtailed her wings to fly. Her father has assigned specific duties to her as a woman as always happens in male dominated society and the same decided in the Victorian age.

Alferd Lord Tennyson in his poem 'Princess' reflects the androcentric view,

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion (web)

Suvidha, the protagonist of the novel, is not an exception as she is brought up under the guidance of her father who consciously or unconsciously wants Suvidha to follow the duties that the androcentric society has already decided for every woman. Simone de Beauvoir, one of the pioneer feminists, rightly analysis the situation of women in her book 'The Second Sex: "A woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir and one is surprised her horizon is limited; her wings are cut ... she cannot be expected therefore to go beyond herself towards the general interest."' (Beauvoir 660). But her inner strength and dedication for doing something special as a woman does not allow her to be stained in the social chains and boundaries. She focuses her study and competes her Ph.D. and consequently Deenanath hanged the nameplate at the door of the banglow - *Dr. Suvidha Gupta M.A, Ph.D. (English)*. It gives new problems to Deenanath Ji but opportunities and directions to Suvidha's dreams, career, and ideology. On the request of her neighbour friend, Vandana, she starts teaching Vijay Shekhar, who has been selected for U.P.P.C.S. and is now an aspirant for I.A.S., though her father is angry and reminds her of the mistakes committed by Eve in 'Paradise Lost' by John Milton and Miranda in 'The Tempest' by William Shakespeare.

Vijay Shekhar is smart and handsome enough to arose the instinctual desires of Suvidha who at the very first sight thinks of him "Lucky will be the girl who marries him." (A&F 40) He was also interested in her physical charm and amorous advances, and consequently, they savored sex regularly at her home and she is ready to face the music strongly. She wants to make an identity with Vijay so she refuses to take the gold ring and requests him, "Keep this ring as my possession, a lovely gift, to be possessed in future when we marry and officially enjoy our honeymoon, please." (43) Despite her father's disapproval, she happily jumped into a sexual affair with Vijay who is under doubt whether he will marry Suvidha, a widow, having three children because "the status of widowhood is a curse for women in India." (Singh 406)

She does not care for the social taboos and restrictions imposed on the widows in the patriarchal society. Although *sati pratha* is no more a tradition yet a widow is not expected to marry again, to have physical relationship with someone and to adorn herself rather to be alone throughout her life in permanent grief of her husband's death. But she is a lady of modern mindset and like Bapsi Sidhwa, she is very aware of the powers that nature has imparted to women. She has joined a kitty party and enjoys her liberty there also. She has liberty to enjoy Champagne, Vodka or Shaw Wallace Whiskey at any time but with the passes of time, she grows sexually weak and have sexual relationship with so many persons which may indicate "Perhaps she had become a nymphomaniac as she needed a robust man once a week" (A&F 167). Suvidha is an aspirant for her own identity in the society and wants to be happy "like Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Indra Gandhi, Laxmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Mrs. Meineka Gandhi etc.," (46) by engaging herself in some productive work. Vikas Sharma, as a creator of Suvidha, fills her with mental strength to take bold decisions. She, with the help of her father, founds a big school name *Deena Nath I.B. School*, affiliated to C.B.S.E, the most reputed school board and makes her lover a partner in this school. She was in strong love with Vijay Shekhar and most of the time, is found craving for him but when she finds that she is duped by Vijay because he is engaged with Joy Rakhee, she does not mourn for her lover and "she didn't make the phone call to him rather she very, strongly, decides to leave him forever for the sake of her self-respect and dignity. She goes ahead on the path of her career as a founder and runner of her school. She has the support of her father and her mother-in-law and both had a very loving, caring attitude towards Suvidha and her three children who are taught at home by an expert in physics and chemistry named Ganesh Salil who is very much fascinated towards the charming body and appealing physic of Suvidha. She finesses him in such a way that he satisfies her sexual desires and teaches in her school without any complaint. He also agrees to teach two daughters of a gold businessman, Ayush Darshan who has seduced Suvidha in a hotel and has lustrous eyes on her to get married with her.

Suvidha leaves no stone unturned to make her school as the number one school in the city. She has appointed the best teachers in her school and established three huge labs equipped with the modern facilities for doing practical in class 11th and 12th. The daughter of the contemporary District Magistrate, was also the student of her school in class 9th but she was fascinated to see the laboratories and requested her father to meet the school administration for allowing her to practice in the labs. When the D. M. visited her school with any prior information,

Suvidha felt shocked... the D.M. come without any prior notice...she welcomed him with folded hands and said – ‘Sir, you could call me to your office.’

‘No. My daughter has created my interest in your school administration. Somehow find out the possibility of arranging practical classes for students of other classes apart from that of XI and XII. (76)

This is a matter of pride that a D.M. is impressed with the administration and facilities of the school run by a lady and he himself visits her school to verify the facilities of laboratories and suggests to open them for the students of other classes also. She has set an example of excellence not only in the field of studies but also in games. In her school, she has the facility of playing billiards, baseball, gymnasium, badminton, and table tennis etc. and the students of her school team are adding one after feather to her cap. “A.D.M and the D.M. congratulated her on her success as an administrator, and she won the National Award for the best Principal from Rotary International.” (89)

Suvidha does not want to look back in distress and she has decided to achieve one after another target in the field of Education. She, with the help of her father, Ayush and some other partners, is going to start Suvidha Technical Management Institute for the study of all technical and management courses like information technology, artificial intelligence, civil engineering, computer engineering, quantum physics, quantum chemistry, and nano technology etc. She very smartly refuses Vijay Shekhar to get affiliation from his university and with the help of her team members, the esteemed professors, vice-chancellors, she tries her best to get her institute affiliated to any foreign university. “Fortunately, the Vice-Chancellor of Houston University arranged all affiliations from Penn University, U.S.A with security money.” (108) It gives her extreme happiness and she starts flying in the sky of success with the wings of her strength and positive attitude.

She has been selected among the five successful young men and women of 25 to 35 years age, by Rotary International to visit Michigan District for a period of twenty days to create harmony, brotherhood, and cooperation between Indians and Americans. “Rotary Club of Ghaziabad greeted the team members on 16th April 2005” (130) This team reached New York on the 18th morning. Dr. Suvidha and Harsh Pal Harsh, a college professor, stayed in Lincoln Hotel and they enjoyed sexual pleasure in night but it was not a hindrance in her path as she has enjoyed the same with, Vijay Shekhar, Ayush Darshan, Ganesh Salil and Shivender etc. so she “took it casually and then talked about the future of the programme.” (131). She enjoyed there and participated actively in the process of achieving their objectives. She visited several places there and found so many momentary but happy relationships among the members of the group and they treated it quite casual, in contrast to the patriarchal social set up.

Suvidha met some ladies who belong to different sectors and united through Kitty Party, the modern fashion of being socialized. They, being kind and rich, also offered some social services for the needy people. Suvidha, though strict enough in school administration and casual enough in sexual relationship, is kind by heart and she serves the humanity in real sense. She with Monisha visits the beggars’ home and donates sixty woolen pullovers. She is shocked with the pitiable situations of a handicapped beggar who “had either no right hand or no left palm at all.” (70) Some of them were suffering from infections, skin problems and different diseases. She asks herself, “How do they lead a tragic life in this neglected area where flies and mosquitoes had settled permanently.” (71) Some NGOs and self-made groups try to help those beggars and other needy people but Govt. has no suitable plans for these people. Suvidha advised to create a new fund named ‘Medicine for the crippled’ and promised to donate one thousand rupees per month to this newly created fund. Vikas Sharma also supports the concept of Eco-feminism in this novel by showing the pitiable condition of the Hindon river and its surrounding. Krishan Kumar Sharma gives an immense glimpse of the same in his research article. He writes, “The author has depicted the filthy condition of the Hindon river that flows

through Ghaziabad, a city of Uttar Pradesh. It also highlights the mentality of people in preserving natural resources.” (13)

She was doing very well as a role model for so many ladies in the country but her emotional and conjugal life was empty. Everybody be it – Vijay Shekhar, Ganesh Salil, Shivendra and Harsh Pal Harsh – enjoyed only sexual pleasure with her flesh and every time she wants to fill the vacuum of her life, the stability by marrying someone because nobody agrees to marry her except Ayush Darshan who is also a widower. She like Richa, the protagonist in the novel ‘*Love’s Not Time’s Fool*’ (2021) seems to ask herself,

Is a widow everybody’s wife? ... to be wise and prudent and maintain my self-dignity at every cost. For this getting married was essential as social considerations could not be given up forever. (Quoted in K.P. Singh, 406)

She knows very well that social stability is required for a widow or widower and it can be achieved through social institute of marriage, as her father has married Lovely or Laali, a maid in her house and got social and emotional stability. Suvidha with the permission of her inner consciousness and logical sense decides to marry Ayush Darshan and enjoys her conjugal, parental, and professional life happily in the upper echelons of society.

Conclusion:

Vikas Sharma has selected and created his female characters with feministic approach and advocates for gender equality in every field of human life. He is, undoubtedly, a pro-feminist author who delineates his female characters – be it Richa, Suvidha, Sana or so on – with an energy or life force that helps them to face the hegemony and finicalness of the patriarchal society and its taboos. Suvidha, being a lady of feministic approach, former Under Officer of NCC, seems to be more courageous than her husband to face a lot of challenges and adverse situations created by vagabonds in Ghaziabad; she very bravely shoots two of them at sight and others gets murdered in the prison. She overcomes the boundaries set by the androcentric society and followed by her father; and establishes herself as a well-known administrator of school and technical institute. She has a very strong interest in the works of Virginia Woolf and Mary Wollstonecraft that shape her ideology and attitude. Vikas Sharma as a creator, creates her with pro-feministic approach to deal with the situations and circumstances in human life. She does not lose her heart even at the murder of her husband rather moves forward with more power and strength so that she may fly higher in the sky of triumphant success.

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