

Writer in Context

KRISHNA SOBTI

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Body and Sexuality in Krishna Sobti's Novels

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Krishna Sobti is known for making a paradigm shift possible in presenting female protagonists. Her novels demonstrate and acknowledge the diversity of women's lives, experiences and creativity. Her protagonists are women of substance who remain firmly grounded and yet have a persona that glows with the assertion of 'self'. In this essay, I will examine four of her novels: *Daar se Bichhudi (Memory's Daughter)*, *Mitro Marjani (To Hell with You Mitro)*, *Surajmukhi Andhere ke (Sunflowers of the Dark)* and *Ai Ladki (Listen Girl!)*. Each of these novels is complete in itself, and yet each is aligned with the others through the bold portrayal of its female protagonist.

Mitro Marjani, published in 1967, created history by presenting a woman character who asserted her self-consciousness about her body along with projecting her strong sexual urges. This created a tremor in the still waters of the world of Hindi fiction, which had so far only looked at women through the prism of accepted norms of morality. Krishna Sobti's women characters lifted the veil off the patriarchal, stereotypical social structure. These characters are not the deliberate reflections of the author's own will. Instead, in the process of writing, while the author attempts to understand the impulse of life, they come to settle at the tip of the writer's pen, and it is the keen insight of the author that identifies the extraordinary within the ordinary. The writer's comment on *Mitro* is apt for other novels as well: 'Mitro is not simply a test of the writer's boldness, she is a discovery and a challenge too' (Sobti 1991: 183).

Sobti's women characters – Pasho, Mitro, Ratti, Ammu and Ladki (in English, 'girl') – in the previously mentioned novels have a keen awareness of their existence and to an extent each one has redefined herself, both in physical as well as in metaphysical terms. Ammu's statement in *Ai Ladki* echoes the sublime philosophy of Sant Kabir – 'this body is a mere garment. Wear it and you are in this world. Take it off and you're in another world, away from your own!' (Sobti 2002: 21). In the midst of it all stands Mitro's body with its unbridled desires and urges – a puzzle that confronts both, the family and society alike. The body that she considers her strength, and her

confidence that it must evoke admiration in others, become the thorn that pierces the heart of Sardari Lal. His anxiety doubles up at the thought that Mitro revokes her husband's sole right upon her body.

At the time when Krishna Sobti started to write, literary narratives were replete with examples of different stereotypes of women as created and offered by Premchand, Jainendra or Bhagwati Charan Verma. Later, in sync with the modern temper of the 'Nayi Kahani Movement', Sobti's contemporary women writers such as Mannu Bhandari and Usha Priyamvada engage with the issues of the educated and working urban women who find themselves misfits in the family. While the image of an urban woman gets reflected in Ratti of *Surajmukhi Andhere ke* or in the Ladki of *Ai Ladki*, the focus of the author's vision is on the questions of female identity. Krishna Sobti's creativity is suffused with the voice of defiance and a woman's natural 'self' which in no way can be suppressed by existent morality. An intense scrutiny of life, disregard for the traditional dictates of society and an urgency to deal with diverse situations of life are characteristic features present at the core of her novels.

Long before the feminist discourse surfaced on the literary horizon, Krishna Sobti's female protagonists emerged on the literary canvas. Sobti did not ever accept the notion that her writings should be perceived only in the narrow context of the feminist idiom. For her, it was clear that life had different other dimensions as well, with which she fervently engaged as a writer. She believed that self-respecting women had always existed and they needed to be acknowledged. The dignity with which her characters exist in different adverse situations sets them apart from the rest. Though distant from the usual urban middle-class feminism, her women do not imagine themselves as mere victims of patriarchal structures, but as agents of their own lives.

Each of these novels has an enigma of silences to be read, interpreted and understood. I attempt to read the vital presence of woman's body, sexuality and desire as foregrounded by Sobti in her women-centric novels. The dramatic presence of unique characters such as Mitro and Ratti in her fiction have drawn attention to women's experiences of body, pleasure and sexuality. An appropriate critical apparatus required to understand these characters was also called for. Mitro unravels the truth of 'desire' in women usually behind the veil of the so-called cultural and moral cover. The quest of Mitro to realise the meaning of her existence and her bodily aspirations thereof are enough to create an explosion within the existing social fabric governed by the code of tradition, modesty and morality. The opening of the novel is extraordinarily bold. Mitro, assaulted by her husband for her sexual demeanour, is dragged into her sister-in-law's room, where she tears off every piece of clothing from her body and taking the name of her brother-in-law says, 'Banwari says – Mitro, your body is all syrup, pure syrup! I tell the rascal – Yes, and this very syrup breeds armies of venomous serpents to

sting you to death!’ (Sobti 2007b: 17). Her sister-in-law, Suhagwanti, shudders, and she can only maintain, ‘If all women shed their shame like this one, every woman’s body would become a pot of sin’ (Sobti 2007b: 17–18).

She confronts Mitro with a blatant truth about life:

Damn you, Mitro! Dead and gone, you wouldn’t even know you were alive once! Such conceit for this body of a woman that perishes by the day? Damn you! There are white and black and wheatish women like you in every home and hearth. All with two hands, two legs, two eyes and two breasts, just like yours! Are you a rare species come to grace this house?

(Sobti 2007b: 18)

But Mitro cannot be controlled with such wisdom. She does not hesitate in admitting that she cannot exercise this control over herself. She accepts and owns her passionate desire: ‘Your brother-in-law does not understand my fever. At most, it is once a week or fortnight. And this body of mine has such thirst that I flail like a fish’ (Sobti 2007b: 19). And when her sexual urges are in conflict with the norms laid down for the family, instead of recoiling in shame, she tells herself:

Mitro Rani, let all cares and worries go to your foes. The Potter who made you and sent you into the world to reap all its pleasures, He who is the keeper of the world, will also take care of you.

(Sobti 2007b: 21)

Mitro’s sexuality has been inextricably woven into the novel throughout. Be it her laughter, speech or gesture, emotion or expression, all is but a celebration of her sexuality.

While Hindi literary criticism recognises Krishna Sobti’s representation of female body and desire in terms of a daring expression, in actual terms her focus is on the centrality of the body vis-à-vis the identity of her characters in a variety of ways. She directs our attention to Dhanwanti in *Mitro Marjani*, who is floored at the sight of her tall and handsome sons. ‘As she came out into the courtyard, she caught sight of the two brothers and her eyes lowered instantly. Ram-Ram! Even in such crisis, these shameless eyes don’t tire of adoring these tall, robust sons of hers!’ (Sobti 2007b: 12–13).

For Mitro, her body is the first step to realisation of self and identity. She values the body and its desires with almost an animal instinct. She maintains that a man-woman relationship is in straight terms that of a masculine and feminine where the male is not primarily a husband, brother or brother-in-law. Initially, the demands of body for her make more sense than the defined relationships. No wonder she says for the men in the household, ‘Poor unlucky wretches! If they were men indeed, they would have licked

me up, or chewed me alive like lions' (Sobti 2007b: 16). There are many instances in the novel when Mitro takes great pleasure in admiring her own physical beauty: 'She saw herself in the mirror. Taking off her odhni, she spread out her arms and smiled. Strange are the ways of this body. A drop leaves it as unquenched as a sea' (Sobti 2007b: 45).

Even the battered Pasho of *Daar se Bichhudi* does not stop indulging in self-admiration of her flawless skin and looks at her youth and bloom even while her body may have become a site for relentless torture. Ratti too, of *Surajmukhi Andhere ke*, remains caught in the dark 'tunnels' of her body. While the approaches may vary, it cannot be denied that at the core, it is the body that has a well-thought-out and serious focus in these novels. Krishna Sobti has conjoined the issue of female identity with the idea of the assertion of the body that includes intermittent expression of desire, aspiration, sexual pleasure, procreation and any other mode of physical reflection. She depicts the female body as a site for violence and identifies the muted voices of the sexually abused. Her presentation of sexuality is not limited to 'boldness' alone. While addressing the contradictions related to the question of women's identity and the appended moral issues, she opens a rich and serious dialogue, at an altogether new plane, with patriarchy within family.

As one opens Sobti's first published novel *Daar se Bichhudi*, there is a historic statement that defines female lives in the fold of the family: 'If your feet stray even once, your whole life turns to dust' (Sobti 2007a: 122). A woman spends her whole life under the social strictures and moral pressures of having to protect and maintain the 'purity' of her body for respectability within a family.

Family is an institution, squarely responsible for feminising the female. With its demand for a sacrificial role of the woman, it inevitably goes on to divest her of all rights. Mitro's self-consciousness of her body and its urges pierces through the cloak of tradition and morality, thereby raising significant yet unanswered questions – 'This whole business of bearing life . . . if your son sows the seeds, it's a virtue, if another does, a vice!' (Sobti 2007b: 73). With such incisive questions, Mitro succeeds in unravelling the societal conflicts that seethe under the weight of countless social norms regarding the honour of the family. Patriarchy thrives on the basis of the control it extends upon the female body. Men would go to any extent of violence to keep it intact. Ironically, the culture that takes pride in its dealings with the metaphysics of the body and the transcendence from it fails to assign space for the expression of the body. The questions related to women's identity and female sexuality remain perennial to feminist discourse even today. It is as though the deliberately designed patriarchal notions of sexual purity/chastity/honour have become the basis of the traditional family system. Mitro is a challenge for such notions.

Sobti's novel, *Ai Ladki*, also highlights the enduring power of a woman within the family: 'The churning and crushing that a woman endures when

she steps into a new family are no less than the upheavals of an earthquake' (Sobti 2002: 90). However, Sobti never falls short of depicting the value of autonomy in a woman's life. In *Ai Ladki*, after having lived a long life, Ammu says, 'There are pleasures in this world other than the pleasures of bed,' or 'A self-reliant person needs a vast sky and an immeasurable earth' (Sobti 2002: 63). Sometimes the mother feels anxious about her daughter's loneliness in the future, asking her who would she call when the need arises. The daughter categorically replies, 'I won't have the need. But I will respond if someone calls me' (Sobti 2002: 63). The refusal to submit to traditional beliefs is not merely an expression of rejection of social structures but an endeavour to build an alternate view of social circumstances and an attempt to reveal the truths concealed within. In fact, the search for a woman's identity that Krishna Sobti begins to engage with in *Daar se Bichhudi* (1958) reaches its apex with *Ai Ladki* in 1991, in which Ammu's words represent a liberation from all social impositions on woman: 'Ladki, to be yourself is the ultimate, the best' (Sobti 2002: 72). These lines mark the feminist stance of Sobti, which engages with myriad hues of life. She celebrates the family and the community life in her novels. Gurudas of *Mitro Marjani* too acknowledges this: 'Even enmeshed in the web of family life a man is not a loser' (Sobti 2007b: 41). Sobti's women have always coexisted in a larger frame of family and society, and yet they have held their ground and asserted themselves. It is in this context that the debates around Sobti's women need to be reviewed.

In a patriarchal society, the man's desire to possess the female body is most pronounced. But in a woman, 'desire' is not even acknowledged. For a writer to articulate and identify female desire in the Sixties was unprecedented and shocking for both the writers and the critics. Critics had developed no tools till then to review such a phenomenon. The eminent Hindi critic Vishwanath Tripathi decoded Mitro's character as a 'social fact'. He believes that 'to transform this fact into a reality, a morality could be the handiwork of an extremely responsible art'. For him, the story entails an evolutionary dynamism from bodily desire to 'love which is undivided' (Tripathi 2006: 124).

According to another important literary critic, Nirmala Jain, 'while there is a shrill voice of primeval uninhibitedness that speaks in *Mitro Marjani*, yet the story is a retreat into carefully balanced social structures' (Jain 2011: 106). Both do not assign any significance to the bodily desire. They are together in upholding the idea that sexual desires hold meaning that is restricted to the individual self. However, for Mitro it is a question of making a choice, and for the sake of familial stability and its social acceptance, her return to her husband at the close of the novel implies a transformation within herself. Both the critics regard this to be authorial acceptance of societal limits and norms rather than an exercise of individual agency.

Mitro's sexual desires have been located within the precincts of her mother's socially peripheral lifestyle, which remains unrefined and uninhibited.

It is presented in opposition to the notion of morality of the so-called high society. The feminist critic Rohini Aggarwal commented,

If at the core of the writing of *Mitro Marjani*, the objective of the author is to assess the bodily desires of a woman living within a family, then why did she not choose an ordinary Indian woman as her protagonist?

(Aggarwal 2019: 60)

An answer to this question can perhaps be located in Tripathi's essay on *Mitro Marjani*, which highlights the significance of the narrative strategy in the way Mitro's character is situated in the novel.

In this story Mitro epitomizes a blow to the cowardly, self-contained world of the joint family. . . . Mitro is an extraordinary character. No one knows from where she landed in this household, she has turned everything topsy-turvy. Vivacious and with such a bodily presence, she could break a family, madden the husband. . . . There could even be a murder. But by inserting Mitro in such a god-fearing, middle class traditionally ideal family, Krishna Sobti planned for a head-on collision. This collision is very sharp and unceasing. The ever contrary situations remain active throughout the story. The whole story vibrates with this collision.

(Tripathi 2006: 123–124)

However, the author, Krishna Sobti, has argued the same point in a different manner in her following remarks:

Mitro is a deliberate step towards realising the true essence of her being. Both men and women have equal right to experience, respect and embrace their libidinous energy, the source of continuity of all life. In the Gurudas household the churning of Mitro's past, present, and future creates a high-powered jolt that not only amuses or surprises, but also forces one into deep cogitation. The restlessness that Mitro embodies is not just the effervescence of youth but the very essence of one's identity, which is negated by putting women on a pedestal of domesticity. An ode would sum her up as someone who lived by the labour of one's hand, for the pleasures of one's body.

(Sobti 1991: 184)

In the extended domain of feminist literary theory, questions pertaining to body and sexuality have been discussed very seriously and extensively. With the emergence of strong feminist discourses, the woman's legitimate

right over her body has gained ground. The alleged conflict between the politics of body and mind was dismissed, and the authority of body was validated as an indispensable aspect of female identity. With such a perspective, Mitro can be understood better. She can be seen as the one who is challenging the submissive role of a domesticated woman and is eager to establish her identity on her own terms. The French feminist critic Hélène Cixous has argued very persuasively in favour of the independent authority of the body – ‘Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard’ (Cixous n.d: 880). Every word spoken and every breath taken by Mitro is filled with the meaning that her body dictates. Her image that stays beyond the novel is of one who steers clear of the social compunctions and revels in her gaiety in the same manner as Cixous accounts for Medusa in *The Laugh of Medusa* – ‘You only have to look at Medusa straight on to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful and she is laughing’ (Cixous n.d: 885). Mitro demands a similar appreciation. She is beautiful the way she is.

In Krishna Sobti’s fictional writings, Mitro and Ratti represent two divergent expressions of body and sexuality. Mitro’s aspirations are laden with bodily desires. On the other hand, there is Ratti, a victim of sexual abuse in her childhood, who recoils at the slightest touch of the skin. An incident and an episode in childhood has fixed a label on her forever that Ratti is not a good girl. This has come to stay as a knot in Ratti’s life. With age, she may have travelled far from this point, but the remnants of the traumatic experience continue to pull her back from normalcy. While her disposition makes her desirable to her male friends, yet there is something amiss which prevents her from being at ease when she is close to any of them. The pain of sexual abuse sits deeply embedded in her psyche. Sobti, however, does not assign to her an agonising outcry, nor is she pleading for pity. In her childhood, Ratti had only one way of dealing with adverse situations – she would beat up anyone who would tease or rebuke her. There was never a single voice of compassion for her. Be it her father’s disgust writ large on his face or mother’s piercing eyes – all seemed to say, ‘The girls are right you *are* a wicked girl’ (Sobti 2008: 40).

The entire novel is a woman’s search for the truth of her existence, seeking deliverance from the shadow of an experience suffered long ago. When older, Ratti comes in contact with several male friends in whose company she would always cringe from within and stiffen altogether. The angst and desperation within do not necessarily emerge from a psychological complex. Ratti distances herself from all such men who view her only as a body to be owned by them. Ironically, nearly all men who enter her life wish to possess her body. Be it those of her own age like Rohit, Ranjan, Bali, Omi or Sumer or older men like Jagannath and Bhanurao, all are similar. This leaves Ratti convinced that the relationship with them could neither be of sensitivity nor

equality. Emotions for her were important to fulfil the sense of her body. The dark tunnels of her consciousness were lit by Diwakar alone.

The love episode of Diwakar and Ratti is the high point of this novel. The book originally published in Hindi in 1972 carries a description of sexual intercourse between them as an affirmation of Sobti's exemplary writing skills. Language plays a significant role in the context of body and sexuality. The slightest lack of caution in the use of language is bound to tamper with the delicacy of the relationship and raise the question of obscenity. Until then, no woman writer in Hindi had attempted to describe the sexual act so well. In her description, Sobti has carved out a scene in which the body and the transcendence from it are caught within a single frame.

Diwakar bent down over Ratti as if to gather all of her into himself. She caressed his nape, smooth as silk. For an endless moment, Diwakar hung from a fine string, lighter than a breath, connecting him to her. Floating. He closed his eyes and let his fingers stray, undoing the buttons at her throat, mapping her feverish body with his hands.

(Sobti 2008: 96)

The desire of the body to possess another body finds an outstanding imagistic expression wherein the author has used a creative metaphor of a place of worship. 'Steeped in the glow of the fading fire, the room seemed ethereal. And the two of them, two deities on an altar' (Sobti 2008: 96).

At this point, the visages of Mitro and Ratti merge into each other. After a long struggle, they are able to accept the pleasure of their bodies. But then, a woman's desire cannot be understood merely in terms of physical needs. Love, feelings, tenderness and sensitivity together fulfil a woman's desire. In all likelihood, both Mitro's retreat at the end and Ratti's step forward grow out of this aspect. This cannot be perceived as a compromise, nor is it a gesture of helplessness. It is a quest for the inner truth that Sobti is able to weave with tremendous deftness. The characters of the story can never be puppets at the hands of the writer. They are the products of their times and society and are directed by its influence as they tread on the path of their destiny. That is why Krishna Sobti concedes, 'at an unexpected stop, without the writer's permission, Mitro retracts her steps from the threshold of an open vista and turns towards home' (Sobti 1991: 184), or that in the case of Ratti or *Ai Ladki* her pen paused at a point on its own. However, the writer does succeed in pointing her finger out at the socio-cultural structures of relationships built around a women's life. Amidst such complex social constructions, characters such as Mitro and Ratti are lit up with the glow of an inner light. They stand in dignity with their inner courage and hold their heads high.

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