

## Roots of Indian Feminism in Swarnakumari Debi's *The Uprooted Vine*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Women Novelists of the Pre- Independence period provide a true picture of the women in contemporary times. It was for the first time in 19<sup>th</sup> century that the women's issues were raised in India on a large scale and efforts were made to reform the conditions. The burning issues of those times like 'sati', child marriage, female infanticide, widowhood, 'purdah', polygamy, 'devdasi' and lack of education amongst women in society were taken into account. Out of these some of the issues like child marriage, education for women, widowhood and its consequences, polygamy, problems of property rights to women, dowry system, power struggle amongst women in the house due to insecurity etc., have been highlighted through the lives of women portrayed in the novels. Swarnakumari Debi's *The Uprooted Vine* is chosen for study in this research paper.

#### Swarnakumari Debi's The Uprooted Vine

Swarnakumari Debi's The Uprooted Vine is a novel that deals with the Hindu patriarchal system. The female characters of such families were deprived of their rights, exploited as domestic drudges and marginalized to the extent of being denied shelter and maintenance. It is an exploration of gender and familial relationships in the changing society of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novelist uncovers the complicity of women in upholding patriarchy and exploiting it to oppress weaker individuals particularly women. Her novel treats with gentle irony the conflict between the generations, traditional attitudes, personal aspirations, colonial powers and the spirit of nationalism amongst the educated youth. The novel even highlights the need of women's education and empowerment through the story of a woman. The theme of the novel is being discussed below:

Snehalata, an orphan, is brought up by Jagat Babu and his wife along with their own children Charu, a son and Tagar, a daughter. On the one hand she receives warmth, love and care from Jagat Babu but on the other hand she had to suffer under the tyranny of the mistress of the house, Jagat Babu's wife who is known as Mashima in the novel. Snehalata has love for books and has keen interest in studies but is constantly discouraged from studying. Mashima compels her to do housework and stop studying. Snehalata is considered as a burden by Mashima and Jagat Babu's special love for Snehalata makes his wife more uncomfortable. Jagat Babu wishes to fulfil his mother's wish to get Snehalata married to Charu. Mashima feels insecure at the thought that Jagat Babu would give all his property to Snehalata and she would even lose all her powers at home.

In spite of all the protests from Jagat Babu, Mashima, his wife, gets Snehalata married to Kunja Babu's son, Mohan at the age of ten years. This marriage gives her a sense of satisfaction of driving Snehalata away from both Jagat Babu and Charu's life. The marriage happens because of Charu's indecisive nature and his mother's dominance over him. Snehalata is married off with least dowry. Mohan, is pursuing his studies in medicine. He loves Snehalata a lot. But, another dominating and shrewd lady, Jethima, makes Snehalata's life a hell at her in-law's place. Snehalata is ill treated for not bringing enough dowry, she is not allowed to meet her husband and is even denied permission to go to her parent's house. The little emotional and moral support she gets is from her sister-in-law, Kamala. Kamala also suffers at the violence and indifference of her husband towards her and she is ill and weak but she does not get any medical help at her in-law's house.

Snehalata makes efforts to adjust at her in-law's place, but fails. Mohan is blamed by his family of pampering his wife and giving her extra importance. Mohan decides to leave his house along with his wife and finally takes her to Jagat Babu's house. Snehalata stays there and Mohan leaves for Roorkee to pursue his studies. In the same period Tagar's marriage is arranged with Jiban who is Mohan's cousin and who once thought of marrying Snehalata. Snehalata feels happy for Tagar and is busy in her marriage preparations when she receives shocking news of Mohan's death due to some fatal disease. Snehalata's life becomes more

miserable because now as a child widow she has no where to go. She stays at her Jagat Babu's house for some time. Mashima and Tagar hate to have her in the house and they accuse her of wooing Charu and stopping him from getting married to some other girl. Mashima cannot tolerate Charu's inclination towards Snehalata and she speaks ill of her.

Snehalata decides to go to her in-law's place and lead a life of Mohan's widow. She is totally unwelcome at her husband's house. Kishori, Mohan's brother and Kamala's husband behave sweetly with her. Kishori was interested in her share of property which belongs to her for being Mohan's widow. Kishori tries to molest and assault Snehalata physically to suppress her. Snehalata protests and leaves the house to save her sanctity. Later Kishori gets to know about the law which says that if a man dies, when his father is alive, his widow has no share in the property and he loses interest in Snehalata.

Snehalata gets shelter in Jiban's house not because Tagar wishes to help her sister out of love, but because she needs someone in her house to do all the household activities. Tagar loves to spend her time in gossiping and playing cards just like her mother. Jiban has a soft corner for Snehalata and he likes her staying with them. In the beginning Tagar feels insecure because Jiban empathized with Snehalata, but Snehalata's cold response makes her feel secure. Snehalata is dominated by Tagar and faces abuse even if she makes a smallest mistake.

Snehalata returns to her in-law's place for a day when Kamala is on death bed. She breaks down seeing Kamala's condition and asks her to take her along with her for the heavenly abode. Jagat Babu is unaware of the fact that Snehalata has taken shelter in Jiban's house. Jiban unknowingly reveals this to him and even tells him that it was Charu who ditched her after expressing his love for her. Jagat Babu summons Charu who is happily married to Priyatama and has never cared to know about Snehalata's condition. Charu, being in a fix, lies that it was not he but Snehalata who betrayed him; otherwise he was ready to marry her.

Charu's callous behaviour and Jagat Babu's misunderstanding becomes the cause of Snehalata's suicide. She consumes poison and ends her life in Jagat Babu's clinic in his presence. Charu's false allegations break her sanctity and even the faith Jagat Babu had in her. She could not think of living with the blame Charu had put on her and dies of shame and remorse.

The novel has characters like Jagat Babu and Jiban who talk of social reforms. They support the idea of women's education and reformation in legal rights of women in society. They are against child marriages. But the irony is that they fail to implement them even in their own houses. Jiban's mother is denied her share in her husband's property and Jiban is seen fighting for her rights. Snehalata and Tagar are married at the age of ten. Snehalata fails to continue her studies. The heated discussions about social reforms amongst the men in the novel seem to be a fashion of the times as in the end Jagat Babu feels that, had Snehalata not been educated, she would have accepted her fate happily and would not bring about her own downfall and death.

The novel is mainly the story of Snehalata but including all the major and minor characters there are in all six female characters portrayed in the novel. Along with Snehalata the novel has Mashima, Jagatbabu's second wife and Snehalata's step mother, Tagar, Mashima's daughter and Snehalata's step sister, Jagadamba Debi or commonly called as Jethima, elder sister-in-law of Snehalata's father-in-law, Jiban's mother, younger sister-in-law of Snehalata's father-in-law and finally Kamala, Snehalata's sister-in-law. All the major female characters are discussed below:

### **Snehlata**

Snehalata, an orphan, is brought up by Jagat Babu and his wife along with their own children Charu and Tagar. On one hand she receives warmth, love and care from Jagat Babu but on the other hand she had to suffer under the tyranny of the mistress of the house. Snehalata's love for books and her keen interest in studies is encouraged by Jagat Babu but his wife constantly fumes at Snehlata whenever she sees her with books. The mistress of the house remarks at Snehalata's complaint against Tagar for not allowing her to read. She says:

So much fuss about a book! What is the world coming to? As though they will all wear turbans and go to office. I say to her, what is the use of reading so much. You don't have to take up a paid job, but she doesn't listen. It seems she is going to be another Lilavati. (13)

Snehalata is married to Jiban's cousin Mohan at the tender age of ten and her marriage makes her life a hell. In the name of customs and traditions she is constantly tortured mentally and physically by Jethima and her brother-in-law Kishori. Immediately after her marriage she is abused not only for her looks but also for not bringing enough dowries. Women gather around her and scrutinize her. The author writes:

Next, a woman commented on the pale complexion of the bride. Another one held her hand and said that it was soft but the fingers were too long and then proceeded to examine her feet.... The scrutiny was coming to an end when someone held Snehalata by the hand and made her stand up so that they might see her figure. 'She is too thin,' was the general verdict. Now they turned their attention to her jewellery. 'Only four thin bangles and a heavy one,' said one. 'That is next to nothing.'

A young woman lifted Snehalata's veil, examined her throat, and turned away smiling, not considering it worthwhile to comment on the single gold choker she was wearing. Was that any ornament? (53)

Mohan is the only friend of Snehalata at her in-law's home and she is deliberately kept away from him. She is devoid even of marital bliss as her husband is sent to some other town to study. Mohan's concern for his wife leaves him stranded as his father disowns him and denies him the property rights. Mohan makes sincere efforts to give Snehalata a comfortable atmosphere, but fails. The author writes:

Mohan's effort to ease the situation for his wife backfired.... Our country is well known for the oppression of brides but the misery of young husbands is no less acute. The fear of elders or social censure prevents them from openly protesting against the oppression of their wives but they suffer much in isolation and silence. (67)

Just a few years after marriage Mohan dies and Snehalata is left alone in this cruel world. She is given shelter by her father at his place but is never accepted by the mistress of the house and is constantly blamed for luring Charu for marriage. Charu, who has lost his first wife tries to woo Snehalata by his poems and finds solace in her company. But all these advances bring shame to Snehalata as she is abused by her step mother. She says:

Inauspicious wretch! After destroying three families you are now eyeing my precious son? You are trying to trap my innocent boy. (157)

Charu and his father Jagat Babu are the characters who strongly believe that social reforms are necessary and women's condition asks for a change but they fear the reaction from the society. Charu wants to marry Snehalata but avoids taking a stand by saying that Snehalata won't agree for it. Finally Snehalata returns to her in-law's place with all the shame showered on her. Snehalata finds a fellow sufferer in this house and she is Kamala, Kishori's wife. Kamala although is straightforward person and is seen making efforts to retaliate when abused or put to injustice. But still she undergoes suffering for not being able to give birth to a baby boy. Kamala is always ill and the victim of neglect as far as her health is concerned. Snehalata finds comfort being with Kamala and her kids. Kishori, who fears that he would have to part with a share of his property which belongs to Snehalata, tries to control her physically. An instance in the novel goes as follows:

Kishori was standing in the darkness in the room. She quickly tried to get out of the door but Kishori blocked her way and said, 'Where are you going? Am I a toad or a snake that you avoid me like this? What harm have I done you? Boudidi, listen to me. Let me tell you how much I love you...' Snehalata said, 'Go away, Thakurpo. If you don't, I will...' Kishori laughed and said, 'What will you do, Boudidi?' (207)

Snehalata is driven out of the house of her in-laws by Kishori when he comes to know that if a woman became a widow while her father-in-law was alive, she had no right to claim any part of his property. In fact she had no claim to any maintenance either. Jiban's mother gives her shelter. Jiban's earlier passion for Snehalata turns into calm friendship and Tagar also does not fear Snehalata's presence in her house as she knows that her husband, Jiban, has compassion for the unfortunate soul.

Snehalata's end is very touching as she consumes poison and invites her death. She takes this drastic step after she is blamed by Charu and especially Jagat Babu for a sinful act. Snehalata is accused of expressing her love for Charu despite she being a widow. Charu, who talks of social reforms, finds his love for Snehalata a fit of madness and thanks God for saving him from being penniless, homeless and outcaste. Jagat Babu after all the experiences of life becomes staunch Hindu and gets agitated when he hears about social reform. To escape from his father's anger, Charu shows a letter written by Snehalata and puts the blame on Snehalata for breaking her decency and expressing her love for him. She blames herself for her death and says, "It is not a lie. That sinful woman had indeed written this letter. It is all her fault." (245)

The thoughts of women in those times are reflected in a conversation between Jiban and Snehalata. Jiban says:

You women are goddesses, we men are monsters. You deserve to be worshipped and we disregard you at every step. You sacrifice so much for our comfort but we only kick you in return. Our race is in such a sorry state because of our sinful behaviour and yet we are proud of it. (227)

To his remark Snehalata says:

If you talk in this vein it sounds like a mockery. Where did you learn that women's nature is superior to that of men? Women are at the root of all the misery and trouble in this world.... In comparison to men, we don't even seem to be human. (227)

Interestingly, in the epilogue of the novel the author writes that the death of Snehalata made no difference to anyone's life. Everyone lived happily as always because so many Snehalatas die everyday. Jagat Babu and Charu stop talking of social reforms and they can not even tolerate any discussion on it. The author writing about Jagat Babu says:

He is a proper conservative Hindu now. He believes that had Snehalata not been educated, she would have accepted her fate happily and not brought down about her own downfall and death. He is convinced that it was shame and remorse which drove her to commit suicide. Hence Jagat Babu is now wholeheartedly engaged in arresting the changing course of time. (247)

This behaviour of Jagat Babu is probably an effort to turn a deaf ear to his own inner voice which would be cursing him for Snehalata's fate and her sufferings.

### **Mashima**

Mashima is a dominating wife and mother. She is Jagatchandra Chattopadhyay's second wife who is a prosperous gentleman whose father left quite a lot of wealth for him which he enhanced as a successful doctor. She is the mistress of the house, with a plump body, flaunting a big nosering embellished with pearls, who is often bullying her husband and becoming adamant over petty issues like the one related to the seating arrangement of the house or girls wearing jackets over *saris*. She keeps yelling and screaming and even beating her own daughter, Tagar.

Snehalata is a permanent scapegoat and a regular target of Mashima's anger and frustration as she is an adopted child of Jagat Babu. She believes that she is the final authority in all the decisions related to household matters along with the marriages of her children and dislikes interference in them. Playing card games with the neighbourhood women along with the betel leaves ready to relish and flaunting her wealth is her major pastime. All this is accompanied by the talks related to matchmaking and gossiping about neighbours. Her views on modern women are reflected in the following words of the author:

The sight of modern girls wearing just a hint of vermilion, no ring in their noses, and tight-fitting jackets infuriated her. She did not mind sending her daughter to attend religious festivals in an English frock and a bonnet, but she lost her temper if Jagat Babu suggested that the girl could wear a jacket with her sari, for she jumped to the conclusion that Jagat Babu was taking his revenge on her by making her daughter a memsahib. (7)

Mashima's strong hatred for Snehalata forces her to marry off Snehalata at the tender age of ten. She cannot even tolerate Jagat Babu's idea of getting Snehalata married to Charu, his own son. She says, 'See, let me tell you frankly-Charu won't marry her. If you insist on that, I'll hang myself.' (17). When nothing works she ends up crying to impose her decision on her husband. When Mashima realizes that a handsome and eligible boy Jiban and his mother have a soft corner for Snehalata, she immediately decides to marry Tagar with him. She looks for an average middle class family boy for Snehalata and does not give any dowry in her marriage. She even hates Snehalata's love for studies and Jagat Babu's efforts to teach her reading and writing.

When Snehalata returns to her house as a widow, Mashima hates her and blames her of wooing her son Charu who is now a widower. Thus Mashima's hatred for Snehalata is also responsible for Snehalata's tragic end.

### **Tagar**

Tagar is a highly pampered child of Jagat Babu who is plump like her mother and totally disinterested in studies. She has inherited the qualities of her mother and loves to hear juicy gossips. She used to yell and scream at petty things and marrying a rich and handsome man is the only motive of her life. She, just like her mother, loves flattery and gets charged up by her praise. She is throwing tantrums when she is asked by her mother to do something. The mistress's dislike for Snehalata is also inherited by Tagar. She hates Snehalata's love for studies and harasses her by snatching a book from her. She also dislikes her brother, Charu's love and attraction towards Snehalata. Tagar gets married to Jibanchandra who is Snehalata's brother-in-law and a social reformer. Jiban has a secret liking for Snehalata and he even provides shelter to her after her husband's death.

Tagar hates it in the beginning but later she has no objections as Snehalata does all the household activities and even takes care of Tagar's children. Tagar feels free to roam around or sit at her mother's place forgetting her responsibilities at home.

### **Jagdamba Debi (Jethima)**

Jethima or Jagadamba Debi is another strong character of the novel which adversely influences Snehalata's life to a great extent. She is Kunja Babu's elder sister-in-law and Snehalata's aunt-in-law. She is involved in the power struggle in her house. She is highly dominating and cannot tolerate any woman, who tries to overpower her, in her house. Her dominating and rude behaviour can be seen immediately after Snehalata steps into her in-laws' home after marriage. She criticizes Snehalata's looks and later joins other women in commenting on the dowry given to Snehalata by her parents. "What cheap ornaments has the girl been given!" she commented. "Why they bothered to give her even these, I don't understand." (53)

Mohan's special care and support for his wife, Snehalata, enraged Jethima. She blames Snehalata for influencing Mohan's mind and taking him away from his parents. The target of her wrath was Snehalata and even Jiban's mother, who negotiated the match between Mohan and Snehalata. When Mohan defies his father's decision and leaves for Roorkee for further studies she reacts in fury. The author writes:

Jagadamba Debi, whom we know as Jethima, was the veritable goddess Durga in fury, ready to strike Mohan's allies, who had now become her enemies. She waved her arms and exercised her tongue relentlessly, cursing and abusing them. In this she was egged on by her attendants. (72)

Jethima, the elder sister-in-law of Kunja Babu, is respected by him only because she has a claim on one-third of the family property. Jethima's relatives are also very much aware of her rights and thus force her to leave Kunja Babu's house and stay with them, but she knows very well what power she wields in Kunja Babu's house where nothing is done without her permission. She is smart enough to save her share of property even when Kunja Babu's elder son Kishori, tries to steal it from her.

### **Jiban's mother**

Jiban's mother is Kunja Babu's younger sister-in-law who has lost her husband and she stays with her son Jiban in another house. She is deprived of her share of the property which was owned by her husband and has to be content with the monthly allowance sent to her by Kunja Babu. Jiban's mother has neither money nor family support and so she fails to fight for her rights. She has intimacy with the Jagat Babu's family and she dreams to bring Snehalata as Jiban's wife and her daughter-in-law. The reason behind it is that Snehalata is Jagat Babu's favourite child and would bring a big dowry along with her. She often flatters Jagat Babu's wife and keeps her happy. She tries to convince Jiban for marriage with Snehalata, but Jiban is strongly against child marriage. He says, "I trust I shall be able to earn enough money to satisfy you. You don't need to become rich with your daughter-in-law's money." (47)

Mohan's stubborn attitude towards his father and his love for his wife Snehalata brings wrath of Kunja Babu and Jethima not only on Snehalata but also on Jiban's mother who had negotiated Mohan and Snehalata's marriage. Kunja Babu stops the monthly allowance and Jiban's dreams to study abroad are ruined. He has to take up a job to meet the day to day expenses. In this situation Jagat Babu's wife approaches Jiban's mother with the marriage proposal of Tagar for Jiban. Jiban is under the impression that the girl proposed for marriage is Snehalata for whom he has a secret liking and so he agrees for marriage. Thus Jiban's mother gets Jiban married to Tagar simply with the hope to get financial help from Jagat Babu for her legal fight with Kunja Babu to get her share of property.

### **Kamala**

Kamala leaves an impression on the minds of the readers. Kamala is the wife of Kishori, Mohan's brother, and she is the sister-in-law of Snehalata. Kamala's presence is not highlighted even in Snehalata's marriage with Mohan. She surfaces only during the tough times of Snehalata and gives her best to protect her. Although, she herself is ill treated by her husband and is left to suffer along with her children despite her ill health. After Mohan's death Snehalata takes shelter in Jagat Babu's home for a long time. Later she is accused, by Jagat Babu's wife, of wooing her son, Charu, and stopping him from marrying another girl. Thus Snehalata decides to return to her in-law's place and lead a responsible life of Mohan's widow. Once Snehalata expresses her wish to visit her parents and she is stopped by Kishori, saying that he is fighting a case against Jibanda and so she should not visit Jibanda's in-law's house. Just then Kamala interferes and says, 'Then how did you endure the insult all these years when Didi stayed with them? They are her parents; you cannot expect her to stop seeing them.' (203)

The author writes that Kamala is a straightforward person and she is not ready to tolerate any unfairness. Despite being a Bengali wife she always voices her resentment whether it was in front of her husband or even Jethima. The tragedy is that she can't do much due to her ill health, financial dependence and the need to provide shelter to her children. Kamala is aware of her husband's polygamous nature and she sympathizes with Snehalata in her misery when Kishori molests Snehalata. Kamala retaliates when Jethima abuses her parents and denies hearing a single word against them.

Kamala reacts when Kishori drives Snehalata from the house, knowing that Snehalata has no share in the property. She says:

She is made to work all day like a maid for the little food she gets and then you talk like this? It is Didi's bad luck that she has come to stay in your house. Why didn't you let her go when she wanted to and why should she go now? She has as much right to stay here as we do. She has her own share in the property; you cannot chase her out like a cat or a dog. (212)

In reply to this Kishori coolly says that if she really feels so she should prove it and claim her share. Kamala continues to fight for Snehalata's rights and says:

Why should she say all this? I am saying it because it is true. You didn't let her go to Jagat Babu's house earlier, you should be ashamed to send her there now. In any case you should give her the maintenance. Don't you feel bad about forsaking a member of the family. (212)

Kamala's efforts go in vain and Snehalata is driven out of her in-law's house, but she takes courage to express her thoughts in words and dares to speak against her husband and Jethima. She suffers the consequences and dies in isolation without any medical help or care. Snehalata rushes to meet her when she is on the death bed and the author writes:

Snehalata quietly entered the room and stood near Kamala's bed with a trembling heart and tears in her eyes. Kamala opened her eyes and the painful expression on her emaciated face turned into a tranquil one. She said, 'Is that you Didi? You have come after such a long time.' Snehalata sat on the edge of her bed and took Kamala's cold hands into her own. Kamala looked at her helplessly and whispered, 'Didi I am leaving. Please forgive him. He has troubled you so much.' She fell silent and her eyes became glazed. Sneha said tearfully, 'O my sister, where are you going? Take me with you.' (222)

### **Observations**

In India during the Pre-Independence period most of the women did not even realize that they had the right to live, as individual human beings. For whatever happened in their lives they blamed themselves even though the mistakes lay somewhere else. They suffered due to the ill-treatment meted out by the men of their own families and also due to some of the social dogmas. Those who were conservatives even believed that education spoils the girls and they do not need proper school or college education as they were supposed to be within the four walls under the protection of the men of the family. Swarnakumari Debi's The Uprooted Vine presents women characters that represent the women of that period. In this novel Snehalata, Mashima, Tagar, Jethima and Kamala are the samples of the types of women dwelling in that period. The Indian women during that period expected and desired that men should understand their needs and expectations. Even if they were deprived of all their rights and privileges they would not ask for it, they would not even complain about it. The protagonist of this novel is better educated than the women of her time. Even Jagat Babu who is a social reformer thinks that Snehalata's sufferings and tragic end was the consequence of her education. She herself blames her own self for her predicaments.

Mashima represent those women who do not let other women live in peace. Such women plot against the women in their own families and constantly manipulate the men to ill treat them. In this novel, Mashima is prejudiced towards Snehalata and intentionally makes her life miserable. She behaves very strictly with her own daughter, Tagar. In India it was the period when most of the daughters-in-law were tortured by their mothers-in-law and some of the traditional mothers did not spare their own daughters. Mashima's constant nagging, grumbling and ill treatment compels Snehalata to commit suicide. Jethima also belongs to such overpowering women of the time.

Tagar represents the girls of the time who were least interested in studies and spent most of the time thinking about their marriage. They spent most of the time in gossiping and playing cards. As it was expected from the society they trained themselves to be good wives. Tagar was privileged enough to have Snehalata to boss over and she was not even expected to the household work as she had Snehalata for it.

Kamala is a character who grows gradually and asserts her views as she matures. As she witnesses constant oppression of Snehalata she starts supporting her and opposing the oppressor though he is her husband. Kamala like many girls in India dies an untimely death due to the neglect of her husband.

It was a time in which women of India did not dare of talking about freedom of any kind. In fact they were in their cocoons and did not wish to have more than what the men allowed them to have. If at all voices were raised in support of women, it was done by some of the male social reformers.

The Uprooted Vine presents various women characters and all of them have been discussed in this article. The in depth analysis of these women characters reveals that women behaved as they were expected to behave. They were controlled by the women of their families. In the early period the women were highly submissive and did not dare to express their views and desires and therefore there was no question of demanding for their rights. In the slightly later period before Independence the women started gathering courage to demand more freedom and some basic rights but such women were not welcome in the society. When women in the West were very active, regarding the welfare of women, in India women were struggling for their survival.

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