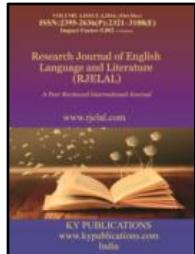


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'CAUGHT BETWEEN THE SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS': A NEW FEMINIST READING OF STEPHANIE MEYER'S *THE TWILIGHT SAGA***HYMA SANTHOSH¹, INDU A S²**¹PG Student, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amritapuri, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita University, India.²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita University, India.**ABSTRACT**

Female identity from time immemorial is linked to the men in a woman's life. Till her marriage her identity remains to be her father's and after getting married she is identified as her husband's. This is the reason why women change their surname to her husband's after marriage. Even the Indian ancient text like the *Manusmriti* holds the view that Girls are supposed to be in the protection of their father when they are children, women must be under the protection of their husband when married and under the protection of her son as widows. In no situations is she allowed to take independent decisions herself. Women are always entangled between the important men in her life whether it is her father, her best friend or her love. Stephenie Meyer, the American novelist became a huge sensation with her publication of *The Twilight Saga*. This popularity brought along with it numerous criticisms also. Whether or not the novel series has literary value continues to be a hotly discussed issue. This paper tries to evaluate *The Twilight Saga* as a woman's choice to choose what she wants in life through the protagonist Bella Swan. Bella's struggle for survival in the new land of Forks and her love for her father Charlie, her best friend Jacob and her love Edward is the main focus in this paper. Meyer has created a 'new woman' through Bella who becomes the 'voice' and 'hero' (more than heroine) of the novel. Through the age old theme of a star crossed couple, the conflict of Bella as an independent woman fearlessly taking each decision of her life and her perspectives with the idea of true love is also analyzed. The paper will then seek to present women's free will as the foremost concept behind New Feminism.

Key Words: New Feminism, New Women, Existentialism, Vampire Fiction

Meyer has made a new branch of Vampire Literature by breaking the tradition concepts of a gothic novel. She takes up the age old theme of the mismatched star-crossed lovers and adds an eerie twist to make it something exciting and new. The narrator of the story is the heroine Bella Swan whose parents are divorced. Her life becomes charged with events when she shifts to Forks to live

with her father Charlie. The struggle for existence is something that she faces from her childhood due to the broken marriage of her parents. This struggle reaches its peak when she meets new people in Forks. What makes the story more interesting is the fact that the predator falls for the prey and that the human falls for the vampire. The common features of any teen romances like kissing, touching and

talking takes on an entirely new meaning as a small mistake would be life threatening. Bella and Edwards struggle to make their relationship work becomes a struggle for survival. "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Thou shalt not eat of it: For in the day that thou eatest thereof Thou shalt surely die" (Genesis2:17).

New Feminism is a movement that is different from Feminism which not only functions against the violence against women but also against male supremacy over women. In the Indian context, the best symbol to understand the idea of New Feminism is the concept of 'Ardhanarishwara' where Lord Shiva is portrayed as half 'Shiva' and half 'Shakti' which denotes that the male and female power is both required in equal amount in order to maintain life. According to New Feminism, neither male nor female is superior as both are designed for different functions which together keep the world alive.

A woman is designed to become the mother and is bestowed with the ability of maternal love and spiritual motherhood. On the other hand, men are designed to be fathers who become mental as well as physical support to their woman in bringing a new life to the world. New Feminism is against the discrimination based on sexes as weak and strong. They believe in the equal superiority of both the sexes. They believe in the institution of marriage, which is not only a communion between two people but also a promise to stand for each other in all hurdles and sufferings. Only when the partners are able to get united forgetting their differences of sex, then only the communion gains meaning. They argue that true feminism concentrates not only on women but also on the family as it is the foundation that promotes women both psychologically and socially. When other forms of feminism fight for the domination and power of women, New Feminism holds love and care superior to power and domination. Only when men and women share the bond of love and affection forgetting bitterness of power and domination, a true partnership arises. Another principle concerned with new feminism is that true freedom comes only when men and women are free to perform whatever they are emotionally and physically

structured to perform. Last but not the least, they consider fertility as a natural phenomenon which the women and men must respect rather than taking contraceptives to be cured from.

Stephanie Meyer absorbed the theme of the novel in her dream. She dreamed of a young girl who was sitting in a beautiful landscape with a heavenly looking vampire. They were talking about the threats that their relationship is facing. Meyer was so much into the dream that she could even decipher the intense feelings of the girl whose desires were both life giving and life threatening. Bella and Edward was borne out of this dream and the dream in reality was controversial at many points as the readers regarded Bella as a weak heroine. She was considered the girl who was someone who lived under the protection of her Vampire boyfriend. But the reality is Bella is a strong heroine as her biggest threat was her boyfriend itself and she chose a life of risk between a vampire lover and ware wolf best friend.

Meyer in her novel series envelops all these aspects of new feminism creating a new type of fiction. The protagonist Bella Swan is a 'new women' who arises to be a successful survivor wiping out all her weaknesses and obstacles that tried to weigh her down to be the 'typical sufferer kind of woman'. But instead of getting blinded by them she rises from her own ashes like a phoenix as more powerful and victorious. Identity has always been a problem for Bella. Even though she is closer to her mother Renee she has the character of her father who likes to lead a lonely life. Falling in love is the method that she chooses to escape from her boring life. Both Edward and Jacob are the only people who make her feel alive and their difference from the normal humans attract her to them. Edward is a vampire and Jacob is a werewolf, they are the born enemies but Bella makes a bond between the two demons with her magic of love and friendship. Her life was always governed by free will and her existential crisis gave rise to this attitude. This is what forces her to give up her life as a human and embrace the life of a vampire.

The novel is constructed cleverly by employing it a main plot and sub-plot. The relationship between Edward and Bella becomes the

main plot and Bella's relationship with Jacob becomes the sub-plot. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two plots. The two plots supports and enriches one another. Bella becomes the common heroine of both the plots. She balances both the plots equally by being the backbone of the relationship with her lover Edward and her best friend Jacob. Both of them are equivalent forces belonging to the extremes and needs a stronger force to balance them. This force is provided by the female protagonist Bella. She even acts as a catalyst that speeds up the action of the novel. She itself is the source and target of the incidents and it becomes a milestone in her life to become the center of all the action.

As a preface to the first book of the series Bella's words throw light upon her attitude to life through her words;

"I'd never given much thought to how I would die-though I'd have reason enough in the last few months...surely it was a good way to die in the place of someone else, someone I loved..I knew that if I'd never gone to Forks, I wouldn't be facing death now"(1).

Bella's shifting from sunny Phoenix to cold and rainy Forks leaving her mother was not easy for her but she had no other option. Her father Charlie was not comfortable with expressing his emotions and Bella inherited that from him. Physically or mentally Bella was not able to fit in Forks. She found herself caged beneath the cloudy sky of Forks and admits that it was literally her personal hell on earth. Her reading of the famous work *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte very well suggests that she had the mental stage of Catherine Earnshaw. Bella can also be compared to Catherine who was trapped between the love of Heathcliff and Linton. Here Bella is trapped between Edward and Jacob. Edward is always an enigma for Bella and it is this enigma that makes her attracted towards him. In the beginning of the novel she feels caught between her father, lover and best friend but as she gets more attached to them she finds that they respect and value her decisions in spite of being a woman.

Bella is a strong believer of the equality of sexes. This is well evident by her words in *Twilight*:

"I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships. But it just seems logical...a man and woman have to be somewhat equal...as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally" (473)

These words prove true in the book *New Moon*. In order to save Bella's life from the Volturi, Edward decides to give his life by doing the forbidden act. Bella reaches on time in order to save her love from being killed and requests the Volturi to kill her instead of him. Their extreme unalloyed love for each other forgetting all their differences makes the Volturi give a second chance to them. Edward's intense love and acceptance for Bella is well seen when he says in *New Moon*:

Before you, Bella, my life was like a moonless night. Very dark, but there were stars - points of light and reason... And then you shot across my sky like a meteor. Suddenly everything was on fire; there was brilliancy, there was beauty. When you were gone, when the meteor had fallen over the horizon, everything went black. nothing had changed, but my eyes were blinded by light. I couldn't see the stars anymore. And there was no more reason for anything (514)

Even though she is tested by destiny, she never accepts her defeat. Her emergence as a true heroine happens in *Breaking Dawn*. She decides to get married to Edward and become his family even after knowing that he is a vampire. Edward also accepts her as she is even after knowing that he must be very careful to be with her as even a small mistake can become fatal. Their wedding happens in the perfect religious manner where even hatred is changed due to the overpowering impact of love as the werewolves, humans and vampires celebrate together. Jacob is hurt by her decision to marry Edward but still he accepts her decision like a typical friend who values his best friend's happiness over his own sadness.

It is not Bella who is addicted to Edward or Jacob but Bella becomes a drug for Edward as well as Jacob without which they cannot exist. She is powerful enough being the embodiment of womanhood who can equal man in all respects. She is ready to face anything and everything in her life without over thinking much about the risks that are hidden beneath them.

Bella's pregnancy becomes a matter of concern for Edward and his family but like a true New Feminist, Bella does not take any contraceptives to abort the child. She accepts their fertility as natural and decides to give birth to the life that is blooming in her womb even after knowing that this may prove fatal to her. In *Breaking Dawn* she says, "This child, Edward's child, was a whole different story. I wanted him like I wanted air to breathe. Not a choice – a necessity (132)"

Like a typical mother, she is ready to become a vampire for bringing her child into the world. Edward, his Family and Jacob become support to Bella mentally and physically in the dangerous act of giving birth. Her daughter Renesmee not only brings the joys of motherhood to Bella but also the life of an immortal vampire. In the peripheral level, Bella is always caught up between the Scylla (Edward) and Charybdis (Jacob). Jacob was not only her best friend to her but also her family.

"It feels... complete when you're here, Jacob. Like all my family is together. I mean, I guess that's what it's like – I've never had a big family before now. It's nice. But it's just not whole unless you're here. (*Breaking Dawn* 298)"

But her life is an example so as to how the support and love of men can create a successful woman. It is the love for her daughter that makes her fight the Volturi and ultimately win the battle. She was helped by everyone that she loved in this battle of her life thus making her not only a wonderful 'mother' but also a perfect 'woman'.

Bella's strength as a new women does not reverberate or reflect from her but her actions and decisions very well suggest her inner strength. She does not allow herself to be crushed in between her male relations, instead correctly uses and manages the patriarchal society around her. Simone De

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 examines the position of women in the western society. The book took the whole world by a storm as it unfolds the existential dilemma of women in the male dominated world. This book established the aspect of feminism in the minds of feminist writers. In Meyer's case she is not worried about making her heroine a feminist but in providing her with all the traits that can make an equal to a man.

Every aspect of New Feminism blends perfectly into this novel. Many critics have termed Bella as an anti feminist heroine. She may not be a Feminist who hates men and fights for her power and domination. But she is a perfect heroine whose life is moulded according to the principles of New Feminism, thus making the novel a New Feminist one.

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