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TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN ASARAM
LOMTE'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: Asaram Lomte's short story collection *Alok* contains stories that centre on female protagonists' of exemplary courage in terms of combating the evil forces around them. This article unfolds various dimensions of their indomitable spirit while retaliating the conflicts arising out of new rural socioeconomic order in the modern globalized world. It takes up five female protagonists: Grandmother in *Chireband*, the sister-in-law in *Oza* (Burden), Gavlan in *Kubhand* (Conspiracy), Kousabai in *Jeet* (A Victory) and Prayag in *Valan* (A Turn).

Keywords: courage, combating, evil, conflict, socioeconomic

Introduction: Asaram Lomte is a prolific Marathi writer. He has written two short story collections: *Ida Pida Talo* and *Alok*. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award for Marathi language in 2016 for *Alok* which contains six short stories. He is noted for his first hand understanding of the rural life especially after the devastating changes

taking place after the globalization. *Alok* is remarkable for the trials and tribulations of women who do not surrender but fight in their own way. Another striking feature of these stories that women characters are powerfully portrayed.

Grandmother in *Chireband*: The narrator, named Prasad, arrived in the village in order to accompany the Grandmother to the felicitation programme scheduled to be held at the district headquarter on the eve of Liberation Day. Being the wife of the deceased freedom fighter, she was to be felicitated. The grandmother lived in the large ancestral house which had been deserted by the family members. She cultivated a part of land with the help of a servant couple and remaining lay barren due to litigation matters. The estate spread at five to six locations in the periphery of the village and she knew their dimensions, present status very well. This shows her attachment to the land. Prasad's father was a teacher and lived in a city. The grandmother visited them for a few days

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once a year. His father had stopped coming to this village due to his busy schedule.

‘Father works at the district place where he completed most of his service. We have built a house there. Grandmother, however, doesn’t want to leave the village. She is completely involved in this castle and the land.’ (11)

Earlier she used to cook food for herself, but as her age had advanced she was not able to do cooking now. So the servant’s wife Sarja cooked food for her mostly once in the morning because she ate the stale remainder in the evening. She was the widow of a freedom fighter named Pant whose role in the Liberation Movement was a matter of controversy and suspicion. Being a money lender, he grabbed a large stretches of land from the gullible village folk by means of coercion. He was eliminated by some discounted fellows when writer’s father was just five. After his death she went to stay with several of her relatives, but finally came back to the village and started tilling the land. Despite her struggle, today she was lonely and somehow managed to till the land. From the narrator we learn that the village people did not hold a high opinion about their family. In such a hostile environment, she preferred to stay in the village. Asaram Lomte tries to show that today the educated people are cut off from the village while the older generation is still deeply attached to the family land. Prasad’s mother was of the

view that her mother-in-law held a lot of treasure but maintained secrecy about it. The writer shares this myth rampant in rural societies where the people believe that the old people have a lot of treasure hidden somewhere in their houses. While Prasad was leaving for the village, his mother sternly reminded him about the treasure.

‘Ask her something. She must have hidden the treasure somewhere. Anyway, she will not carry it with her.’ (19)

Within a few days of his arrival, Prasad felt lonely in this village because nobody knew him. The Grandmother too felt lonely and isolated because she too was not visited by the village folk: only the servant, his wife and a two or three old women came to the house. She still hoped that the scattered family would come to the house. She articulated her desperation thus:

‘Prasad, it needs a lot many people to fill this house, then you would see how beautiful it looks.’ She said.

When will you come back? She said.

‘I’ll come sometime. I’ll start early morning tomorrow. I’m bored.’ I said.

‘I feel all my people should stay with me. If it takes so many years for you to meet me, why do you people run and for whom?’ You would stop or not?’ She said.

The writer fetches our attention to some of the gerontological issues arising out of the

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new social order. The educated generation likes to live in cities whereas the old generation wish that their children ought to be with them. This is why she deliberately showed Prasad the carefully preserved land documents. On the following day, Prasad packed up and leaves the village.

The sister-in-law in *Oza (Burden)*: The narrator who is the professor of Economics and lives in the city while his illiterate elder brother committed suicide due to agricultural distress and ever increasing debt. He was survived by his father, mother, wife and a daughter. There was no capable person in the family to do the agricultural work. It was also suggested that they would sell the land and invest that money in the bank so that the family would get an assured income and be able to meet the marriage expenditure of the only daughter when she became of a marriageable age. In such tough times, the narrator's sister-in-law came forward. She said that there was no need to sell or farm out the land to other tillers of the village. She told them that she could continue to cultivate crops. She asked him to help her buy seeds and provide a servant to assist her. She also added that her daughter Chatura would write the yearly account which meant that she would repay his money after selling the agricultural produce.

‘Why to farm out the land? We have already made investment. If we

farm out, what will we gain? Unlike last year, we don't expect good produce this time around. But we'll accept whatever little we shall get. We shall till the land ourselves. We need only need a servant.’ (54)

She was very self-reliant and courageous woman. Hardly a few days had passed since her husband's death, but instead of mourning, she determined to rise. We knew very well that since last few years owing to scarce rainfall, the agriculture had been ruined completely. When he was alive, her husband relied on his younger brother for buying seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and always borrowed money from him. But year after year, there was no let up from drought. This plunged him into depression and so he committed suicide. But his wife was a different woman. She was very optimistic. So she hoped that the situation would change one day. Her desire to stick to the land is exemplary.

Gavlan in *Kubhand (Conspiracy)*:

Kubhand is yet another story by Asaram Lomte in which we meet Gavlan who worked as an Anganwadi assistant. She belonged to a backward community and sincerely did her work. She loved to cook rice mixed with vegetables for the children of the kindergarten of the village. She was proud of being an earner in the family. Her husband was unemployed and the family

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lived happily with her meagre income as their needs in that village were but a few.

One day, her son, sneaked into Malipatil's orchard and stole some sweet limes who held him up and thrashed badly. While escaping through the iron-wired fence, the child bled badly. Along with her husband Ankush, she went to Malipatil and asked him why he beat her son. Malipatil gave them bad words and even referred to their caste which made them very angry. Along with their leader Ananda, they went to the taluka place and registered a case of atrocity against Malipatil. Having learnt this development, early next morning Malipatil went and met the lawyer. He bribed the police inspector and bail was granted to him. So there was no arrest which was normally expected in a case of atrocity. Now Malipatil decided to avenge his discomfiture. He hired the young people of the village and asks them to torture Gavlan. He called them and explained the modus operandi.

'We will not harm him (Ankush). His wife is an Anganwadi assistant in the kindergarten. She has an air of being a teacher. We must hatch out a conspiracy so that she would lose her job. We will have to do weeding in the field.' (92)

Initially, Vilas and Motiram passed provocative comments on her while she was going to the school. They said that she opened the school late so parents are held up unnecessarily and there was no

discipline among the staff. But as she was late to the school, she felt that it was her mistake. This extract tells us more about her character.

'It is my mistake. So people get a chance to speak. I should take care here onwards. Let's not give them a chance...With how many people can I fight...People will say that this woman has got no other business except fighting...I have this job, so I get enough to eat. Otherwise I will have to work across the fields.' (94)

Having got the first breakthrough, Malipatil chalked out further plan to harass her. The schematic Malipatil called them again and explained his strategy.

'Out task is just to harass her mentally. She should cry. No one in the entire village, has ever uttered a bad word to me and she files a case? Do the people consider me mere dry leaves? She should fear to eat her meals.' (95)

One day while the children were eating the cooked rice, one of the village dandies Vilas arrived on the scene and prevented the children from eating the rice. He told them that there were worms in the food and so it was harmful to their health. Soon he called other people in the school and brought the gravity of the matter to their

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notice. He forced the headmaster to write down the matter on a paper to be forwarded to the higher authorities. He also obtained a photocopy of the letter.

Later, Anand, their leader cautioned her that she should not keep the rice bag in the school because someone would steal it and the blame would come to her. So after the school, she emptied the rice bag into her big bowl and carried it home. But it was also a conspiracy. Now another villager named Motiram came on the scene and stopped her. He asked her to show what she was carrying in the bowl. Having seen the rice there, he made such a hue and cry that a crowd gathered there and again the matter was taken to the Sarpanch.

At night, both Gavlan and Ankush discussed the matter. They were of the view that the police department would not help them all the time and being a minority community, they should not grumble about such an injustice. They came to the conclusion that it is futile to fight with so many people at a time. They went to Malipatil that very moment and begged his pardon. However, Malipatil shut the door and they came back to their home. That means he would continue to harass her.

Kousabai in Jeet (A Victory): Kousabai's husband Hari Bhosale had died in a road accident a month ago. He was a member of the Grampanchayat and by-election was to be held soon. Each party held four seats and this being a decisive seat, the win would

decide where the power would shift. So there was a tough tussle between the incumbent Sarpanch Vilas Shinde and the Sabhapati Dharmaji Bhosale. After a lot of debate and consultation Sabhapati decided to file her nomination for the vacant seat.

Her husband was a member of the Grampanchayat and very often visited the taluka place. She always protested for evading the agricultural work. The burden squarely fell on the shoulders of her son Madhav who did not like this irresponsible behaviour on the part of his father and this gave rise to tension in the family. No doubt there were other people in the village who were also engaged in politics, but they got some economic benefits. Hari was an exception to this. When Sabhapati Dharmaji Bhosale came and insisted on her for contesting the election, she turned the offer down. The first reaction of Kousabai on the offer is important.

‘Brother, my husband wandered for politics at the cost of our farming work. But what did we gain? Sometimes I think if he had not fallen into this business of politics and stuck to farming, our agriculture business would have been stable and our family would not have been ruined. Now I feel that after all this toil what did we gain? We have lost a man from our family...how can it

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be compensated? We are helpless.’
(114)

The schematic Sabhapati somehow managed to coax Kousabai and finally she agreed to contest the election. He promised that since he belonged to the party of the MLA he would get the proposal for well construction sanctioned under the Jawahar Scheme. She felt that Sabhapati was a respectable politician and belonged to her clan and if she denied the offer he would target them. Later, Sarpanch Vilas Shinde tried to press her to withdraw the form, but she did not succumb to his pressure. So he fielded Pandhari Kadam, a highly respectable and religious minded person as her contestant. Kousabai was illiterate but had a great deal of wisdom about the state of affairs happening in her village. She knew that both Sarpanch and Sabhapati were selfish hard core politicians and had nothing to do with the welfare of her family and the village.

‘He betrayed my husband and now fielded a Godlike man like Pandhari against me. He wishes that no good man should ever live in the village.’
(127)

Though Sabhapati had promised that she would not have to participate in the campaign, in reality she had to do vigorous campaigning days before the election. Her campaigning received a mixed reaction from the women folk. Some said that she should not step out of her house only

months after her husband’s death. Some did sympathize with her. Kousabai did not like politics at all. But she could not displease Sabhapati. After Hari’s death, she was in a dire need of support from her relatives. Because Sabhapati happened to be a distant cousin of her husband, she gave the consent.

If Madhav was to be married, she needed help of her people. In that case, she needed consent and cooperation of Sabhapati. Asaram Lomte has an indepth study of the social practices prevalent in Indian villages. If the prominent people are not consulted, very often they play a spoilsports in matrimonial matters. Kousabai’s next immediate aim was to marry her son off. It was also possible that he might corner and isolate her family in social matters. This fear also lurked in her mind while agreeing to file the nomination. Another important backdrop of her decision of joining politics was Dharmaji’s initiative in terms of approaching them personally. Sarpanch Vilas Shinde was shocked to know that Kousabai was contesting the election. He knew that the public sympathy was inevitably with her. He cautioned his activists thus:

‘Once she steps out of her house, the women folk would listen to her account. The old women felt that her husband has died and her family is disrupted. Once, all the women in the lane make up their mind, it

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would be very difficult for us.’
(118)

Kousabai knew very little politics. In fact, right from the beginning, she condemned politics. She did not know the tactics of politics that people like Dharmaji Bhosale and Vilas Shinde did. She felt that the election fever would be over in a week and she would concentrate on her agricultural activity as usual. The Sabhapati had already assured them that they were not supposed to participate in the campaigning. So she did not withdraw her nomination. She did vacillate on occasions. She knew that politics was not her cup of tea because she was a farmer. But she was not a sort of person who shrank back when it came to the commitment. Reluctantly, she participated in campaigning three days before the election. But here again, her mind dwelt on her fields where cotton crop was ready for picking.

‘I did not turn up to the field since last eight days. The cotton must have been stolen. Someone would move cattle into the crop that we grew with care. But I can’t move from here. My mind wanders in the field.’(130)

Once the polling was over, she heaved a sigh of relief but as the result was to be announced on the following day, there was some anxiety. She knew if she lost the election neither the Sarpanch nor the Sabhapati would help her. She was concerned with the future of her son

Madhav. She determined that she would straightaway continue to do agricultural work the next day onwards. For the average farming communities, food was the first priority. So the common people in the villages did not take politics seriously and preferred to work hard in their fields. Kousabai is their representative. This is why on the day of result, she started for the field along with a few women for picking cotton. This also shows her disinterestedness in politics. She did not eat anything except a cup of tea. The day was full of anxiety. Finally when the news of her victory was communicated to her on the mobile phone, she looked up and folds her hands to God. Most probably, it was not due to the victory but because the days of politics were over.

Prayag in Valan (A Turn): Prayag was an eight standard student. Her father reared a herd of goats. Her parents were landless people so her mother worked in the farm on daily wages. She was their only daughter. She was very brilliant. As there was no secondary school, everyday she walked to the school in the nearby town. One day while she was going to the school, in a secluded corner on the way, she heard a shriek of a man. Far across the hillock, she saw a man with beard and a bracelet on wrist. They stared at each other. Later, she came to know that a man was murdered. Meanwhile, unknowingly she narrated this incident to her friends and also to her

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mother and thus it became a talk of the town. Two policemen called her into the Headmaster's office and asked her what she had seen. Flabbergasted, Prayag did not disclose anything. The next day her father met the headmaster with Prayag and it was decided that she should not reveal any specific information but give a generalized description of the murderer so that she would be safe. So she told the police about the incident and on the basis of her account, the police arrested a man. But the relatives of the accused started troubling Prayag. One evening two people arrived at their home and threatened her father of the consequence in case she becomes an eye witness. She felt scared.

'If the school stops, the future would be like a hot summer. I will have to work in the field. Some girls in the village do that. It means hard work.' (147)

A man accosted her on her way to school and warned her of serious consequences if she did not leave the school. As the accused belonged to the politically powerful family, they further pressurized the Headmaster because they thought that Prayag's absence would help neutralize the case. The president of the Gramshikshan Samiti started pressuring the Headmaster by insisting that he should issue her the school transfer certificate.

'We want to do politics in the village. After her witness, we are being interrogated. People know

about it, but did not utter a single word. But her statement messed it up... let's close the matter here itself. Call her and issue her the transfer certificate.' (151)

Finally, the headmaster sent her the transfer certificate with her friend. The Headmaster suggested them to meet a social worker named Bhai. Bhai took them to the Collector for help. Having heard the account, the Collector said that he could order to enroll her in the school again, but that wouldn't be a feasible solution because the people would keep her harassing thereafter. So he arranged for her accommodation in the government hostel and admitted her in a school too.

'In my childhood my sisters looked like her. So I paid special attention to her. Legible handwriting. She understood anything when explained once. I see many such brilliant girls while working in villages, but their education stops. Their parents marry them hurriedly.' (164)

The way the Collector handles the matter does not appear to be a just resolution of the matter. He intervened and arranged her accommodation in the government hostel and enrolled her in a school at the district place. Instead, he could have arranged to bring to book the anti-social elements that deprived her of her right to education. We know that she was the only daughter to her

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parents and that she was forced to leave the school. Asaram Lomte, leaves the matter to our imagination to contemplate. Even today, we see this obnoxious nexus of muscle power operating in rural India. The downtrodden and the weaker sections are being crushed under its heavy weight. They are so fragile that they cannot even manage to leave their workaday life and ask for justice. This is why when the headmaster sent for her father, Rama had to request his friend to look after his flock of goats for a day. If they don't work for a single day, they are starved.

Conclusions: Asaram Lomte has created powerful female protagonists in *Alok*. The Grandmother in *Chireband* needs emotional support from her near and dear ones but unfortunately she has to lead an isolated and secluded life in her large traditional house in the village. In the story *Oza* (Burden), the sister-in-law is a self-reliant and hard working woman who makes up her mind to till the land even after her husband's early death. Similarly, Kousabai

in *Jeet* (A Victory) is deeply attached to her land and though she falls into the whirlwind of politics in an inevitable circumstance, she did not like the dirty politics that vitiates the congenial atmosphere prevailing the village. Thus, we can say that all the three protagonists display a sense of attachment to the land. Prayag in *Valan* (A Turn) is deprived of her village and her school for she has seen a man being murdered on her way to school and since she is made an eye witness the people of accused family harassed her. Similar is the plight of Gavlan who figures up in *Kubhand* (Conspiracy) who keeps on fighting for justice but since she hails from the downtrodden minority community, the powerful people of her village make her surrender to them. In short, the plight of the female protagonists in *Alok* evoke a sense of sympathy and beckon at the wider social strife which is the reality of the Indian rural life today.

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