

SUMMA TEKUR'S 'TABLE FOR ONE': A NARRATIVE OF CHOICE FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

“Solo-living is not an easy ride but I advocate it as an essential life experience to meet yourself. It has transformed me as no other experience might have.”

-Summa Tekur –
(p.230)¹

This paper aims to analyse personal narrative in ‘Table for One’, by Summa Tekur, on the basis of Choice Feminism’. Feminism is an ideology of social, political, economic, personal, educational rights and opportunities for all genders. It calls for breaking barriers and improving educational, professional and interpersonal opportunities and outcome for women. When a woman dares to break social barriers to carve her own life style, it is known as an act of Choice Feminism. Summa Tekur choosing solo-living after her marriage shattered, was a courageous act. Ten years solo-living experience has been penned down in her book ‘Table for One’, which was published in the year 2023:

As the title indicates, it is about a person who books a table in a restaurant or lays a table at home, only for one person. It represents that person is living alone and nobody is there to accompany her/him to a restaurant or sit with her/him at a table at home also. It is narrative of solo-living by the author. So, it can be said a personal/autobiographical account of her life journey during last ten years. When a woman dares to break gender barriers and traditional familial set up with her independent decision, she has to face many hurdles. Tekur too faced many hurdles to establish her identity and authority when she opted to change her life-style. She narrates with examples from her personal life how she was able to cope with finances to sustain herself; how she was able to cope with her anxiety and fear; how she was able to cope with her physical safety; how she was able to cope with her emotional welfare; how she was able to draw boundaries for intruders and finally, how she was able to prepare herself for her end journey. She herself admits at the end of the book that solo living transformed her as a person who approached every situation with the question “why” and “what not?”. She became more logical, mature in thinking and became emotionally stronger to meet any challenges life threw at her.

Key Words: Choice-Feminism, solo-living, narrative, logical, mature

“Living alone is an attitude, a mind-set that permeates every aspect of our life, be it, self-exploration, mental health, friends, family, marriage, career, travel or growth.”

-Summa Tekur-
(p.39)

This attitude or mind set is based on Choice Feminism. Every plan, thought or every action of such person is centred around her persona. Solo-living is like a bouquet of roses with thorny leaves; roses being rewards while thorns being hurdles on the way to be overcome, to enjoy those rewards.

The title of the book 'Table for One', by Summa Tekur, brings to mind a person sitting alone in a restaurant or at the dining table in her home, enjoying the meals in silence without any company. Only a person, who has consciously chosen to live alone, happens to do so.

In Summa's case she deliberately chose singledom/solo-living when her marriage broke down after a short span of time and she got divorce papers in her hands. She was standing at the cross-roads in her thirties, and preferred to choose a new life style:-

The cross-roads opened up before me like an Oasis in the desert, Funnily, I didn't even realise how thirsty I had been for a new path, a fresh perspective, and an offbeat road where the scenery was likely to be remarkable for its novelty, if not anything else. (p.11)

Perhaps, in her case, the thirst was intrinsic, which she ignored or did not try to tap. It was buried in her subconscious mind and her conscious mind kept it buried. It was the shattered marriage that brought that thirst outside:-

While standing at the cross-roads, I had transformed from the six year old and my fourteen year old clueless self into a woman who was beginning to question everything especially the pre-accepted norms and beliefs made by someone else a long time ago. I decided to slide that manifesto aside and write a fresh one for myself based on my aspirations and my unique experience. (p.11)

It is a narrative of Choice Feminism. Before moving further, let us first understand what is Feminism and Choice Feminism. Simply said, Feminism is a social, political and ideological movement dedicated to achieving the political, economic and personal and social equality of the sexes. It evocates, for equal rights and opportunities for all genders, actively dismantling stereotypes and improving educational, professional and interpersonal opportunities and outcomes for women.² When a woman dares to break gender, social, professional barriers and chooses a new life style it becomes an act of Choice Feminism. So seen in this light, Tekur can be labelled as a feminist and her personal narrative about her life path an act of Choice Feminism.

In her book – review Sayeri Biswas talks about its relevance:-

Being extremely community driven, Indians glorify living in the traditional family system. So for a woman to live alone, to voluntarily choose to do so is unheard of and this is elaborated by Summa Tekur in her book 'Table for One'³.

In India, male dominated society makes it extremely difficult for a woman to take any individual decisions, independently; fear of societal wrath in the form of slander, shame and stigmas that would be thrown at her, prevents her from doing so. For men, living alone of a woman is a considered a challenge to their supremacy in familial system. One way or other, they try to pry or interfere in her life to check how far she will go all alone. In Tekur's case too it happened. In fact, Tekur choosing solo-living happened after divorce when her dreams of happy married life shattered. Till then, she had never thought of breaking traditional barriers. During her teens, she spent her time dreaming about marriage like other girls of her age. For her, breaking away from the secure familial ties was not easy but there was no other choice:-

The critical moment of truth arrived when I hit thirty, got married and my marriage broke down within weeks of tying the knot. The flashpoint became my life's loudest

wake up call. When my plan of socially sanctioned married-living crumbled, I had a choice. I could try again and force a partnered living arrangement to work or I could instead design a different type of life outside the pre-approved limits of social order. (p.11)⁴

Choice-Feminism mattered more; self before others tagline became her life-purpose. But this choice became possible only because her parents had liberal mind set about their children's personal ambitions. In her twenties, she got a fellowship from a foreign university and her parents allowed her to travel to an unknown destination all alone. This travel experience and her living alone in a foreign country introduced her to the solo-living-life style. She lived in an apartment where living, dining and cooking areas were shared but she had a private space of her own where she could rest and do what she wanted. She also could mingle with others if she so desired:- "This was a great initiation into the art of balancing isolation with social situation". (p.31) She travelled alone to other countries when her job demanded or on her own solo-trips after that. She did not fear going out alone for a ride or to a restaurant for enjoying some snacks. She even tried sitting alone in a Pub to enjoy a drink:-

I once found myself on a London bus taking me in opposite direction of my destination. I took a nap, talked to co-passengers and enjoying the sights of London, on a bright summer day. The lesson from that was. I will survive even if I take a misstep. (pp.29-30)

Even in India, she preferred long drives after the busy working schedule was over. Once a meeting was cancelled while she was in Chennai; she did not go back to hotel but roamed in her car, went to eating joints and pub all alone not bothering about anything else. All these experiences where she chose to step out instead of staying in, gave her confidence to live alone:-

When it came to making the actual decision to live alone, I had no doubt that I would not just survive but thrive in single living-situation. (p.30)

Often when a woman chooses solo-living, the decision is taken due to unavoidable circumstances; and it is rare that a woman opts for it consciously. For Tekur, it was both, a circumstantial as well as a conscious decision made with full conviction:-

The comfort of living alone eventually boils down to the question of our deep and meaningful introspection. If we are ready to meet ourselves we will ready to live alone. (p.32)

She started her solo-journey by buying a house, so that she may have a feeling of belonging; a place she could call her own. Being a working woman, she had saved enough for down payment and managed loan (emi) to pay the rest. So, two things favoured her the most on her solo-journey; her travel experience and sound bank balance. For her, home was a place she could live as she wanted; un inhibited, in peaceful surroundings and silence, sans anybody around:-

The home of a single dweller becomes a sacrosanct space where she can shed all inhibitions and drop every mask to be truly at home while creating and nurturing the space as a personal sanctnary , opening it up to friends or lovers eagerly could shift the vibe of the place. (p.125)

For her, it became imperative to draw boundaries by saying NO to unwanted callers, neighbours, relatives, whose only motive was to break her privacy by giving unwanted advice on her life style. Boundaries became essential to guard personal space from prying eyes of

such intruders:- “I have said NO to potential lovers who assumed that I was available simply because I was single. I have said NO to curious aunties who wanted to find out where I lived”. (p.56-57)

She did not hesitate to bang the door on unwanted people; she did not let the labour enter her house. When people tried to make trouble, she would shout at them. Reinforcing boundaries by saying NO was like turning thorns into roses. She sometimes regretted being rude to elderly people.

Tekur’s parents chose silence and remained quiet. She felt grateful that in her desire/ act of making personal choices they did not block her path by asking pricking questions that could kill her confidence. Support of her parents in silent way, her close relations with her sister in whom she could confide her secrets, talk about her plans and ring her in any emergency, made her journey less arduous.

When Tekur’s parents moved to a new house and held a house warming party, an old man was continuously speaking about how women are supposed to behave. Tekur’s father interrupted him by saying that “woman have their own mind, Sir. She travels the world, alone. She can handle any situation.” (p.171) The old man responded by saying “Eh! Travel! Alone? What for? “Her father’s talk reveals his open-mindedness in accepting that a woman is capable of managing her own life. But people like him are few in number as compared to the old man who does not want to see the changing scenario where women are becoming independent and choosing their own life styles. Patriarchy still rules the societal set up to keep the traditional boundaries intact: “Being alone for extended period gave me the confidence to be unabashedly and unapologetically who I am.” (p.125)

Discarding the old life style and adopting a new life style based on her personal choices is indicative of Choice Feminism: “Ah the sweet scent of freedom. The liberty to do as I please. The space to unleash my crazy side with judgement from no one else but me.” (p.12)

To move forward on a less trodden path was not easy at all for her. She had never previously thought about it. But she chose two best friends at the start of her journey; commitment and courage: “I made two best friends to be my constant companions helping me navigate the unknown maze. The first was commitment and the second was courage.” (p.22)

Her courageous attitude helped her conquer her fears; whether it was fear about her physical safety, fear about public slander and jibes, fear about health. Her commitment was based on the fact that on facing a difficult situation she would ask herself how it would help her grow and what was the lesson for future in it. It energised her and gave her courage to carry on through rough patches. It is often said that everything we need or want is on the other side of fear. The courage that it takes for a woman to dine alone in India “is all about the nuanced strength – not the physical, muscular variety – to rebel the way things are usually done.” (p.24)

Her new life style taught her that she had to adapt to new situations, new demands that cropped up on daily basis like remaining quiet when she felt like screaming and retreating back without getting into a discussion. “Living alone and/or being single kick starts the process of unlearning the preconceived ideas so that we can develop new definition for them that fit our unique needs.” Celebrating women who get married and have kids and shaming the singles is how societal set up is conditioned. Women are identified in relation to men. When her newspaper man introduced her as the “Saar of this house” to all – male party

who came to her house and wanted to meet the “Saar of the house”, she felt elated as a proud house-owner for the first time. She had got an identity for herself independently. Till this point, owning a house for her meant a means to make room for independent living:-

It was not a symbol of material wealth, nor was it a milestone to cross. My own home was about how it would enable me to live, and not how people would behave with me... Being called the ‘saar of the house’ made me feel proud of how far I had come. (p.96)

That day, she decided to call herself home owner to claim her space and identity. This identity conveyed that she was the decision maker and chief dweller who performed all chores related to her house. Slowly, she re-evaluated her other identities: financial, professional and social:-

When the limits of who I am proved elastic then the limit of what I can do and what I can desire also changed accordingly. (p.100)

It is Choice Feminism at its peak. She understood now that she had to earn enough money to sustain herself as familial security was now missing. She managed her finances by focusing on both long term and short term commitments. She made a courageous decision of quitting her 9 to 5 Corporate job and turning to journalism. For short term gratification of money she accepted the invitation to teach students of Media and Communication semester at a prestigious business school. She also started writing blogs for a client in Europe, for which she had to do thorough research as these were related to ever changing modern technology. These bank-balance additions made her happy. She wanted to build career on present format:-

The conscious weighing of job I take on to earn money bring in great awareness of what I want to do, and what absolutely I don’t want to do. I credit my experience of living alone to make independent decisions for this growing awareness and action. (p.164)

She changed her attitude of spending hard-earned money too- from want verses need. No fixed monthly income was the truth that enabled her to spend wisely and on need basis. She never did shopping in groups but independently and that habit helped her to streamline her spending attitude, so that she may save enough for emergencies. She also learnt to invest her money on long term basis, guided by some inputs from the workshop she attended about money-management:

My other indulgence, which was also happily on investment was that I bought something in gold on my birthday every year. I started this as a tradition when I first started earning and then continued the tradition..... (p.167)

So, earning, spending and saving through investment gave her courage to explore new vistas in other fields too:-

My evolving attitude to money was about making this choice of spending on experiences rather than things. I would rather invest in a ninety minutes Swedish deep tissue-massage rather than on new pair of jeans. I would rather spend on moderately working smart phones and spend the saving for weekends outside the city. (p.169)

Professionally, apart from being a writer and editor, she became a coach, delivered lecturers, became a poet and artist, turned a healer and above all her passion for travel increased manifold. She enjoyed keeping herself busy with these professional activities. Socially, being outgoing person she connected with those groups where her identity was

valued and not criticized. She had vibrant exchange of ideas, thoughts with like-minded people who appreciated her solo-journey of life and this consequently gave roots to her social identity. New friends were made on the way while the old ones who did not match her point-of-view were left behind. Only those associations held meaning for her in whom she could confide her fears, aspirations, plans and seek advice in times of confusion.

Her solo life style prompted her to take self-care challenge suggested by a friend, of doing one thing every day, without repeating, for herself-like walking, exercising, doing yoga, lying on grass in silence, observing greenery, journaling thoughts, getting full body check-up, paying attention to protein intake etc.

After successfully performing such spontaneous acts for 100 days she felt refreshed, energized and started paying more attention to various aspects of her personality. By the time she completed 100 days she had incorporated these habits into her regular routine. Living alone enabled her to spend more time alone, by herself, and take better care of herself: "In slow and subtle way it had transformed my idea of self-care." (p.176) For her now "self" became more important than anything else and it made her more health conscious.

"The 3S helped me along the self-care journey- sleep, stomach and sounds." (p.179)

The quality of sleep and also its pattern -undisturbed sleep and fixed timings, help in resting both body and soul. Similarly, home-cooked, healthy balanced diet keeps us active, energetic and happy. For this she chose to cook her own food and focused on her mother's recipes for keeping herself fit and fine. Fixing sleep hours and avoiding eating out happened gradually and the outcome made her happy and satisfied.

A documentary changed her understanding of sounds. In the documentary, the researchers showed the effect of sound on water, ripples were created. After that she started listening to various sounds created by birds and insects, in the morning and at night, and felt a calming effect on her mind. She felt that her mental tensions gave way to mental peace. These three 'S' transformed her as a person:- "Sounds affects us more deeply than we realise..... I realised that self-care is not only about what I eat, it is also about what I choose to listen to." (p.191)

For her travelling too was an act of self-care:-

The more I move on outside, the more I connect with stray pieces of emotions with in me: This is at once an act of pushing the boundaries of freedom and making more room for me in this big world, and also an intense form of emotional self-care where the intention is to continue to protect myself while still moving out. (p.152)

As the time passed she started listening to her own intuition, her inner voice regarding her emotional security: Much of the choice to live alone is tied to the choice of life-partner." (P.216) For her, the thought of living with a partner who would likely share all the things dear to her gave her little jitters. She held her privacy close to her heart. During her travels outside the country, she met several suitors who bragged about their physical assets, not bothering about to find what type of person she was her likes, dislikes etc:

I seek intellectual depth, a conscious world view, and a high awareness with which a man responds to the world around him. This is true for my pick of friends too..... (p.218)

She admits that she had set a high bar for relationships and partnership. The big question she put to herself was whether a changed status would allow her to add to her

growth and continued learning. Her spirit of curiosity kept her going, without bothering how she would handle the future as future remains unpredictable to everyone.

During Covid-19, however, she felt great discomfort and anxiety at the constant lurking though in her mind that a great transition was going take place. There was a gnawing ache she could not decipher. Perhaps it was a feeling relating to death:

When I spoke to my friend in Tenerefe on our unprompted check-in, I told her about this gnawing ache that would not go away. At the risk of sounding foolish, I told her that the idea of death is taking up a lot of space in mind... (p.219)

Her friend told her that she had been experiencing the same feeling and to overcome her anxiety, she went to meet a lawyer for drawing up her will' she had started de-cluttering her life by getting rid of physical things, unwanted people in her life and also unwanted emotions. She advised her to do the same to overcome her anxiety. Tekur felt that a burden had been lifted of her mind. She immediately started making a list to meet the mortality challenge:-

As my friend suggested I made, a list of things to do to prepare for unexpected transitions. It included drawing up a will and de-cluttering my home so that I don't leave for anyone else to clean up after me. I realised how important this work was, but I had been focussing on the urgent tasks of meeting deadlines and being occupied with the day-to-day work rather than make time for the important preparation. (p.220)

By doing so, she got clarity about her anxious thoughts and why she was feeling so upset. Her solo-living made her aware that this transition was inevitable and it consequently, brought a change in her thinking process and doing things: "The reason, I bring this subject here is to highlight how living alone made me think about the after-life transition, and what it did to my solo living experience." (p.221)

One of the Tekur's friends Lena, who had lost her father but kept his letters and books, struggled to give those away in order to de-clutter her house. Like Tekur, she was also living alone. Lena's friend's sudden death shook her completely and made her aware of her own mortality. Lena's friend too was living alone and died alone in a hospital. Lena was worried about the absence of the immediate help for those who lived alone. So scared was she of this thought that she immediately prepared "a list of people that need to be notified" in case something happened to her. Tekur's name was on that list too and she had handed it over to a common friend.

Tekur's attitude about death became logical not fearful. She started preparing for her end journey with the belief that every one should prepare before hand, so that when the call comes everything is in order:-

A heightened awareness and acceptance of mortality should ideally make life freer and lighter. Death and freedom, after, are two sides of the same coin. (p.226)

This attitudinal change reveals that in ten years of solo-living, she got maturity in her thought process and behaviour-pattern. Although she believed in living in the present but future emergencies were not neglected by her. She logically started working on such probabilities:-

We live alone with deepest thoughts and desires and we all will die alone. (p.226)

Treading on the less travelled path brought a huge transformation in her life. She confesses that the confidence of living solo has made her approach every and any situation with the questions "why" and "why not?": "This approach has given me the ability to think differently

from the typical mainstream narratives. Formula driven decisions don't excite me. I believe in going beyond the formula." (p.230)

This biggest transformation gave her the courage to face her fears too. For that, she chose experimental mind set. Let us do it and see. She never feared the end results. Failures did not deter her:-

I never stopped trying for something that I truly wanted. (p.252)

This quote justify that the 'Table for One', is surely a journey of Choice Feminism. Her life style change pushed her closer to her soul nourishment and fulfilment. Her home gave her more room to breathe and her heart: more time to sing. Her feet had more energy to dance on her tunes:-

In the end, this liberty matters more than anything. (p.228)

Her living alone made her more logical, independent, peaceful version of herself. So, Choice Feminism really proved an ace in the arm for her, in her life journey. Written in simple language, this book keeps the readers engrossed till the end.

Note:-

All references (page nos.) are from the book 'Table for One', by Summa Tekur, published by Hay House Publishers India, in the year 2023.

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