

Indian Feminism: A Comparative Study with the Feminist Issues in the West

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Abstract

The hierarchical family system in the Indian patriarchal society envisages a secondary status to women, where, since her childhood she is conditioned to imbibe the female traits necessary for gender identity. This subservience of a woman is evident in the Indian society, since ancient times, which through its institutions of marriage and religion has constructed gender norms that regulate and constrict a woman's liberty and rights. In the West, however, during the early nineteenth century, women collectively, for the first time protested against the patriarchal norms that subjugated them and demanded gender equality. This organized women movement was termed as 'feminism', which sought to raise the female consciousness against their age-old victimization and marginalization. This woman movement expressed its views through social protests and the medium of literature. Feminism, though had its origin in the West but with the deterioration of the status of women in India, women here too stepped out of their confined roles and spaces and challenged the patriarchal roles. The present paper seeks to explore the feminist issues in the context of the Indian society by comparing it with the women issues as traced in the Western feminism.

Key Words: Feminism, Indian feminism, Women, Patriarchy, Marriage, Gender norms, conditioning

Introduction:

The Indian society has constructed gender norms that have imposed 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as essential traits for both the sexes, which has strengthened the unequal power relations between the two genders. These traits are inculcated in the personality of both the sexes through their socialization in the family and attributes a secondary status to a woman. This woman subjugation is an age-old cultural phenomenon in the Indian society, which finds its sanction in the religious and traditional beliefs. The cumulative effect of myths and legends coupled with religious ideologies propagate the secondary status of women. In the context of the tradition bound Indian

society, the formation of a woman's identity is directly configured by her social conditioning, which circumscribes her roles to marriage and motherhood alone.

In India, as compared to the West, feminism took a long time to come into force due to the stronghold of patriarchal traditions and rigid customs, which has bequeathed to Indian woman an ambivalent legacy; a secondary status and worshipped as a goddess. During the early nineteenth century, multiple factors acted as catalyst to motivate women to oppose their marginalization and question the validity of gender roles. The advent of the British led to literary awareness, a modern culture and spread of English language. These factors

influenced the traditional cultural beliefs of the patriarchal society and people began embracing this new culture and language. Literary awareness helped women to realize their state of subjugation and about Women revolution in the West, which inspired them to break their claustrophobic existence.

The popular social and political leaders during the time of India's struggle of Independence, like Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Nehru encouraged women to participate with men in the political movement for India's independence. These leaders also protested against the various form of women oppression like, infanticide, child-marriage, widow oppression and polygamy. This widespread agitation eventually eradicated these form of women oppression to a great extent and gave women a platform to articulate their point of view in the society, collectively. Feminism, therefore, in India, unlike the West was initiated under the direction of all male social reformers.

Women, independently in a group, came to forefront for their rights, for the first time in 1927, with the formation of 'All India Women Conference' (AIWC). It was initiated for the liberation of women by Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant. Gradually, by the 1970's, many more women organizations emerged in the country and focused on issues like, reforms in marital norms related to prohibition of dowry and implementation of laws related to domestic violence. These organizations in the contemporary milieu focus on equal rights for women in education, inheritance, jobs and women safety laws at workplace. These social organizations have also struggled hard

to ensure fast-track courts for rape cases in an order to provide speedy justice to women.

Feminist scholars and writers like Uma Narayan, Madhu Kishwar, Jasbir Jain and Vrinda Nabar have contributed significantly in throwing light on the status of Indian woman and its comparison with the aims of the Western feminism. These writers have pointed out that feminism being a Western concept has always been critiqued by the patriarchal society in India, as feminism being a Western concept is naturally to be condemned by the rigid society. Till date, according to the people holding traditional beliefs related Indian culture, condemn all the beliefs and customs of the West by referring to them as non-ethical. Vrinda Nabar observes in this context that, feminism can never be acknowledged in the Indian society because of "Patriarchal religions and overt and covert conservative super structures" (7).

The feminist issues in the Indian society are more rigorous and diverse as compared to the West, therefore, incorporating the aims of Western feminism in the Indian context is irrelevant and may yield false results. Indian women have a different mode of oppression which varies geographically and religiously. A critic observes, "The important thing to note is we in India have to respond to this version of feminism cautiously - Neither accepting it wholesome uncritically nor rejecting it altogether but see for what it is and what to take from it" (Kumar 8). Till date, religion in India exercises a strong influence on the mindset of people in India, which conditions them to accord a secondary status to women. In India, as compared to the West, the desire of a son

has always been a marked feature of the male-hegemonic families. This urge for a son, during the primitive times, resulted in the practice of infanticide and in the contemporary times has taken the form of foeticide. In states like Haryana, Punjab, New Delhi and other backward states, it has led to the decline of the female ratio as compared with the male. Vrinda Nabar observes, "A woman in India is morally obliged to bear a son. As a consequence childless or a woman who cannot deliver a son is marginalized" (52). This social aspect of the Indian society was never apparent in the aims of Western feminism. A daughter in the Indian society is referred to as, *Paraya Dhan*, to be handed over to her husband after marriage. A son on the other hand is considered as an asset who continues the family lineage, looks after his parents and performs their funeral rites. A son is valued for socio-sacramental reasons and a woman is therefore, urged to deliver a son than a daughter. In India, therefore, as compared to the West, "Her culture gives her an identity and an unassailable position only after she becomes a mother, especially if she delivers a male child" (Sree 9).

Since the inception of the adolescence of women in the Indian society, she is conditioned to prioritize marriage as her destiny than her other dreams because marriage is an essential virtue for women in the Indian male-hegemonic society than the West. A girl, therefore, very early in her adolescence learns that the virtues of womanhood which will take her through life are submission, docility and adjustments in marriage. Jasbir Jain points out, "Either society, religion or tradition controls them

and more often... are used to exclude women from power and knowledge and reinforce patriarchal authority" (84-85).

Equal rights in marriage is a marked feature in the West but in the Indian society, despite the impact of globalization and modernization, women are often deprived off equality in marriage. In India, marriage is idealized as one of the essential *sanskaras* (sacrament) for both the genders, which completes a woman's existence and earns her a respectable status in the society. A woman as a married woman, is expected to adhere to her traditional image and comply with the needs and wishes of her husband. "A historical study of the role of women in the male-dominated society... in particularly India ... would categorically prove that man has successfully connived to keep women confined within the socio-religious walls" (Alexander 59). In India, there are two aspects of marriage which reinforces the secondary status of women. Firstly, their gender oppression and secondly their exploitation in terms of their controlled sexuality. Till date in the Indian society, a woman is expected to surrender to her husband, physically, as her obligation to her husband. Women often become victims of marital rapes or forced impregnation for a son and bear these atrocities to save their marriages. The issues related to 'virginity' of a woman and her inability to attain motherhood, till date becomes one of the major reasons for a woman's condemnation or end of her marriage. In India, divorce is till date considered a taboo, therefore, women compromise in their harsh marriages to save the family honour. In the West, however, the effects of feminism have

eradicated all the barriers related to women liberation, which constricts a woman's freedom.

Madhu Kishwar remarks: The pervasive popular cultural ideal of womanhood has become a death trap.... It is women as selfless giver, someone who gives and gives endlessly, gracefully, smilingly, whatever the demand, however unreasonable and harmful to herself.(46-47)

Sharing of marital and child-rearing responsibility is evident in the West because marriages in the West are based on the principles of equality. In India, however, the family structure assigns these responsibilities to women alone, as men are encouraged to be the bread-winners. "Most women realize the difficulties of making men assume their domestic responsibilities" (Kishwar 303). Equal rights in education and empowerment were the main aims of the feminism in the West and due to this movement, women in the West are liberated to choose their career and work after marriage. A woman's life in India, however, is controlled by her husband, who takes all the important decisions related to her life, including her economic empowerment. A woman, therefore sacrifices her dreams and compromises in her marriage. Jasbir Jain observes, "The rejected Sita is accepted but not Draupadi. It is because she is not an ideal but very real" (43).

The feminist issues in India are diverse and differ geographically as compared to the feminism in the West because women in the urban states have different form of

patriarchal exploitation than the rural women. Women in the urban areas, in the contemporary scenario are better educated, empowered and awakened to their rights as compared to rural women, who are still deprived of basic amenities. Rural women are still unaware of their rights and privileges due to illiteracy and poverty. They are doubly oppressed in terms of gender oppression and by harsh labour work. Urban working women undergo a completely different mode of patriarchal exploitation, where they experiences sexual harassment at workplace and have high late night safety risks in returning home from work. In India, many social organizations have focused more on the issues pertaining to urban women, whereas women in the rural areas are still deprived of basic amenities like, health and sanitation. Therefore, "Call for change is only concentrated in urban India, with the rural counterpart much on the periphery." (Batish1)

India is a land of multiple religions too, where all religions have constructed the gender norms for women according to their own beliefs. Religions like, Hinduism, Sikhism and Christianity are more liberal in their outlook toward women than conservative religions like Islam, which has always been most oppressive and stern in its attitude towards women. Uma Narayan, therefore, rightly comments, "Indian feminism is clearly a response to issues specifically confronting many Indian women" (13). The issues pertaining to Indian feminism, therefore, cannot be assimilated under one broad category.

Feminism as women liberation movement,

though has often been criticized by the Indian patriarchal society but with globalization and modernization, women in India too have struggled for their rights and independent identity. The issues of women in India differ considerably with the women in the West but both have always aimed for establishing a society which is based on the notions of equality and respect between the two genders. Feminism as a movement does not believe in overturning patriarchy with

matriarchy but it envisions a world, where a woman is first acknowledged as a human being than according to her biological essentialist nature. Marilyn French, a prominent feminist writer advocates the aim of feminism as:

The ultimate goal of feminism is to change the society. Feminism work to educate both the sexes, to show the suicidal nature of domination. (380)

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