

Gender Discrimination and its Impact on Socio-Cultural Life of Indian Women:

A Feminist Perspective

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Gender discrimination is a perennial issue that rendered matriarchy dormant and passive till the dramatization of Ibsen's play 'A Doll's House'. This is the first feminist play that broke new ground by provoking the women section of the society to clamour for their emancipation and liberation. In the wake of its publication the wave of revolt against patriarchy flooded the national and social life of other countries of the world. This issue further gained momentum after the evolution and dissemination of the theory of feminism in 1970. Since then gender discrimination has been raising storm of controversy and protest in the community of women against marginalization and subordination to which they have been subjected by men for generations because of patriarchal hegemony and sovereignty.

In the context of vulnerability of women Western critics like Kate Millett, Henry Millers, Sheila Mcleod and Beauvoir have vehemently denounced in their books the inherent dominance of male over female in every sphere of life and commiserated the persecuted women attributing their tragedy to their servitude and subservience to men. Kate Millett in 'Sexual Politics' considers the chauvinism of male as the power nexus. In this regard she refers to Henry Miller's 'Sexus' and comments "a male assertion of dominance over a weak complimant and rather unintelligent female". (1)

1. Sheila Mcleod a critic of Lawrence elucidates the term power nexus with

reference to latter's novel "Men and Women" "Women's work has long been downgraded and devalued when compared to man's work. Male muscular strength has been prized above the female capacity for physical endurance". (2)

2. Indian tradition and culture have implanted the root of gender distinction in Indian life since the Vedic age and strengthened its trunk for centuries of years by widening its gulf of difference. It is on the basis of gender distinction that male chauvinism reigns supreme in its national and social life in India. From ancient time down to the 20th century this social evil of gender issue has been getting deeply rooted into Indian way of life and jeopardizing existential stability and social security of Indian women. Matriarchy has been languishing from the days of yore up to the independence of India because of suppression and repression by patriarchy.

If we retrospect the past and review the history of women's position in India and compare it with their present circumstances we notice considerable difference in their status. In the Vedic age women enjoyed social security and safety because of exalted conceptualization of womanhood that deserved universal respect and reverence.

An identical statement is made by a critic named Ramesh Ch. Dutt. "Women were honoured in ancient India more perhaps than among any other ancient nations on the face of the globe. They were

considered the intellectual companions of their husbands". 3. Sukantala Rao too holds the same view "Woman was regarded with due respect in every sphere of life and she was not subject to any of the miraculous laws of an unsympathetic society". 4. Sri Aurobindo supports this view and states "In India the institution of slavery was practically absent and the women had at first a free and more dignified position than in Greece and Rome". 5. The statements made by the critics mentioned above highlight the position of Indian women in the Vedic age. They were looked upon as the epitome of purity, chastity and fidelity. Epitomization of these virtues sublimated their womanhood.

Indian mythologies portray the exemplary characters of Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Mandodari and Gandhari and extol their magnanimity considerably. These mythical characters are illustrative of chastity, fidelity and devotion to their husbands. Indian Sanskrit literature too idealizes the characters of Sakuntala, Savitri, Urvashi and Damayanti and hails them virtuous and iconic in order to inspire modern women to emulate their qualities as worth imitating. Raja Sekhar's Kavya Meemansa also throws light on the virtues of Indian women. The Vedic society treated women as deity regardless of gender distinction. In familial life they were looked upon as ardhagini which suggests that women are the inseparable parts of their husbands. They co-operated with their husbands in every walk of life. Neither of the couple claimed his or her superiority of status in their marital life.

There are two schools of version about the femininity of women. Each of the statements is contrary to the other

version. According to the school of religious views a woman is the best gift of God to men. She was deified as Laxmi, Saraswati, Durga and Chandi and adored in the society.

The second school of thought states that a woman is an embodiment of evil on account of which she is cursed as devil, witch and a sorceress. It further advocates that the best way to merge with God is to shun the company of a woman who cannot attain salvation after death.

6. In order to lend support to these statements, instances are borrowed from Meemansa. Sita the devoted wife of Ramachandra was an emblem of chastity and devotion to her husband. She sacrificed all her comforts and happiness for the sake of her husband.

If we look to the other side of her image, Sita was exiled in to the forest by Ramachandra who suspected the immaculacy of her chastity. Such a suspicion arose in the mind of her husband towards the character of his wife for her being a woman. Similarly Draupadi the wife of Arjuna is also recognized as a chaste lady for she was regularly undergoing an ordeal of chastity and evincing her immaculacy. The same chaste lady, Draupadi had to face the humiliation of denudation by the Kauravas for being a woman.

There are divergences of views with regards to the chastity and character of these mythical women. It is however incontrovertible that these mythical characters have been calumniated on the ground of gender disparity. Nevertheless, the dignity of the status of matriarchy maintained in the Vedic age persisted till the dawn of medieval period in Indian

history after which their position declined and degenerated in to slavery. All restrictions and prohibitions were imposed on their activities and deportment by men. "Marxists perceive women as in the position of a social class exploited by patriarchy at all levels economic, political, ideological" (6)

7. In the medieval India Indian society was characterized by gender distinction that exerted its impact on the social and cultural life of women. The patriarchy in the then society domineered over women and subjected them to slavery. In the context of gender Catherine Stimpson says 'Cultural laws of gender demand that feminine and masculine must play off against each other in the great drama of binary opposition.... in the patriarchal culture, the struggle must end in the victory of the masculine'.(7) The sufferings of the female knew no bound at all and they dared not divulge their reaction or grief. Their miseries and plight came to light with the publication of novels on women by the women novelists who emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. Swarna Kumari Ghosal, Rajlaxmi Devi, Cornelia Sorabji, Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Santha Rama Rau are some of the women writers, who took it a challenge to highlight the predicament of Indian women with a commitment to reform the custom of gender discrimination in India. 8. These writers exploited their skill of writing to fictionalize the tragedy of women with a view to evoking the response of the social reformers. Their principal objective was to motivate them to revolutionize Indian society in favour of women.

Krupabai Sathianathan's stories **Kamala;** A **Story of Hindu Life** and **Saguna;** A

Story of Native Christian Life, Shevanti Bai Nikambe's novel **Ratnabailia,** Rajlaxmi Devi's **The Hindu Life,** Cornelia Sorabji is **Love and Life Behind Purdah,** Iqbalunnisa Hussain's **Purdah and Polygamy** and Kamala Das's **Alphabet of lust** and **A Doll for Child Prostitute** are some of the significant works which focus on the persecuted life of Indian women in their social and familial life. In all these novels women are represented as encaged animals. A lady in Indian society grows up in restriction of her father and brother and after her marriage she remains absolutely under the control of her husband. Thus a lady is denied freedom from her childhood till her death. Indian society considers a husband to be a sheltering tree. Manu comments "A shelter tree "Without the tree you are dangerously unprotected and vulnerable".(8) Women work strenuously and rot miserably in domestic life to ingratiate and appease their husbands and other male members but nevertheless they suffer physical and mental torture inflicted on them by men. In this regard the character of Padma drawn by Salman Rushdie is worth citing. The novelist depicts the husband of Padma as aggressive and tyrannical and comments. "He degrades her, derides her, exploits her and still expects her to be loyal to him. (9) Manu too supports this view and says "Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as God." (10)

10. Worse is the predicament of the Muslim women in Muslim countries as well as in India. With this regard the

Muslim women novelists like Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Attia Hussain have reflected on the miseries and drudgery of the ladies of this community. They are denied the right to go out of their houses for shopping and marketing or for witnessing any kind of cultural performances presented in public. In case of inevitable necessity they are coerced to put on burqa to cover their entire body so as to conceal it. Many ladies in Afghanistan have been brutally killed by the extremists for not putting on burqa. Besides, a Muslim lady is prohibited from making love or falling in love with any young man of the same caste. Muslim custom strictly precludes love marriage whereas the Hindu ladies can indulge in lovemaking and romance with any young man even outside their caste.

Gender distinction is strictly maintained in the Muslim community in Afganistan, Pakistan, South Arabia, Iran and Teheran. Women in these countries are bound by fetters of rigid customs and orthodoxy. In this context it is relevant to refer to the autobiographical account of Teslima Nasreen who divulges her resentment due to restriction imposed on her by the Muslim Community of Bangla Desh. She was not allowed to go any where but to school. She was scolded several times for her interest in games like cricket and football played by boys but was encouraged to play with dolls which she hated. From her childhood she developed a strong sense of social justice around her. Her personal experiences have determined her feminist ideas. In an interview she recalls and states. "When I was only nine, I felt the discrimination against women for the first time". (11)

11. The women novelists who appeared in the pre-independence period have endeavoured through writing to ameliorate the plight of Indian women but they have unremark ably achieved their predetermined goals. However, a rapid improvement in their condition was noticed after the emergence of a new group of women novelists who have fictionalized the tragedy of persecuted women in order to effect a reform in their community. These novelists are Attia Hussain, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Rama Mehta, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapoor and Bharati Mukherjee. They have introduced in to their novels a new class of women to inspire the oppressed women to challenge the autonomy and autocracy of patriarchy.

Let us turn our attention to some of the pictures of new women drawn by the new group of women novelists of the post independence period.

12. One of these novelists is Attia Hussain who introduces in her novel **Sunlight on a Broken Column** a heroine of undaunted and rebellious nature. This heroine boldly revolts against the joint family system. She lives a secured and sheltered life strangely in a Muslim family where gender discrimination is acute. She refuses to live like an encaged bird in the family. Further she takes a bold decision to marry Ameer a young man of her choice in the face of opposition of the Muslim community and asserts her determination. She had to face an unpleasant situation because of the resentment of her aunt who remarked about her obstinacy in the following words "you have been defiant and disobedient you have put yourself above your duty to the family." (12) In her

conflict between society and individual Laila triumphs over impediments and marries her lover irrespective of family's disapproval of her choice. Laila further opposes the Muslim culture of putting on burqua by way of self pity and resents sitting in a curtained car. In this novel Attia Hussain has assailed with an undertone of reform the orthodox conventions that enslave a Muslim lady.

Anita Desai is another novelist who has voiced out her feminist objective through her novels **Clear Light of Day** and **Fasting Feasting**. She has drawn out the characters of the protagonists as new women of new outlook. Bim the central character of the novel **Clear light of Day** has a strong ambition and will to achieve emotional and economic independence. With this predetermination she deliberately restrains herself from getting married in order to live independently and she indeed succeeds in her mission. Similarly, Uma the heroine of **Fasting Feasting** stands far superior to Thabvals's women characters Radha, Tarla and Amrit in respect of determination, courage and perseverance. Anita Desai asserts that her women protagonists are new women with a difference in attitude and vision. They persevere tenaciously with strong will to promote their own condition.

Another woman novelist who also follows the footsteps of Attia Hussain and Anita Desai in introducing new women in her novels is Nayantara Sahgel. She has professed her feminist perspective about women in her works. She is preoccupied in her novel **The Day in Shadow** with modern women's quest for sexual freedom and self-realization Simriti the protagonist in this novel stands courageous enough to divorce her

husband Som on account of incompatibility of his attitude and temperament. She struggles against all adversities of life without succumbing to their blows and succeeds in asserting her independence and individuality. Simriti combated gender discrimination and triumphed over this evil.

13. Rama Mehta belongs to the new group of women novelists who have written with a commitment to emancipate the women from the tyranny of patriarchy and alleviate their tribulations. In her novel **Inside the Haveli**, Rama Mehta introduces to us a new woman named Geeta, a Bombay bred girl of modernist perspective. She marries Ajaya son of Rajput family of Rajasthan and finds herself in a suffocating atmosphere of rigid traditional restriction. She is debarred from coming out of the Haveli for shopping and roaming only because she is a woman a daughter in-law of a Rajput family. But Geeta being an educated girl rebelled against the rigidity of prohibition imposed on her freedom and activities. She bears patience and fortitude and persists in her struggle to dismantle the fabric of Rajput conventions and restrictions. After prolonged struggle she eventually succeeds in bringing about a change in the tradition and orthodoxy of the family. Geeta represents new women who are born with an econoclastic objective to effect a change in the social setup of India.

Shashi Deshpande is another novelist who typifies herself as a combatant against patriarchy. Her novels are the vehicles through which she assails and deprecates the sovereignty and hegemony of male persons. She has portrayed her women to be bold, defiant and combatant.

Let us analyse her women characters in the light of her novels.

Her novel The Dark Holds No Terrors presents the character of Sarita who combats the oppression of her mother and architects her career as a renowned surgeon. She forsakes her aggressive parents and achieves success triumphantly in her profession as a doctor. She marries a classmate of her own choice against her mother's wishes. Sarita exemplifies herself as a new man who transcends her feminine limitations by defying parents and traditions in order to attain fulfillment in her ambition.

In her other novel Roots and Shadows Deshpande explores the inner struggle of her protagonist Indu who represents modern educated woman of new generation. In this context O.P Bhatnagar says "the novel (13) deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom." Indu repels the interference of her Akka and opposes her over bearing imposition of views Although she encounters many hurdles in her life yet she sustains patience in achieving her aspiration. She detests womanhood from the core of her heart and asserts her independence. Out of hatred for womanhood she expresses her sentiment and says "Woman, woman, women..... I got sick of it (14)

In her next novel That Long Silence, the woman protagonist struggles throughout her life to adapt herself to her marital life. Jaya the heroine of the novel is a new woman educated and influenced by modern concepts and Western outlook. She finds her marital life vitiated and consequently undergoes a long period of anguish and agony but she overcomes them with a spirit of challenge. The feminist rebellion and defiance

epitomized in Jaya's conduct are symptomatic of the identity of a new woman who transcends her cultural boundaries in order to stabilize her existence in Indian society. Deshpande does not entertain the concept that women are inferior beings who must remain passive and submissive. She believes that the new women shall gain power to crusade against the patriarchal dominance and demolish the barriers of restrictions on matriarchy.

Her subsequent novel Small Remedies is a sensitive portrayal of women's quest for identity in a male dominated world. The novel presents the picture of Madhu's efforts to thrive in her shattered family life. She refers to two women Savitribai and Leela who are considerably bold and rebellious in their activities. Savitribai elopes with a Muslim young man and dwells with strangers in an unknown town by virtue of her courage and adaptability. Madhu narrates the life of another lady Leela who was fiercely independent and firmly committed to the Communist Ideology. Savitribai daughter Munnar is also a lady of independent attitude. All these ladies are represented as strong headed and unyielding. They protest any kind of injustice and ill-treatment meted out to them. Thus, these women transcend the cultural constraints and profess themselves as new women of modern India.

Another renowned women novelist, who flourishes in the current decade is Manju Kapoor She portrays her women characters in the new mould of new women who are predisposed to transgress their limitations. She has introduced Virmati as a new woman in her novel Difficult Daughters. Virmati prosecutes

her studies at R.B.S.L. College with a strong resolve in spite of opposition of the family. She derives inspiration from her cousin Sakuntala and from her classmate Swarnalata. She imbibes their courage and spirit to behave in an undaunted manner. She did not deviate from the path of her decision regarding studies, love marriage and services. Manju Kapoor has deliberately depicted the characters of Swarnalata and Sakuntala as practical, decisive, firm and obstinate in their social activities. The novelist has projected these women characters with a feminist perspective and objective.

In the second novel A Married Woman Manju Kapoor has cast the character of Astha as an educated and Delhi-bred girl. She is a working lady in the metropolitan city. She is influenced by modernity and sophistication in the cosmopolitan environment. Astha fights for self-assertion and recognition of her identity as a new woman who defies male chauvinism and repudiates orthodoxy. She is audacious enough to revolt against her parents for their interference in her activities. She disregards them for opposing her decisions and asserts her individuality as a modern woman. Manju Kapoor does not tarnish the images of her women characters by characterizing them as passive, submissive, subservient and tolerant. "The new woman today challenges the Indian notion of identifying woman as an angel in the house. She is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society."(15)

All women characters portrayed by Manju Kapoor in her novels have triumphantly transcended the bounds of feminine limitations. Another woman

novelist of the new group is Bharati Mukherjee. She too disregards the notion of gender difference and portrays her protagonists as women of revolutionary spirit. In her novels her heroines appear as new women of post-colonial Indian life and come forward to challenge the patriarchal sovereignty. In the novel Jasmine the heroine figures herself as a daredevil who goes to America unescorted and unaccompanied by any male person. She musters her courage in an alien land to kill her rapist and proves her chastity. She gets herself acclimatized to the new environment and social life in America. Jasmine is exceptionally courageous and adventurous in all her activities. She faithfully defies gender disparity and asserts her independence as a new woman.

In Manju Kapoor's other novel The Tiger's Daughter the heroine Tara appears as a lady of unusual smartness and recklessness. As she returns to Calcutta from America, she behaves presumptuously and haughtily without any inhibition and hesitation. She is bold and overconfident in her aspiration. She is implacably adamant in accomplishing her predetermined objectives. Thus, we notice that Mukherjee's protagonists also transgress the bounds of social norms.

If we attempt a comparative analysis of the characters of Mukherjee with those of her predecessors, we find a good deal of difference in their characterization. The women of Mukherjee are superior to those of Desai and Deshpande in respect of their will and decision. Deshpande's protagonists are stronger than those of Desai in as much as they attempt to resolve their problems independently by a process of temporary withdrawal.

Deshpande remarkably succeeds in portraying stronger women who do not break under the weight of challenges of life but still stronger are the protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee who have the courage and smartness to leave home and go abroad to settle down as immigrants in the West. Mukherjee's heroines are also expatriates like her and attempt to build a home far away from their parental residence. The Tiger's Daughter recounts the novelist's similar experiences as an expatriate. Although Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee have never claimed to be feministic in their objectives yet their protagonists manifest the spirit of feminism in their activities. Each of the heroines is an individual seeking an independent autonomous existence of her own ignoring gender discrimination.

Now, it is relevant to refer to the themes of the novels of some of the male novelists in the context of women's transcendence of cultural boundary.

Salman Rushdie focuses in his novel Midnight's Children on the plight of Padma the woman protagonist who becomes a victim to masculine might and male chauvinism. She is a devoted nurse and a docile soul of Saleem Sinai who treats her as a bitch and calls her a witch. The way he behaves with Padma suggests his repugnance for her on the ground of her gender disparity. Saleem invariably estimates his masculine power to be superior to his wife's and her gender to be inferior. It is in view of gender that Saleem always ill treats Padma and domineers over her. Indian patriarchy marginalizes women in general and assigns them tedious and troublesome tasks in domestic life in consideration of their second sex. In this novel Rushdie presents the tragic picture of the familial

life of Padma who represents many persecuted women of India. They cannot voice out their grievances in the court of law or in public. Rushdie indirectly criticizes the patriarchal hegemonistic attitude for marginalizing and subordinating women to men but he has not emboldened Padma to protest the ill-treatment meted out to her by her husband. She is timid, pusillanimous and self-restraint.

In contrast to Salman Rushdie Mulk Raj Anand has introduced in his novel the Old Man and The Cow a character who transgresses her limitations as a woman. She is Gauri the woman protagonist who becomes a prey to gender distinction and consequently becomes rebellious against society. She had to lead a life of groaning and moaning under the pressure of male sovereignty. When she goes beyond the limit of endurance she becomes obdurate and hard hearted. She combats the aggressiveness of her husband and curbs his ego and arrogance of a man of chauvinistic attitude. Once Panchi her husband strikes her and coerces her to abandon his house on the issue of her virginity. Gauri too reacts to his assault and retorts "If I am cursed on you, I will go away and if you strike me again, I will hit you back" (16) unlike Rushdie Anand in this novel imparts courage and reactionary spirit to Gauri and emboldens her to oppose the tyrannical attitude of her husband.

Thus we have traversed a long way in our discussion on gender issue and now we shall focus on its impact on cultural life of women. All the novelists mentioned above have delineated the plight of Indian women in their social and familial life but they have ignored the impact on the culture of matriarchy.

Women in India have remained traditionally incarcerated within the four walls of the house. They are unfairly debarred from witnessing any spectacular performances such as procession, pageantry, parade and ceremonies in public places. They are also forbidden to take part in dance, drama and recitation on the ground of their being women where as male members of the family enjoy the rights and latitude of viewing such entertaining cultural performances. Many Indian ladies are gifted with the talent of singing and dancing but prohibition to take part in such performances overshadows their accomplishments in these arts. Even after independence when women enjoy the franchise, they are denied the liberty to present cultural performances.

The situation is worse in the case of the Muslim women who are not allowed to participate or view any kind of cultural activities in consideration of their gender disparity. This kind of deprivation renders the women culturally deficient and bankrupt of artistic excellence. But women in foreign countries are free to participate in dance, drama and recitation because of absence of gender discrimination. They perform ball dance, Jazz dance and pop dance without inhibition and take pride in their performances. But Indian patriarchy prohibits ladies from taking part in cultural activities for fear of social scandal.

Women are forbidden to study the Vedas and join certain ritualistic performances. They are also denied the right to perform priestly services in the temples. Such discrimination antagonizes not only the women community but also the intellectuals and the elite. The

reformers oppose this long persisting social evil by way of public demonstration and agitation. Gender discrimination in modern India has given rise to turmoil and unrest among women organizations that invigorate themselves through agitation measures. The women activists actively challenge the autonomy and autocracy of patriarchy and endeavour for its obliteration in the country.

In the present decade the situation has undergone a drastic change in favour of women who utter the slogans of women empowerment and frequently launch movements to assert their importance. The political and social atmosphere of India is reverberated by women's vociferous clamour for their protection and security. In deed their power of unity has been recognized by Govt. who formulates stringent laws to ensure protection and safeguard their position.

Thus, gender discrimination at the close of the century is gradually losing its ground because of frequent movements launched by women to extirpate this social malady. Mulk Raj Anand remarked in this regards " It is no longer possible for man either to keep women suppressed or neglect her lawful liberty equality, identity and individuality". (17)

After the conceptualization of feminism and its dissemination in the Western and Eastern countries in 1970, the waves of this new ideology have flooded the women community in India and submerged the old customs and traditions which were prejudicial to the interest of Indian matriarchy. Further, the hurricane of modernity blew to their life through the windows of Western education and culture and enthused them to break the shackles of old traditional restrictions

and prohibitions on women. Now the widespread awareness of feminism and modernism has given birth to feminist movements which initiate the gender struggle and gender power politics. The overall solution to all these problems lies in empowerment of women rather than in their emancipation. Indian matriarchy is now encouraged and imbued with the spirit of feminism to launch frequent movements and agitations with a view to securing and stabilizing its position in social and domestic life. Women demand reservation of seats in the parliament and state assemblies and insist on execution of legal provisions and welfare programmes for amelioration of their condition. The condition of women of urban areas is gradually getting better off because of their growing consciousness of their rights and privileges where as women of rural areas are totally neglected and there is hardly any improvement in their condition. Since they are illiterate and ignorant, they live in tradition-bound society. They have to submit to the whims and caprice of the

male members of their families. Hence, feminist movements should be frequently launched in the rural areas in order to awaken the rural women from the deep slumber of complacency and passivity so that they shall be inspired to combat the autocracy of patriarchy. However, the network of feminist movement is extended to the rural areas to regenerate female activists.

At the end of the century, the black cloud of women's clamour for power envelopes the entire political horizon of India and foreshadows the rain of power on their community. Consequently ladies shall be empowered to transcend the social, cultural and moral norms in future. In conclusion it is predictable that gender issue shall not persist any longer in Indian milieu and it has to be obliterated in the ensuing decade because of women's awareness and consciousness of social injustice and persecution meted out to them. The process of decadence of this social evil has already set in due to the influence of Western culture and feminist ideology.

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