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THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL:  
A STUDY OF WOMANHOOD IN THE SELECTIVE WRITINGS OF CORNELIA SORABJI

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ABSTRACT

Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954), the first female lawyer in India, is also a lady who is little known for her exploration of the struggle and hardship of women in Indian household. She discloses in her works the many different ways of oppression that women suffer beneath “the ecstasy, tragedy and comedy” [...] which are unobserved even by a feminist philosopher” (Purohit,2). Her works are a testimonial to the exploitation and injustice that every Indian woman undergoes in the name of tradition. The Indian women is born to live with the idea that she is only a commodity who ought to be of some use to society to claim her right to existence. The idea, she is fed with since her childhood, becomes her religion. She little realizes that the idea is the product of an ideology built on patriarchal terms to establish men supremacy on women. A close analysis of Sorabji’s works reveal how men cut off from all emotional and moral responsibility enslave women. It also tries to understand how women more than men adapt and adjust in the environment; conform and comply to the rules considering every word uttered as true and unchanging. Her blind adherence to custom, demonstrates the power of male authority sanctifying every kind of oppression as natural and fixed.

**Key words:** womanhood, idea, being, patriarchy, political.

In order to cope with gender inequality, it is imperative to understand how gendered boundaries are produced. The Indian mythology presents the nature of the gender divide through the concept of *ardhanareswara*. The idea behind is to delineate the ascribed status of women to reach an understanding concerning the position of women. The iconography depicts the structure of the divide based on patriarchal norms. The *ardhanareswara* is essentially male; the female part is only a support system. The female occupies a part of the male and not vice-versa. The female unlike the male is a dependent. The right side associated with head always and forever represent male whereas the left

side associated with heart represents the female. Although the synthesis of half male- half female in a single body symbolize how man and woman contribute equally towards achieving a common goal, it also reflects why women are given a minor role than man in society. The problems of female performing a subordinate role and being looked down upon by their male counterparts emanate from social and political structures. The problems though seem individual and one’s own are not personal. They reflect the workings of power relationship between male and female. They are political problems. Hence, the interlinking of personal and political.

The phrase, personal is political, first appeared as a title of an essay in Carol Hanisch's *Notes from the Second Year* in 1970 as part of women liberation project. The word political unlike electoral politics has a broader connotation. Hanisch argued that women's "personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution" (76). It implies that the unequal gender relations maintained by the male dominated society in the name of tradition, values, beliefs, religion have political causes and women need to take action to prove to society that they suffer from no personal inadequacies. To add to the above idea, Lord Hobhouse, former law member of the Governor General's Council in India, in a letter to Cornelia Sorabji, remarks, "the traditions of the multitudinous social aggregates in India, all strengthened and endeared to them by a halo of religion [...], socially keeping each in their places just as the insensible force of gravitation and the insensible pressure of atmosphere do physically for all of us" (Sorabji,2). The women live as a gendered subject forsaking the rationality to act such with a hope that her adherence and obedience may win her the title of a good wife, a perfect wife. They remain mute followers of tradition passed on to them in each generation. Their acceptance of the norms and principles as natural and fixed breeds discontentment. Heidi Hartmann summarizes, "Women's discontent [...] (is) a response to a social structure in which women are systematically dominated, exploited, and oppressed."(100). The systematic oppression is a result of power relationship where men define themselves as more equal to women. The self-assigned power to manage everything, gives men the power to rule over women and keep them subjugated. Hence political.

Cornelia Sorabji, the first female advocate of India, is a figure to be read and remembered for many of her women centred contributions in Indian history. A Parsi born into a Christian family in India in 1866 and educated in Britain, Sorabji was committed to serve the Indian women through her selfless service. The Indian women was essentially viewed as remaining "submissive to patriarchal

authority in her household" and as a responsible citizen, "a desire rose within (Sorabji) to do all in (his) power to help them" (Gooptu,30). Her interest in the position of Indian women in the late 1800's finds expression in some of her works such as *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1902), *Sun Babies* (1904), *Between the Twilights* (1908). Her works may seem to be a collection of short stories but they are not stories told in the traditional way. More than a conventional tale, they carry a reportage that depicts a meek and lowly character of Indian women who under the roof of male supremacy live with enforced domesticity. The women and their uncomplaining attitude adheres to the deeply embedded laws of subservience and self-sacrifice that may lead to salvation. The set of false beliefs ingrained by men in the mind of women is meant to satisfy the vested interests of men. As Hubel aptly said, even "the conservative imperialist, bent on holding on to political power in India, had a stake in the social construction of Indian women as oppressed, both by her society and her husband" (111). Thus, the personal issues of women are a result of the exercise of power by the dominant group, the patriarchy.

The present paper is an attempt to study Indian woman depicted in the writings of Cornelia Sorabji fusing a second wave feminist slogan "personal is political". The purpose is two-fold: to enrich an understanding of colonial narratives, to underscore the connection between personal experience and political structures, to understand how a less known writer such as Sorabji depicts the state of Indian woman. The paper intends to hypothesise that women are rooted to the world of being by man-made dogmatic principles, restraining them from becoming the change. Being limits the self whereas becoming is open and evolving. Women remain locked in a relationship burdened by their states of being.

The stories display an effort to depict the plight of Indian women who is recognised by men because of her usefulness. The Indian woman is constantly "regulated by social needs and by mens appreciation of her value" (Sorabji, "Love" 4 ). Cornelia Sorabji,s works significantly open a myriad of stories happening in the daily life of a woman

who irrespective of her age is considered ignorant and impractical. Her stories bring the private and personal matters of a family to political analysis and discussion. They highlight the orthodoxy writ large in the society which amounts to suppression of women. The orthodoxy is felt in matters of child marriage, position of widow, the keeping of a zenana, maintaining the practice of lordship, religious indoctrination, in the art of possession, in laying the duties of womanhood, in the attitude of men towards women, in defining the traditions of a Hindu marriage, in the act of idolization, in their belief in superstitions etc. The women strongly hold on to their respective roles in every stage of their life to maintain the law and custom of the male dominated society. The wise woman reflecting her thoughts about the fate of women says, "the whole duty of womanhood – to be a good wife: to omit no act of ceremonial Hinduism" ("Between"43). Though she is addressed as the wise woman, her words carry no wisdom. She is only a victim to be pitied.

The story *Pestilence at Noonday*, Love and Life behind the Purdah, depicts unreasonable reverence shown to men by their wives as a sign of compliance. The abrupt conversation with which the story opens reveals the character of Sita, the helpless wife, living at the mercy of her callous husband. The expression "my lord" and the language full of imperative sentences speak much about the society of the colonial times.

I have been very kind to you, letting them teach you most of the things I learnt myself, and saving you from household drudgeries. And I have even let you call me by my name, and raise your eyes in my presence, and dine, sitting by my side (4).

It also depicts the complacent nature of women who have given in to be tamed like cattles. The husband who has his appearance only in the opening scene later disappears leaving his wife and son behind so as never to return. The husband, who warns his wife to be in the best of her behaviour so as to keep him attracted to her, acts in the most inhuman way by giving false promises and also letting his innocent family die in the village affected by plague. Sita on the other hand lives behind "to please (him) by being a good daughter to (his) old father" (5). The

word tradition is, therefore, a subtle prank to persuade women behave in a certain way that would satisfy men. The story, further, reveals the way a woman is perceived by men, that is, "daily objects" created "for (his) convenience and ministrations" (5).

The structure of a society is based on certain laws and custom. Any deviance is considered a threat to smooth operation of the system. The system does not allow any fundamental change. The system itself is religion to the mass. It is a set of ideas that define the purpose of creation. Men and women are assigned different roles based on the idea of masculinity and femininity. The female sex is meant to provide an heir to the family. It is as Sorabji reflects "there was the idea again, the central idea in all Hindu thought in relation to women... the worshipper of the life bringer" ("Between"36). The conduct of the ceremony of worshipping young girls post menstruation reflects deep seated laws and conventions. The dignity of a woman is maintained depending upon her ability to procreate. And she becomes complete only when she delivers a son to the family. A girl child is seldom welcomed in an Indian family. A girl child is regarded as a liability. She does not add to the prosperity of the family. She brings disappointment to all. The society, on the other hand, considers the boy child, a blessing in disguise. The boy child is talked about in the *Queen who stood Erect* as "their passport to heaven, their token of the visit of god to the world [...], the saviour of those who have been closest to them in life-husband, father..." (117). An echo of the idea is expressed in *Greater Love*, when the husband who fails to become a father to a son by his unyielding wife murmurs in his sleep, "a son to light my funeral pyre, to pray for my soul!" ("Love"38). Such a conservative attitude is so deeply ingrained in the mind of women that any effort to uproot it will go in vain. Even the big mother of the story firmly believes in the idea and never for a moment doubts it. Similarly, a strict adherence to law and custom by women is also evinced in *Sunbabies*. In the story *Kamala Ranjan*, the speaker shares the orthodoxy in Hindu family that denies entry of English nurses even at the time of urgency. Even though the speaker tries to reform, the women are

rooted to their bondage so much as not to take the child from the English nurse arms, "till one of their own caste had washed and reclothed her" ("Sunbabies"19).

To an Indian family, every word uttered by a man becomes a well-accepted theory which carries the approval of the almighty. It is thought to be natural, fixed and unchanging. Cornelia Sorabji in *The Queen Who Stood Erect* shares the expectations of a society in relation to women. Women ought to keep their voices low, they ought to whisper and not talk in presence of others, they ought to love whom the lord honours, they ought to show no choice in marriage. In this context, the Indian girl speaks of her boy husband, "we grow up to think that such an one belongs to us, [...] we take the relationship as you do brothers and sisters; you do not choose them; you do not, however, therefore of necessity, resent them" ("Between"121-22). The practice of lordship is again highlighted in *Devi-Goddess*. Sorabji, the concerned author, observes "the definite place in the scheme of life, allotted to women in a country where woman is of no account, except as handmaid to her lord man" (36).

The Hindu women is conditioned to believe that everything she does is part of a religious act. Her day begins and ends in monotony. Every day is the same for her. She understands the fact that her existence counts as long as she is able to perform her duties well. Her family is of primary significance to her. "Her worship of the gods, of her husband, her children, they are all the same, part of her religion, and they make her life" (32).

Likewise, in *Deter far of ignorance*, the author is presented with a world view that defames Goddess Durga. It is believed that Goddess Durga represents shakti and strength. But the speaker infuses the idea that her strength is but the collective flow of power from gods and not goddesses. The act of conquering the evil would not have been possible had the gods not bestowed their strength to Goddess Durga. Goddess Durga, therefore, mediates between good and evil. She therefore should not enjoy the name and fame.

Men have a very low opinion regarding the intellectual capacity of a woman. They feel that her virtue only lies in being "his occasional amusement,

and always his slave and the physical element in the eventual saving of his soul" (44).

The women live with an idea since their childhood. The idea is filtered into their minds through several institutions such as marriage, family, religion. They all give the same message though the medium is different. The first and foremost rule that it teaches is obedience. They deny them the right to education and instead give them in marriage at a very young age. As a result, they shut all possibility for women to think and analyse their state leave alone the power to question. They live with fear, anxiety unlike the men. At times they helplessly become a victim of polygamy. In *Devi-Goddess*, the youngest bride in the household- "she is but ten years of age" was received "by the elders standing at the head of the zenana stairs- the baby hostess!" (31). The little girl, who earlier served her parents, now submits to the demands of the household. She fails to understand the drudgery into which she is pushed. In *Devi Goddess*, the wise woman says, "even in her parents' house she remains the possession of her husband" (39). Having being married at such a young age she lives in agony all her life with a hope that death alone may relieve her from the pain inflicted upon her by the social structures. She suffers more when the husband she is betrothed to is much older. As a result, she becomes a widow even before her adulthood. The story, *A Child or Two*, carries the instance of two friends who betrothed their children even before birth. In such a case if there is an accidental death of the boy, the girl child becomes a widow even before birth. So "she may even be born a widow" (163). The state of a widow in a household is no different from that of cattles. She is blamed for her state. After all, a widow is a thing of ill-omen, to be cursed even by those who love her" (144). The only duty now left to her is pray to god to forgive the sins of her dead husband. Even in the state of a widow she is not free from her obligation towards her husband. The mother in law of the house is left with the "obligation to curse" (145). Unfortunately, the person cursing is as much an instrument of fate as the person cursed.

The men in the family are regarded as assets. They have freedom to act, right to education, right

to choose or not to choose, to reform, to rule. Hence privileged unlike women. In *Adoption*, the wild peacocks chained up guarding the chamber of the zenana till they learn the faces of the privileged ones" relate a serious gender divide of which even *Prakriti* or nature is a witness to(32). In *Shubala*, the speaker relates how girls change habits post marriage. Shubala, a child bride who played with Madan Mohan before marriage, undergoes a radical change in her daily routine when Madan Mohan says " but Shubala Married must be a story by itself. She lives in the Inside, and can no more play cricket or visit the mad old priest at the elephant-temple" (44). Quite contrary to *Shubala*, in *Love and Life*, the youngest and a child bride Piari finding it difficult to obey the etiquette of the zenana violated all rules and asks for more. She begins and ends her journey of life singing the following lines,

There was the Door to which I found no key!  
There was the Veil through which I could not see:  
Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee  
There was – and then no more of Thee and Me!(24)

The key is probably the key to the door of human heart and the veil is the veil of orthodoxy that forms a great divide between the husband and wife. She fails to realize that "we are all toys of time and space; some battered rather more than others, but all toys, and soon to give place to newer ones!" (24). Women also become a victim due to the superstitious beliefs of the society. Even superstitions are a part of the political strategy woven in the social structure to oppress women. In *Love and Death*, the Indian lady doctor unfortunately falls a victim to the false beliefs of the society. On hearing the messenger say, the gods will stay the plague for the willing sacrifice of a band of virgins, she voluntarily jumps into fire only to be consumed and end up terribly scarred leading to death in the hospital. The superstitious beliefs are again evinced in *A Living Sacrifice*. It presents the tale of twin sisters, Dwarki and Tani , one living alone as the husband is imprisoned whereas the other leading a married life. Unfortunately, Tani becomes a widow and is expected to perform sati. When she quivers, Dwarki leading the life as good as

that of a widow persuades her saying, "I would I had your chance. To buy immortality for a husband, is not this the crown of life, the bliss of death!" (48). In using the phrase "personal is political", Hanisch did not just intend to bring to light the structural problems suffered by women rather he intended to encourage women wake up to their pitiable condition and revolt in group to bring reform. Taking clue from Hanisch argument, Cornelia Sorabji's works are therefore, an appeal to women to stand up for themselves. He urges that they be assertive and break the socio- political structures that keep them confined. She can earn respect only when she pays respect to herself. Sorabji becomes more candid about her thoughts on women in *Portrait of Some Indian Women*, "a women's place in the national life will best be filled by the realization of herself" (148). In her opinion, "women are no longer object of pleasure but a pool of all the healthy values of life" ("Between"2). She ought to learn to claim her share of happiness as she is not always there to "graduate in giving and men in taking". She is equal to men in every aspect of life. In fact, she contributes to society in greater amounts as a life bringer which makes her superior to men. More than married women, Sorabji insists the widows to redeem the curse inflicted on them by taking the "foremost place in the regeneration of womanhood" (Sorabji, "Between"149).

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