

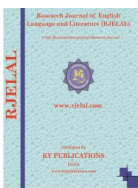


CONDITION OF WOMEN IN PRE AND POST- INDEPENDENT INDIA

SADAF MUSHTAQ NASTI

M.Phil., English

Email id: sadafnasti.sn@gmail.com



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Abstract

Different waves of feminism across the globe over the centuries have ventured to emancipate women from patriarchal hegemony and to create a place for them in society. Novelists across the lengths and breadths of the world, especially the novelists of Post-colonial era depict the realistic and true picture of women because: "Throughout history, woman has always occupied a secondary role in relation to men, being relegated to the position of the "other" ... Whereas man has been enabled to transcend and control his environment, always furthering the domain of his physical and intellectual conquests, woman has remained imprisoned within "immanence", remaining" a slave within the circle of duties imposed by her maternal and reproductive functions. (*A History of literary criticism: from Plato to the present* 682).

Keywords: feminism, women, patriarchal hegemony, women, other.

It is an interesting fact that Indian culture had initially paid and shown great regard and reverence to women. The Rig Veda bespeaks of great stature and freedom that a woman should have in society. The epics, Mahabharat and *Ramayan* both admonish of high prestige and position of women, their educational and marital rights and even the rights of working not under but at par with men. But the scenario altogether changed from the time of Smritis and *Dharmashastras* as the status of women started declining. They were regarded as child bearing machines, confined to the four walls of house and subordinated to the wishes and wills of their men. The origin of patriarchy and assumed female behavior in India can be traced back to the fabrication of *Smritis* and *Shastras* in 200 B.C wherein the rules were put down by Manu. In his book, *Manusmriti*, he proclaims,

By a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done

independently, even in her own house. Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons; a woman must never be independent. Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as god. (*Manusmriti: a sociological analysis* 6)

This perception clearly painted a customary stereotype for women who were bound to follow subordinate and assigned roles in comparison to men at every stage of their life which not only altered the social structure of India but also framed the archetypal picture of women as weak, submissive, feeble and secondary citizens in the entire Indian cosmogonic psychology. Women were not only deprived of the right to study the Vedas but were also labeled as slaves and sinners. The code of Manu was so harshly followed that the role of women was confined to the four walls of house, and

as such were bereft of the rights equal to man. Although the woman's lot kept changing within the family from time to time, yet it universally remained the subjacent one. She is still not given enough freedom as the common or universal lot of women in India is aptly bracketed by Shantha Krishnaswamy as:

She is a creature who as a child is sold off to strangers for a bridal price., or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family, or who as widow in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sita-Savitri', as an immortal. (*The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* 15

In India the concern regarding women's rights and their emancipation stands much ahead as compared to the other parts of the world especially West. Since pre-independence many prominent feminist writers and scholars have emboldened the objective of equal status for women in all walks of life. The status which women relish today in present epoch was neither attained due to the tenderness of men nor due to any natural phenomenon. It was rather the outcome of long endurance, struggle and sacrifice on part of women; that too only when society was in need of their contribution especially in the crisis of world wars, technological revolution and nationalism. In India, the colonial rule is also seen as a pioneer body in eradicating and abolishing the social crimes against women. Colonial fabrication of "Indian Culture" and reformation of Indian womanhood by means of 'social reform movement' precipitated in the shape of nationalism instead of feminism. But by the time of independence in 1947 when a Republic was born, the rights of women were given a due attention and consideration in the very making of constitution.

When in 1817, James Mill in his magnum opus book *History of India* wrote that the condition of women in any society determines its place in civilization, the words like 'woman' and 'nation' got new recognition. Women became an essential tool for colonial countries to legitimize their political power. The physical abuses, atrocities and injustice

done to Indian women became a confirmation for British rulers to launch their "civilizing mission". As foreigners they could proclaim themselves as the protectors of Indian women, saving them from the brutal phallogocentric practices. Before independence, there were considerable brutalities and barbarities in day to day customs of India like Sati – a funeral custom wherein widows were burnt alive on their dead husband's pyre, imposition of celibate widowhood, female infanticide and early childhood marriages. Colonial Missionaries vehemently pinpointed such practices to specify the stature of Indian women as meek and submissive, and Indian men as brutal and violent.

This was the condition of Indian women when the colonial education began. The elites largely from the upper class castes assimilated the philosophy of enlightenment viz humanism and individualism. They recognized the orthodox barbaric practices against women as a perceptible social evil and a civilizational derelict and as such social reforms began to emerge on part of these elites, with or without British help, to rectify these dominating and debasing features of conventional male-centered society. From 1820's to 1850's reformers, who not only favored large scale programs of women empowerment but also the legislative interruption by the colonial power led to the formation of organizations like the Arya Samaj in Northern India, Brahmo Samaj in Eastern India, the Theosophical Society in Southern India the Prarthana Samaj in Western India, thus bringing revolution across every nook and corner of India. In these social reform movements, women were at the forefront of the things as for the reformers women's liberation was an essential requirement to national regeneration. As a result these social campaigns lead to the abolition of Sati in 1829 and sanction of widow remarriage in 1856.

There was an improvement in women's cause in the early decades of 20th century which was the result of the movements led by the social reformers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Jotiba Phule. The involvement and participation of women emphasized by Mahatma Gandhi in his Non-violent movement also did a world of good to

women's cause and struggle. Ramchandra Guha in his article *Not by Faith Alone* states:

Woman is the companion, Gandhiji affirmed as early as 1918 with equal mental capacities and she has the right of freedom and liberty. He (Gandhi) dismissed the ideas put forward by Manu as an interpolation and if it was not an interpolation, he could only say that in Manu's days women did not have the status they deserved. (*The Sunday Express* 4)

In spite of everything, women in Indian society have always been recognized and identified by assigned stereotyped roles. She is someone's daughter, sister, wife or mother but not someone herself. These roles are assigned to her by the male centered society to label her as a property or possession of some male member. She has been dominated by the male chauvinism as a body, forever sacrificing, meek, caring, emotional and homebound. She is never glorified, idealized or admired as revolutionary, hard-working, active worker, intelligent or high-spirited person. She is always assumed to follow the established codes and norms led down by the society. She is exploitable as a commodity and can be utilized as socio-economic baits. In Indian society, the stature of women lies in the profound misogynist dogmas which have hegemonised women's perspective also and as a repercussion of it the women too appear to have taken their posture as granted.

In India reformers, saints, rebels, novelists and poets have championed and advocated the cause of women's rights. Gandhi gave a different dimension and direction to the Women's Movement in India. Through his noble ideas, he liberated women from servility, passivity and domesticity. He put before that men and women are not two different creatures but one and are like two sides of a same coin as they share social as well as political rights and complement each other. The social reform movement brought metamorphosis to the conditions of women by giving them Municipal vote rights dated back in 1885. But due the lack of interest in social problems, lack of opportunities for personal development and lack of education women

were put back to the early man's age where they were supposed to remain illiterate, shackled within house to perform activities like cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, washing and ironing, nourish children and die unheard death. But fortunately in 1922, The National Council of Women and in 1927-1930 All India Women's Conference put up a fight against the feudal forces which kept Indian women under domination. Sarojini Naidu – the Nightingale of India was in the limelight of the freedom struggle of India and she did much to retrieve and restore the Indian women from the shackles of superstition and slavery. Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins led the movement to achieve voting rights for Indian women and were successful in obtaining that in 1920-1921. After 1947, numerous laws were passed to give a broad spectrum of rights to Indian women.

The movements of Mahatma Gandhi and Raja Ram Mohan Roy turned out to be a great repose to women as they were escorted from the despotism of the prevalent social evils. Although the percentage of women relishing the fruit of freedom was still very low, yet the patriarchal image of woman like the orthodox Sita or Savitri was circumspectly substituted by the realistic one i.e. alienated and frustrated one. Furthermore, the initiation of liberal English education not only embossed a consciousness of freedom in women's minds but also brought remarkable changes in the life-style of middle-class people.

Conventionally, Indian culture is a male-oriented culture. Indian woman enveloped with several thick, floppy layers of ignorance, convention, reticence and prejudice in life as well as in literature had no sovereign existence. She was the mirror image of what Sylvia Plath calls her "the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow effacement at the wind's hand" (157). With the impact of western culture and education, in the first half of the 20th century, the Indian woman has re-originated as a new being. She no longer today is Damayant rather she is a Damini or Draupadi, a Joan of Arc or Nora or a Candida. Social reformers like Pandit Ishwar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Chandra Vidyasagar and political revolutionaries like Nehru and Gandhi gave a new direction to the cause of Indian woman.

In India, since antique times a woman's character and life was rigorously categorized; she was a mother, a daughter or a wife. In all these roles she had to devote herself to certain assigned norms; she had no autonomous identity and recognition as a human being. Indian society brands women as ideally affectionate, tender, dependent, meek and submissive. According to Sarabjit Sandhu,

The position of woman appears to be very strange. Like a pendulum she is swinging between the contrasting forces of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality and revolt and compromise. (*The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* 46).

In India, the woman is neither independent nor free. She is sandwiched between the two. During the period of Indian Renaissance, numerous cultures and sections sprang which devoted themselves to eradicate beliefs and dogmas which subjugated women and reduced them to an inferior status in the society. Most of the reformers interestingly devoted to the women's struggle for liberation were men of great learning. They were stimulated by India's rich cultural heritage which attributed women reputable and respectable position in society and the western education.

The Post-independent period in India observed a great and desirable change in the escalation and growth of woman from being passive, docile, and domestic and dominated to an active, determined, educated, reasonable and analyzing individual. Her powers and potentials demonstrated that she can embrace several and different roles in herself. The post-independence period saw the birth of 'The New Woman' who not only punctured the archetypal fallacies ascribed to female character but also demanded an equal position for herself at par with man. The New Woman also manifested that there is no inbuilt difference in the ability of man and woman.

In post-independent India, great emphasis was given to women's education which was another landmark in the emergence of the New Woman. As the level of awareness increased, more stress was laid on the education of women and with the result

women became more reasonable and intelligent. Their potentialities and abilities came to light. Women were dominated for long by males and moderately there was a retort and reaction in the periphery of the society among those people who could recognize some indispensable weakness in the prevailing pattern i.e. patriarchy. They reacted against it and made efforts to encourage others to examine and analyze the current social order so that a new line of rationality could come into vogue. The endeavor for the 'New Woman' was administered at disparaging the age old gender discrimination deep-rooted in patriarchy for her rights and privilege as a human being and to seek a new definition for her.

In the post-independent India, several women writers objected and dissented against the multiple yet assigned responsibilities of a woman. This remonstrance was and is expressed in many ways in Indian English fiction. It was not only women writers like Nayantra Sahgal, Ruth Jabavala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De and Jai Nimbkar but also the male writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Rabindranath Tagore, Manohar Malgonkar etc who greatly expostulated tortured and tormented womanhood in India. Their fiction provides us with the realistic picture of the changing woman in post-independent India. The novels of Mulk Raj Anand portray a pathetic, bleak and submissive picture of Indian womanhood. Tagore brought domesticated woman into the parlour as his women characters challenge the conventional parochial society. Many other feminist writers proved their mettle in portraying crystal clear picture of Indian woman and the barriers which hinder her essential growth to emerge as an independent woman in the society that always lays impediments and obstacles in her way to restrict her from realizing her own true-self. The image of Indian womanhood is almost found in all the novels of post-colonial India. Freedom in post-colonial India has given a woman an opening to fulfill her specific desires; but due to multiple constricting attitudes of the society she is still greatly dominated by men in particular and the society in general.

Although the first feminist text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft was written in colonial period, laid

the foundation of feminism because it was she who first advocated for the right of education for women and proclaimed:

I wish to persuade women to endure to acquire strength, both of mind and body...and to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being regardless of the distinction of sex. (*The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* 139)

Yet the feminist movement found its culmination from 1960's in the west as it greatly triggered the causes of women all across the globe. The seminal works of feminism like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) greatly influenced the post-colonial feminist writers through the lengths and breadths of the world including India. The post-independence period saw the inception of several new women's groups and organizations to promote and advocate women's interests. Although some women organizations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and Women's Indian Association (WIA) were existing in the late 19th and 20th century, but it was only in seventies and eighties that many urban groups in Bangalore, Calcutta, Pune and many other states were formed that essentially and devotedly worked for the causes of women. With the result many laws were passed for the upliftment of women in post-independent India viz The Hindu Marriage Act (1955), The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956), The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), The Hindu Succession Act (1956), The Hindu Women Right to Property Act (1973), The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), and The Equal Remuneration Act (1976).

The fiction by Indian women writers comprises a considerable segment in Indian English literature. In post-independence India, women fought desperately against the prevailing social order to assert their individuality and to establish their identity. As literature is a convenient tool in depicting the reality of life, so it is to women in portraying their sufferings and agonies, facilitating them with the role models who too have been the

prey to male chauvinism and domination. The Indian feminist writers' ideological preoccupations and thematic concerns helped their cause by constructing women as passive pawns in the hands of males. The post-independent women writings not only unmasked the phallogocentric ideologies and their despotic tendencies towards feminist growth, but also paved ways of abolishing these cruel attitudes. The women writers such as Arundati Roy or Bharati Mukarjee propound matriarchal criticism of male chauvinistic institutions, especially sexuality which remains a multifarious and contested domain within the culture of India where man is the idiosyncratic empowered sexual agent. Each woman writer delineates various kinds of self-chosen exiled existences of women that become a method of fracturing patriarchal hold over their lives. Each depicts the patriarchal community from the woman's or feministic point of view as cloistered, obscure, destructive and oppressive. The Indian feminist writers play a key role in bringing forth women's problems, unveiling their stereotypical roles that have been thrust upon them by patriarchy since times immemorial. Thus their fiction is a form of raising awareness identifying problems and suggesting ways to combat them.

Indian English novelists have either idealized or glorified their women characters or exhibited their pitiable plight and pathetic condition. The novels which are thematically set in the backdrop of Gandhian era, they are Damini equipped with unconquerable courage and unwavering determination. But novels like Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* and Kamla Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* deal with famine, hunger, industrialization and joint-family where women are sufferers and victims of cruelty, injustice and exploitation. Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai have a different perspective as they seem to be dealing with them distinctively through their psychic turmoils and emotional break-downs. Woman is often caged in the myth of a wife, mother or the animal.

Today novelists give picture of a huge number of women characters. Women are now at the centre of every novel whether by a male or by a female writer. They have become the limelight of

their novels. These women characters demonstrate enough courage to combat the male superiority and the social evils. The peripheral condition of women as daughter, mother, wife or a widow, has been expressively exhibited in the short stories and the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K Narayan, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jayawant Dalvi, Rajinder Singh Bedi, K. S. Karanth, Bhabani Bhattacharya and many others. It is therefore very fair to pronounce that Indian male writers have been highly sensitive to woman's problems and issues and that they have always tried to keep her at the centre rather than sidelining her. But more than male writers, Indian women novelists altogether changed the scenario as turned towards the woman's world and devoted their writings wholly and solely to their cause with greater meditative intensity and authenticity. They launched an artistic journey within to investigate the inner consciousness of their women characters.

This innovative writing is feministic in tone and character. It is a counter attack on patriarchal hegemony and its tools – social customs and practices, the traditional myths, the processes of socialization, traditional myths – that are exclusively responsible for the marginalization of women in Indian society. The post-independence India observed an ocean of writing particularly fiction by women writers of greater depth and quality. These writers were more pragmatic and realistic in their approach than those of the pre-independence era and were able to venture a revelation of their own.

The long journey from pre-independence to post-independence period saw the gradual changes in the lot of women. There is no doubt that before 1947 there was a significant change in value, outlook and ideology of Indian women. In due course Indian women proceeded towards independence and self-reliance. The status which they had lost during the middle ages and the initial years of nineteenth century has been retrieved to a large extent since post-independence as the stature of women has elevated in India. She evolved through a difficult yet successful journey from:

Periphery to Centre
Kitchen to Parlour

Voiceless to Voiced
Slave to Proprietor
Recessive to Dominant
Illiterate to Educated
Dependent to Independent.

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