



Postcolonial Feminism in India and Empowerment of Women

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Abstract

A lot has been said about empowerment of women over the ages. History is witness to the numerous atrocities committed against women. Colonialism played a major part in shaping the way women were looked at. An empowered woman is the key to a successful family, society, and ultimately a country.

Key words: women, empowerment, rights, confidence, society

Women have every right to attain their rightful place, and women empowerment assures them of this like a ray of hope. A bright future for mankind will be ensured only when men and women are given an equal stature in society. Countries in which women are free to exercise their will are on the path of progress. Our primary responsibility lies in restoring women to the place that God designed for them. Mankind will progress by leaps and bounds if women get equivalent treatment as men. A lot has been said about empowerment of women over the ages. It has been acknowledged that since women are also human beings, with similar body functions and intellectual proficiencies, there is no justified reason for treating them any differently, leading to depriving them of their rightful position in society. Since ancient times they have been not only mistreated, but at a disadvantageous position. The entire process of getting women out of this unfair position and restoring them their due rights is known as women empowerment. Women empowerment ensures that women are given their dues. This restoring of their rightful place would mean a lot towards the larger goal. They don't ask for anything more except being given their due place

in society. A woman is capable of not only looking after herself, but her entire family even though being uneducated. And when a woman is educated, thus empowering herself, she becomes fortified beyond all reckoning. She then radiates self-confidence. This confidence leads her into becoming self-reliant, a necessary pre requisite for a nation to make true progress.

Colonialism played a major part in shaping the way women were looked at. The history of feminism in India can be traced to the attempts at exercising power over the seemingly 'weak' in order to ultimately control them. At times women were paralleled to colonies. This paper attempts to trace the way the issues of women empowerment have been addressed by eminent writers like Toru Dutt, the Chatterjee sisters and Ashapura Devi.

Several countries treat their womenfolk at par with men, but elsewhere a huge gap remains to be filled. Our country, unfortunately, falls in the latter category. Empowering women leads to refinement in their quality of life and sense of self-esteem. Women are then equipped with similar prospects as men in the areas of education,

employment, getting loans sanctioned, etc. gender inequality will become a thing of the past. Educated women are able to take informed decisions, and not be in any danger of being misguided by their male counterparts.

Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.” Patriarchy as a concept was reiterated and underwent several significant changes during and after the colonial period, to be continued even after India gained independence in 1947. The colonial rule ensured that the male identity, along with the female, needed to be discovered afresh in the wake of the wholistic turmoil experienced in all walks of life. The challenging interlacing of the historical skirmishes between the coloniser and the colonised, together with the wide-ranging class, caste, religion and language practices in the Indian culture promoted an inclusive approach to feminism in India.

Women in India were strongly supported by the political leaders fighting for India's independence. The women did not have to fight for their basic rights of being allowed to vote, in contrast to the situation in the western part of the world, where the 'suffragettes who had struggle for the vote'. This fact has been upheld by feminists like Radha Kumar and Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi. Kumari Jayawardena, recognized for her groundbreaking work on feminist movement in Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, defines feminism as '[...] embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system.' Vina Mazumdar, renowned Indian feminists opines, 'the independence of the country and of women has become so intertwined as to be identical'. She feels that the struggle for independence and the anti-colonial movement had almost become one with awareness and fighting for women's issues.

A definite shift in this mindset was observed in the works of eminent writers like Toru Dutt, the Chatterjee-sisters: Santa Devi and Sita Devi, and Ashapura Devi. They continued to write in this tumultuous phase, interspersed with a

plethora of complexities. Their works are looked upon as path-breaking in the dual attitude of compromise and confrontation with the patriarchal dogma women were able to not only begin to change, but dare to challenge the age-old system from the very core.

Toru Dutt's writings display her anti-colonial stance, albeit using the situation more creatively. Her gender, race and colonial status set her apart in British society. Her English education and Christianity made her stand out as an outsider on Indian society. She refused to be dictated by the norms of the society. The political situation in Bengal demanded that she wrote in her mother tongue. Bangla, which she refused to do, raising questions about her proficiency in her mother tongue. Staying in India and writing in English also did not go down well with the British, because she was writing from a place which was not the country of its origin. Her poem 'Savitri', describes her wish for the "boyish freedom", not wanting to submit to the belief that a woman's place was in the domestic realm. Her work did not enjoy much critical acclaim until being rediscovered by transnational scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee, Chandani Lokuge and Kalpana Sharma.

Santa Devi and Sita Devi, better known as the Chatterjee sisters, belonged to the Brahmo faction, the Hindu liberal upper middle-class family in Bengal. The early twentieth century colonial Bengal observed threads of western influence in the male writers, while this was a rare phenomenon in the women writers. The works of the Chatterjee sisters are placed in this interesting literary intersection of traditional Bangla writing and those that were influenced by the western thought process. Postcolonial critic, Meenakshi Mukherjee opines, 'Literary texts get canonized in different and invidious ways...' the writings of these two sisters became popular for a short period of time, and were subsequently unavailable to readers, and went into oblivion. Their adhering to the Brahmo way of religious belief went against them, as they were not welcomed by the traditionalists. Their writings depict protests against the existing system-patriarchal and imperial, not so much against males. Education as a means of social development find

place in their writings. They were not against the Hindu religious beliefs, although belonging to the Brahmo Samaj.

Ashapura Devi, was a devout Hindu and had no fancy for the western world unlike Toru Dutt and the Chatterjee sisters. She remained largely uninfluenced by the English language or literature, and was totally unacquainted with English education. In spite of this, her narratives display a whole new approach in the portrayal of women in creative literature. It questioned the very identity of a woman and what defines womanhood. It was her staunch belief that equal rights can be ensured only when the two sexes attain the same level of consciousness. The rural population still believed that it is a futile endeavor in trying to educate girls. This mindset needed to be changed in whatever manner it requires. Others were of the view that the rightful place of girls/ women is the kitchen, and it is there that she should be kept. The government has launched several schemes for the welfare of women and their empowerment. The society needs to take up more such initiatives on an urgent basis for the benefit of its womenfolk. In spite of these initiatives, the question remains that why our women are lagging behind in many respects. We need to question as a society why women are not allowed to lead a professional life. The answer to this is that we should take active part in these initiatives and support our girls/women wholeheartedly in all their efforts.

In the preface to her novel *Pratham Pratrishruti*, which was awarded the Jnanpith Award in 1977, Ashapura Devi's observes,

H[h]istory has invariably overlooked the dynamics of the domestic world. That domain has always been neglected. This book is about an unknown woman who was among those who carved out the etchings of a promise from within those ignored interior spaces of Bengal.

History is witness to the numerous atrocities committed against women, and how women still have set an example by excelling in whatever sphere they have chosen to. The present times however, have a different tale to narrate.

Women are mistreated in the rural areas. They are treated as property by men, being beaten up at will. They are not allowed to pursue higher education and have no say in the decision-making processes. It is time that humanity woke up to the reality and stop its women from being maltreated anymore.

Most of the developed countries have a feature of gender equality. India, however, has an entirely different story. Gender equality as of now exists more in conversations than actuality. A country can be considered totally developed when its women are accorded equal status. Self-dependent women can take their own responsibilities. This also adds to the fact that women truly understand the meaning of responsibility, and thus can serve their country better. Women have proved their worth in almost all spheres of life. Our country needs to vouch for, and ensure the empowerment of women all the more because, our women are not as secure as they should be. Empowering them would help them stand up for their rights. An empowered woman is the key to a successful family, society, and ultimately a country. Education empowers her to guide her children properly and steer her family out of adverse circumstances.

In conclusion I would like to say that all the authors discussed in this paper were writing from a perspective which had leanings towards feminism, their ideas being heavily influenced by colonialism. Globalization has perhaps taken over the role of colonialism. Ashapura Devi's immortal character, Satyabati, displays how a woman can take the reins of her life in her own hands through determination, courage and education, ultimately enabling her to live life on her own terms.

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