FEMINISM IN INDIA: AN EASTERN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, Feminism has been a widely discussed subject across the globe. Yet, it faces much trouble as women are still in need of due recognition in various fields they work. The present research focuses on the condition of women in the Eastern world, especially in India with a specific reference to Indian writing in English. In a country like India with its deep-rooted tradition and culture, women play a pivotal role in the development of the society. Many women as well as feminist writers from the country like Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, had followed their western counterparts but the 20th Century writers like Mahasweta Devi, Sarojini Sahoo, C. S. Lakshmi had carved their own niche in the field of feminism. The major problem with the Indian feminists is that they are entirely dependent on their western counterparts forgetting Indian custom and culture. When one looks at the past, great writers like Thiruvalluvar (Ancient Tamil Poet) had appreciated the qualities of women. Male domination came into existence only with the westernization of the country. Thus this reading analyses the trends in Feminism as portrayed in the scriptures, from the past till the present.

KEYWORDS: *Domination, Weaker Sex, Women in Vedic period, Proto feminist, Suppression & Social acceptance*

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INTRODUCTION

Women throughout the world had faced hurdles in their lives at some stage of their lives. Women of the East are raised in a different social and cultural setup than the West. In general, the Eastern world is considered as a conservative and closed system with its orthodox views by the Westerners, whose system appears to be more open and less aggressive. But when reading the critical essays by Western theorists from the 17th to 21st Century, there is more focus on the emancipation of women to a greater extent than any other social cause which appears somewhat similar to narcissism, as the women of the West were too obsessed with themselves, that they failed to recognise the importance of the equality of sexes. There is always an inner urge in women to come out of the clutches of the patriarchal society. The reason for the birth of feminism in the West is that the women tried to prove themselves and also felt that they could possibly perform better than their men folk. This had led to a different stream of literature called feminism. It was not essentially seeking freedom, but it sought autonomy of the individual who is not marginalised and seen as a woman or rather being treated as a human.

Feminist movements gained prominence as early as in the late 17th Century where women sought the right of being treated as equal to their counterparts. But when thinking about the East, especially, the Middle East, the condition of women is not so encouraging till now. It has worsened in the past few decades due to the patriarchal system that prevails over the nation. Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China are also deeply rooted in the patriarchal system, where women find it hard to create an identity for themselves.

When compared to India and other south Asian countries only a handful of female writers are found in the other parts of the continent. The reason is these women face economic issues and need to support their families. Hence, they are forced to either leave their education in the middle and seek some job or expected to help their family at home. This has an adverse effect on the mind of women as they are treated like puppets by men who on the other hand enjoy vast freedom. The present paper focuses on the position of women in India in the past from the Vedic period to the present century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In countries like Malaysia and Thailand, girl children are forced as sex workers to earn money. Many foreigners visit these countries to satisfy their carnal desires. This makes the situation still worse for women as they have no choice but to obey their parents or superiors. Even educated women are subjugated by their own male counterparts or most of the time by their male boss, where they were destined to yield to the whims and fancies of their employers. Hence, there is a dire need to look into the problems faced by women and offer them possible solutions.

Women are suppressed in all areas and considered as physically weaker and branded as the “Weaker sex.” But scientifically speaking, women are stronger than men and they are less prone to certain diseases. Also, the body of women supports the development of the child. Biologically, women are strong due to the presence of a uterus. They endure the pain during childbirth and the monthly menstrual cycles, thus making the female community superior to others. Though a patriarchal society, India has great regard for women, right from the religion to the participation in various activities of the country, women were given due importance and respect.

In the Hindu religion, women are worshipped as “Shakti” the reservoir of energy. They are a great source of energy and thus were prone to multitasking tending their family, serving them as well as earning and assisting others. If giving birth to a child is a herculean task, caring and nurturing is another hard task. Patriarchy is deep-rooted in India even now with diverse women. There are many inspiring women such as Savitribai Phule, along with her husband Jyoti Rao Phule who is a kind of proto-feminists in India and fought against the injustices of women.

Women in Vedic Period

Many female scholars like Lopamudra, Gargi and Mytrayee existed during the Vedic period which is evident through Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Among the educated women of the era, “Gargi Vachaknavi is believed to be a pioneer” (“The Better India”). In the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad, she has been credited to have drawn some of the most profound questions of Vedanta such as the nature of the Soul and the origins of the universe, especially during a debate with Yajnavalkya, a Vedic philosopher. Thus, in ancient India, women played a crucial role in all walks of life and they enjoyed liberty and equality. Women were given equal importance in the family and society. For instance, in the past, there were female teachers who taught Vedas and Upanishads to their wards. During the Vedic period, there were female priests who performed Yagnas and other poojas. They also participated in weddings as purohitas. This is evident in the works of the Devdutt Patnaik’s book *Sikhandi* and *The Pregnant King*, where the writer talks about the queen who teaches Brahma Gyana to her King. Such things did exist in the Vedic period in India.

Women Writers of the Past and Feminism

Indian feminist writings, especially those by Toru Dutt, Ismat Chutagi, Mahashweta Devi, also made their presence felt global. Jasbir Jain is of opinion that feminist discourse in India over the past 200 years has been shaped by our colonial past, on one hand, and our opposition to foreign domination, on the other. Also, “it has always struggled to

create space for women to fight against cultural impositions and religious restrictions, which underline and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression” (“The Hindu”). “There is also a dire need to represent the entire “femdom” rather than a particular sect. Indian feminism has tended to represent the interests and concerns of upper-caste women rather than reflecting the experiences of Indian women en masse. By recognizing this fact, Indian feminism can more effectively challenge historically entrenched and varied [systems of oppression] “(“HuffPost”). Commenting on feminism in India, Dwijendre Nath Thakur opines that “The history of feminism in India is regarded as mainly a practical effort and mostly non-existent. Compared to some other countries there has been only sparse theoretical writing in feminism” (458). On the role of alternative media like Facebook, and on the empowerment of women, research has shown that many of the Indian women are comfortable with social media with some privacy settings. Due to the privacy settings, they feel comfortable and secure as they could choose with whom they should interact.

Taraasha Chopra, an Indian Psychologist comments on the feminism that prevails in the present scenario as,

The more education I received, the more aware I became, the conversation on feminism changed. The problems of underprivileged women became nothing more than just facts and figures on a paper. The feminist discourse became more nuanced and we moved on to talking about issues such as socialization, subtle messages of discrimination, rape culture, glass ceilings etc. So the focus of my feminism was more oriented towards the privileged, urban, educated women who were stuck in traditionalist roles while having modern mindsets (“The Ugly Truth About Feminism in India”).

Feminism in the Pre Colonial Era

Even in the recent past, there were many women who actively participated in the freedom moment such as Jhansi Rani, Thillayadi Valliyammai, Velu Natchiyar to mention a few. Women excelled in various fields which include teaching, medicine, military, business, etc. Only in the medieval ages due to foreign invasions and post colonisation, the importance of women has diminished and they were crumbled and made to play the role of a homemaker, caring for children and family. Further, they were treated as inferior to men. Hence there were lots of freedom moments that emerged in the country to protect the rights of women. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her seminal work , *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) notes that: “One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness.” (Qt in Donald.E. Hall, 119). Further, the condition of women in society could be understood through “Such testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or ‘fully’ subjective, of course, but it would constitute the ingredients for producing a counter-sentence. As one goes down the grotesquely mis-transcribed names of these women, the sacrificed widows, in the police reports including the records of the East India Company, one cannot put together a ‘voice” (Qt in “Feminism in India”). The above quotes from feminist theorists question the prejudices and force their audience to escape a theoretical interpretation. While some of these texts might be complicated than others, it is this complicated thinking that leads to a practice of looking closely at human relations.

Status of Women During Colonisation

In the 17th Century, Bibi Dalbir Kaur fought bravely against Mughal forces. Similarly, in the South, Rani Rudramma Devi, a successor of a Kakatiya ruler fought with nobles for her right to rule. Rani Chennama of Karnataka was the first woman to head the rebellion against the British East India Company.

Present Generation Indian Feminists

Kruttika Susarla, a Delhi based graphic designer and illustrator focuses on the Indian feminist movement, by using an alphanumeric character each day to represent a different facet, personality or issue within the diverse Indian feminist movement. She states that: “I wanted to work on a series that would contextualise the feminist movement within the realities and experiences of women and minorities in India... the issues surrounding women and minorities here are so complex—it’s mixed with religion, caste, sexuality and majority of public discourse” (“Feminism in India”). Jasbir Jain analyses the feminist movement in India from a historical perspective, free from the hangover of western concerns. In six chapters, she makes a clear survey of the feminist discourse, textualising history and historicising texts. She holds up for close examination select principal texts, ranging from the Upanishads and the Itihasas (epics) down to the contemporary regional novels and films. Vandana Shrivatsava on Jasbir's conviction of feminism states that “feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realisation of self-worth ... It does not abandon values or relationships but goes on to create new ones” (3). According to her, feminism represents the struggle of women against cultural and religious restriction as well as socio-political and economic oppression.

The Emerging Concept of the East

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni on the feminism in India observes that “Indian style: Independence with social acceptance, success and autonomy that set its boundaries but not require a complete break from the traditional, extended, semi-feudal family structure” (32). In a conversation with her Indian friend, she reveals that it is astonishing that she was able to balance her professional and personal life, whereas in the U.S. could not manage as once she is out, her home becomes messy. One reason is that the familial system in India is such that Mothers-in-law too take care of the grandchildren thus facilitating the growth of their niece. Thus a daughter in law could be relieved of the tension while at work, an option which is unavailable in the foreign countries. Thus the family system proves to be a boon for married women. According to Kanchan C Bhattacharya, “If women want a change, they must begin with their psyche”(35).

Female Empowerment in India

Women, in order to survive in the present world, needs a lot of self-confidence, will power i.e. the strength to face even unpleasant things in life, the capacity to take up challenges that might hurt. In a women initiative programme held at Jaipur, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Ms J. Jayalalitha opined:

I think both films and politics are equally bad. But in films, a woman is an essential commodity whether you like it or not... In politics, you can do without them. They try very hard to do without them but where people like me are concerned it's not so easy to just wish me away. Many people would love to...One of the most demanding fields in the world is politics and for women to be a success in politics is still a rarity in the entire world (“slideshare.com”).

About the position and prospects of women, a critic comments that “women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way” (65). This demonstrates the fact that Indian women are as efficient as anyone else in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

Women of the past from the mythologies such as Sita from Ramayana, Kunti and Draupadi from Mahabharata, to the women of the modern era are all engulfed by posterity. But times are changing in India, where women enjoy the dual role of a homemaker and a working woman. They are traditional as wives, sisters, mothers, daughters balancing the cultural expectation at the same time not losing their individual self. Today, women shine in various fields as business entrepreneurs, professionals, scientists, politicians, actors, etc. and also end up as housemaids or helpers, but whatever be their job, they are financially independent and secure thus redefining their roles in an ever changing versatile scenario.

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