

WO(MEN) IN INDIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT--*The present study aims to portray the subjugation of women in family and society and the impact of the emerging trends of feminist perspectives on the portrayal of womanhood in literature. Since generations, woman had held a celebrated position closer to deities; though in reality they held a very dependent status stigmatized only to do the household chores and responsible for the reproductive function. The prevalent practices of 'sati', 'purdah' speak volumes of subjugation of women for countless centuries. The women writers' attempt to voice forth the problems of the so far muted gender poses a big challenge because of the unconscious deliberation of subjugation that had been so deeply embedded in the social framework.*

Keywords--subjugation, liberation, patriarchy, feminism, colonialism, the Shariat

I. INTRODUCTION

"Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains," said Rousseau. The common gripe that feminism generally put forth is indeed that woman is born free, but is everywhere confined by restrictions. Down the ages, irrespective of climes and cultures, the practice of subjugating woman seems to have held sway—, whatever the theory. In the orient culture, generally, woman is given an exalted and celebrated position as deities of power, glory and virtue in religion, and ancient society seems to have followed that idea. But though the idea is prevalent as a myth today, the practice falls short of it. It holds true with the west, too. In fact, in all traditions, there seem to be two established ideologies of woman as an exalted being and woman as just the other, a debased creature. Diane Hales gives an eloquent epigraph to the first part of her book *Just Like a Woman*:

A woman is a foreign land
Of which though there he settle young,
A man will ne'er quite understand
The custom, politics, and tongue. ("The Angel in the House")

II. THE BLURRED VISION THROUGH THE MIRROR OF PATRIARCHY

Women looked upon themselves in a mirror that did not show their true image but an image set up by patriarchy. Since centuries, the practice of discrimination has seeped so intense in a way that women themselves have adopted this attitude of discrimination. The women were in willing subordination believing it to be the order of creation. Diane Hales says how a historian asserted that even in the nineteenth-century, it was customary for a woman to look at herself with the male-dominated society's eye: "Women still looked at themselves the way everyone always did—from the outside in". Hales comments: "For countless centuries, philosophers, scholars,

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poets, playwrights, educators, physicians, and politicians did indeed base their notions about women on observations that were rarely more than skin deep” (Preface, ix).

The natural implication is that these people, philosophers, scholars, and the rest of them, were the ones who forged the chains under which woman everywhere finds herself. The logic is more or less simple:

Man was the sole measure of all things human. So, at least to a male beholder’s eye, woman seemed biologically blighted, “a fair defect of nature,” as the poet Milton observed. Some early scientists relegated women to a category somewhere above monkeys yet below men. Before the eighteenth century, medical opinion saw the female body as a lesser variation on the male model, with analogous reproductive organs turned about and tucked inside. In the Enlightenment, another notion took hold, of woman as the opposite of man, inexorably different (and deficient) in functions and feelings (Pp, ix-x).

In such an atmosphere of entrenched tradition, even common truths have to be driven home with a lot of labour. Even when something is axiomatically accepted, its emotional and real acceptance is far away. The American Constitution declared that it is a self-evident fact that all men are equal, but quietly assumed that the blacks are not human beings. Religion, ethics, and consequently society by and large, upheld the idea that woman is inferior to man and that it should be so. Christianity proclaimed that God created man, and man was the son of God, but a woman was the flesh of man’s flesh, the bone of his bone, and was brought into being to be a helpmeet unto him. So again, the voice of the poet speaks for all society: “Hee for God only, shee for God in him.”(*Paradise Lost, Book IV, 304*)

III. THE IMPACT OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

However, Diana Hales concedes [she is hardly in the majority] that the present has seen changes in hardened ways of society, thanks to the scientific revolution.

The scientific revolution—as profound in its own way as the social revolution that has transformed gender roles and rules—is replacing stereotypes with deeper understanding. The differences between women and men, we can now see, are exactly that: differences, not signs of defects, damage, or disease. Women are *not* the second sex, but a separate sex, female to the bone and to the very cells that make up those bones....

But for society, to even reluctantly admit changes in its age-old thinking has been difficult, and the process is not complete as yet.

The west’s attitude to this matter has been discussed first to show that in what are supposed to be progressive societies, the treatment given to a woman has not been—or has never been—very different from the treatment given her by the supposedly less enlightened and less progressive societies elsewhere. India is historically a pluralist society and therefore different strands have to be seriously considered in this study.

Considering the position of women in this vast subcontinent, one has to bear in mind another important idea. The west has seen in recent times that its progressive society has a rather ambiguous stance in the matter of the conception of humanity. The people are forced to realize at the receiving end how violently it discriminates between the races. Women of “disadvantaged” populations—blacks, natives and other ethnic minorities in the United States, and other similar populations in other territories, and the “lower castes” in India—have a double

disadvantage: the disadvantage of being women in traditionally patriarchal societies, and the burden of being people who are discriminated against the main stream.

There has been an extensive and varied definition of feminism in the modern context. It is as challenging to define 'feminism' as it is to define 'postcolonialism'. In their introduction to "The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism", Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore argue that a feminist reader is "enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society, and she regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change" (p 1). They suggest that a feminist reader might ask of a text questions such as "how [it] represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference" (p 1).

IV. INDIAN WOMEN WRITING

The writings of Indian women writers in English have in common, an important aspect; the spoken and implied realization of the changing conditions of women. India (inclusive of present day Pakistan and Bangladesh) is a vast country with an amazing variety of communities. Many of them are native to the land, but quite a few, like the Muslim community and the Parsi community, came from other parts of the world, but the synthesizing and absorbing tendency of this vast country have given them a distinct Indian character also. One of the reasons for the fundamentalist upheavals in recent times is the desire of the minorities to assert their differences and to live according to them.

By and large, the society of the subcontinent has been slow to change, but change it has. The Hindu society has come a long way from its restrictive practices like banning travel across the seas, and has widely accepted mixed marriages and new identities. It cannot be denied, however, that different communities in different regions have displayed different degrees of willingness to change. But, however reluctant the change, it has come. They have moved towards the concept of a secular rule of the law of the land that governs all of them. The minorities have not been equally willing to change. What has come to change is more individualistic with them than involving whole communities.

Attia Hossain and Bapsi Sidhwa are women who have documented the process of change in the Muslim and Parsi communities. They show the relevance of space and time in the process. Muslims on the plains of Pakistan have a different style of life from the Muslims of the Himalayan regions. The people in the hilly areas are isolated tribals and they have their own customs, and they do not accept the ways of the Muslims of the mainland. The Parsis in India have stuck to their religious practices and customs in response to their unique historical situation, but they have allowed themselves to be westernized to quite some extent. Yet westernism has not rooted out their native belief system and so beneath their skin they earnestly seek to preserve their ancient identity unpolluted. The younger generation has sought to cross the frontier between religious isolation and togetherness. These two writers are therefore important in the study of changing scenarios in their communities.

V. THE IMPACT OF BRITISH COLONIALISM

The colonial period in the Indian subcontinent brought in extensive and intensive westernization. Social and political processes were introduced that affected the fundamental value system of this ancient country. Though the British did not interfere too much with the social and cultural life of the country, they did sponsor changes according to their own values. They abolished some prevalent systems and many moderns were influenced by the value system of the west. So from the early days of colonialism admiration for western practices and faith in native systems tried to coexist. The dominant attitude was to weed out the interpolated discriminatory processes in eastern communities and refurbish the ancient value system by restoring to it its ancient humanitarian base.

The Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj made their contribution in this regard, and the Theosophical Philosophy also chipped in with its own contribution. These affected the majority community, but they did not influence the minority communities quite as much. But the changes did not pervade the whole population: education and other circumstances enforced differences in degrees. So, changes often came about because of social situations and not solely because of change in the intellectual climate of the country. When, for instance, a family found some of its younger members preferring relationships across the communal frontiers, it came to accept it willy-nilly, though not with conviction, yet with reluctance. With the minority communities the changes have been slower still, but it cannot be denied that there have been changes.

India has through its history experienced many foreign influences and the coming of the British marks, one of the most decisive influences on modern India. The British represent the west for India, and the impact of the west is felt in the fundamental and comprehensive changes that have come about in the ways of thinking and feeling. The traditional political organization of the country changed, bringing in the peculiar blend of democracy and monarchy that the British practise. The traditional caste system and the traditional system of hierarchies have undergone great changes, and they have naturally ushered in fundamental changes in the psyche of the subcontinent.

Even more important to a country's present were the changes that come over its ways of thinking and feeling, and the ways in which it accommodates change in the traditional life style. The basic elements of a community—like family relationships and related social institutions, do not overnight change in a revolutionary way. Our period instinctively understands the history of a country not so much as product of the doings of the bigwigs, but as the life of the common men and women of the country. This shift in understanding means much to literature. There are many important strands to this history of our times. One of them is the transformation taking place in the social moorings of the Indian subcontinent.

British rule subjected India to the fast developing changes in the value system of conventional societies. The new political and social thinking in the west came to India through the British influence. The gradual development of democratic norms came to India through the liberal mode of thinking that characterized the British colonial period. Apart from this, the west witnessed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries far reaching changes in assumptions regarding social life. The west began to be sensitive to the position its traditional society assigned to the woman as an individual and as a member of her society. This new trend began to reach India also. But even before the new trends began climbing attention, the coming of British rule sensitized Indian thinkers and writers to the position of Indian women.

Feminism in literature refers to a mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience in it. A feminist writing is one in which the author purports to impart a new vision of reality—a reality

experienced on her own or perceived from her authentic mode of seeing, feeling and measuring her existence without subscribing to the male cultural codes. It is interesting to note that Indian woman writers were sensitive to this from the early days of Indian writing.

VI. WOMAN AS THE OTHER

In Indian society, woman has been cherished in seclusion—or confined to seclusion. Woman is biologically the preserver of the continuation of any social group and is also thus the most crucial agent of racial purity. That explains the special care with which women have been treated in all societies, not only Indian. But there are other elements which mingle with this social role. Today, women see themselves as the traditional victims of male complexes and instinct for domination. Women, they see, are the victims of male lust, and therefore the power and the powerlessness of women have depended on the ability of individual women to handle this part of the male drive. For this study, the position of women in the minority communities of the Indian subcontinent is more relevant.

Islamic personal laws give men special rights over women. The *Shariat* and other systems disable women in many ways. The motive behind these attitudes cannot be considered in detail here, but in practice, Muslim women do not enjoy equality with their men. They are subjected to restrictions which are supposed to protect them from outside influences. Women are not allowed to move freely in society, and their dress code and code of conduct are severe. Indeed, the corollary of this is that men are also subjected to restraints in their contact with women. But social organization is such that they are able to violate the codes and get away with it while women are held prisoners.

To some extent, times have changed, and values have changed; social, political and economic conditions have changed; but the institution of *purdah* continues to flourish. Orthodoxy supports *Purdah*. The feminists of today dare to question the age old concept of female sexuality that confines women to the twin task of child bearing and child rearing. They claim a more active and meaningful role for themselves and are not satisfied with their parasitical position in the family established by unquestioned patriarchy. Contrary to Freud's view that a woman can be glorified only in her femininity, today's woman claims for a position that asserts the need for autonomy, self-fulfillment, self-realization and independence for women.

And the fact remains that woman in the patriarchal society continues to be seen as the provider of pleasure, care, comfort to the family, and is generally responsible for feeding the husband and children. The woman suffers and experiences oppression because of the realization that her anatomy is her destiny and that she can never escape from this inevitable biological trap in which she is caught.

Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* makes a pointed observation that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...." (Introduction) The assumption that persists is that women are fundamentally different from men biologically and this biological difference has been the cause of the subordination of women. It is argued, then, that woman's differences from man are the chief reason for woman being oppressed, deprived, exploited and dehumanized.

Male domination over women is predominant in all societies. Only with the approval of the male a woman can enjoy anything of privilege or influence. This has led to the pessimistic depiction of women as the innocent, passive, and powerless victims of male violence. Kate Millet argues pointedly in *Sexual Politics*:

The social control of women in a free society such as the United States was not carried out through a rigid authoritarian system of force. Rather, it took place by means of engineering of consent among women themselves. Instead of being openly coerced into accepting their secondary status, women were conditioned into embracing it by the process of sex-role stereotyping.... From early childhood, women were trained to accept a system which divided society into male and female spheres, with appropriate roles for each, and which allocated public power exclusively to the male sphere. (p27)

There is always the tendency to hurt and insult the female because of her alleged biological inferiority. The history of patriarchy presents a variety of cruelties and barbarities: *sati* executions in India, the crippling deformity of foot binding in China, the lifelong humiliation of the veil in Islam, or the widespread persecution of sequestration, the *gynasium*, and the *purdah*. A more terrible version of all this is found in the mutilation of the female genital organ in some African societies.

VII. CONCLUSION

The recent years have seen the development of two orientations towards sexuality. One focused on denouncing the repression of women's sexual needs, claiming sexual oppression through disregard for the clitoris. The renewed value given to the clitoris led feminists to demand liberation in terms of sexual behaviour and to affirm the clitoral orgasm as enabling women to experience sexuality (like men) independently of its reproductive function, making reproduction a matter of free choice. The other orientation towards sexuality emphasized the way women had been alienated from themselves by the feminine mystique, which was viewed as psychological manipulation on a grand scale. The question of liberation in the true sense is to be contemplated and it is hard to achieve unless the woman is set on the go to proclaim, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, ..." (*Jane Eyre*, Ch XXIII, 6).

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