



Vol.5. S1., 2018

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

GENDER INEQUALITY AS EVIDENT IN HENRY LAWSON'S, "THE DROVER'S WIFE"

A. ELAKKIYA

M.Phil., Research Scholar, Department of English, PSGRKCW, CBE

Every society is made up of certain norms pertaining to family, relationships, religion, and gender. Among them, gender earns the ultimate claim which has prolonged conflicts and controversies till date, since the day of emergence of civilization and human beings. It is a social construct that has its own set of protocols within any family and society. The gender roles were created even before the arrival of tradition, customs, belief system and social values. Thus, gender precedes every social construct. Every human being must be given what they need for survival and must be given the freedom to attain self-gratification. The society has discrimination in various systems like social class, caste system, religion, education, occupation and so on. Similarly, there is discrimination among genders, their role and freedom. Gender inequality exists in all the fields and it is very hard to bring equality and realise it.

Men are being considered as the superior sex, women second to them and transgenders are not given any position. The position of men and women in the society is similar to the landlords and the working class people; the high and low culture; the capitalist and labour respectively. But trans-genders are rarely considered as human beings in most of the places. Each gender has been given different set of roles and rules to follow. The roles, though not acquired, are infused forcefully into any society. This is where the discrimination among genders begins. The gender hierarchy has man in the centre of the society; it makes the world masculine since men assume that they hold and possess the power. All the gender roles have been making men as the superiors and women as inferior beings whereas the trans-genders are not even considered for any role. When equal opportunities and roles are given to every gender, there is equality. "Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life" (Juru, 1).

Women are still marginalized in terms of gender, caste, border divisions and nationality.. The prolonged struggle, suppression and sufferings have made women fight the oppressors. Their sufferings and trauma have been serving as the stimulant for women to come out of them.

Australia is one of the colonized countries, which was occupied by the Britishers. The native Australians were treated like slaves where men were tortured and women were abused. Colonialism has left scars in the psyche of Australia.

Henry Lawson, an Australian writer and poet who has addressed colonialism and the trauma people underwent in his works. His oeuvre consisted poetry, ballads and short stories and he was called as Australia's greatest short story writer. He was also known as the 'bush poet' and his short story "The Drover's Wife" and published in the magazine, *The Bulletin* in 1892. He also republished the same story in his collection, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse* in the year 1894.

"The Drover's Wife" gives a clear picture of the predicament of the African women through the character of a drover's wife. The protagonist is an Australian bush woman. The plot portrays the difficulties faced by her in the absence of her husband, and depicts how she confronts all the tough situations on her own.

The protagonist is nameless and is called as the 'bush woman' in the story. She has been addressed as 'the drover's wife' throughout the story. The woman does not have an identity of her own. Since she is nameless, she represents every bush woman. She also represents women on the global scenario who are facing troubles and are treated unequal in the society. The story told in third person narrative does not fail the readers to empathize with her and her position.

The woman's husband, a drover, was droving the cattle for the past six months. His family is poor but he does not have a regular job. His wife has to take care of their four children besides their house and the cattle. She has been facing threats from men and also from nature. Her husband is good but is careless. But when he has enough money, he used to take her out and have good food and stay out. Sometimes, he forgets that he is married which the woman cannot do because she has a number of responsibilities unlike him.

The house in ramshackle needs attention so are her children. The land is very dry and barren and so are the trees and the bushes. There is no sign of civilization nearby. The lonely woman with her four children—two boys and two girls, has a dog named Alligator which serves as her only support since her husband is away from her.

The house they live is a squat. He has been working only for the last six months and his earning is not sufficient to feed the large family. So it is the woman's duty to strive hard to meet the needs of the family. Her husband's unemployed status is given in the opening lines of the short story as "The drover, an ex-squatter" (1). The harsh environment has changed her innate qualities. She has lost her womanly nature and looks and was called as, "The gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman" (1). The children are affected by poverty and are addressed as, "Four ragged, dried-up-looking children" (1).

The bush woman's daily ordeal is also to encounter unexpected guests. Once, a snake enters the house which has only two rooms. As there is thunderstorm outside, the woman has to keep the children inside the house but there is also a snake and has to guard them against the reptile. So she keeps the children on a table inside the kitchen and feed them food. With no sleep and food, she becomes very tired. She sews basket and reads *Young Ladies' Journal* in order to keep herself awake that night. She recalls the difficult time she has faced in her own life. She does the job of thinking along with the other works which shows that her personal space is very narrow and limited even to think. "Now and then the bushwoman lays down her work and watches, and listens, and thinks. She thinks of things in her own life, for there is little else to think about" (5). She has only little things to remember about herself in her miserable life.

She manages to kill the snake with the help of her dog and this struggle is just one incident in her troubled life. She has hopes and dreams like every other woman.

She is not a coward, but recent events have shaken her nerves... She is used to being left alone. She once lived like this for eighteen months. As a girl she built the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead. She finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and Heaven help her! Take a pleasure in the fashion plates. (4)

Delivering children is a life and death struggle for women and that too in such a difficult place and situation. When she delivered her last two babies, she has become very weak and weary. She also had fever. She has delivered the children in the bush which is not a safest place for a woman to deliver. Her husband has brought a male doctor who is drunk and careless towards her. But the doctor does nothing as he is unsteady, and then he sends a lady for assistance. The woman has been bearing all the pain for a very long time and in one such circumstance, she loses a child too.

Once she fought bush-fire alone and she recalls it wearily. She then wears her husband's trousers in order to not get burnt. But four Bushmen misinterpret her as a man and her dog too attacks her in confusion and realizes it later. She has fought with flood in her husband's absence. She is striving hard to save the dam which her husband has built but her attempts fail. She is not able to appreciate herself instead she cries at her inabilities. "There are things that a bushwoman cannot do. Next morning the dam was broken, and her heart was nearly broken too, for she thought how her husband would feel when he came home and saw the result of yeas of labour swept away. She cried then" (5-6). The hard work and effort she has put is not appreciated by others and she is not complaining about it as she could not find time for it.

She fights with the pleura-pneumonia which affects her cattle. She also fights a mad bullock that surrounds her house. She rescues her chicks from the crows and eagles and she is not only fighting for her own survival but also for the survival of her cattle and birds. Once she meets a cunning bushman and she tries to send him stating that her husband and sons are at the workplace. She always tries to protect her by one or the other way. In another incident he comes across a swagman who enters her house without her permission. She gives him food but he harasses her. She kicks him out with the help of her dog. Though she is courageous and full of perseverance and, "a determined-looking woman" (6) she is also betrayed by a man who offers her some wood. She pays him more tobaccos and praises him but the wood that he has given is hollow inside. She cries when she realises that she has been cheated by him and is hurt. Though her days are challenging she never forgets to be a good mother. The loneliness she encounters in her life is not brooded by her.

She takes her children to walk and makes it a practise on every Sunday. "But this bushwoman is used to the loneliness of it. As a girl-wife she hated it, but now she would feel strange away from it" (7) shows the ability of her to be a good mother to her children.

She is very much satisfied with the role she is playing. She loves her children, husband and also herself, but she has not time to show. She looks harsh at them because, her surrounding does not encourage her to have womanly qualities. She also makes some negative events into a laughable one. Once when she is crying, she takes her handkerchief to wipe but it is full of holes through which her fingers pass and she is laughing by seeing that. Her sense of humour is evident when she cracks jokes, "She has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous; and sometime or other she will amuse bushmen with the story" (8). And when she starts to cry, her old cat also joins her and its cry makes her have a good laugh. Her young son, who watches her at close, tries to behave and to trouble her. She in spite of her struggles and hardships is able to be a good mother to her children and finds a way the other be a good human being.

Though her struggles and hard work go unrecognised, she faces the challenges that life throw upon her bravely. Though her feminine outlook is lost because of harsh conditions, weather and surroundings, her mettle to succeed indeed inspires all the readers and brings a sense of satisfaction in them.

References

- Lawson, Henry. *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*. Gloucester: Dodo, 2012. Print.
Juru PC 2002, *Towards Equity: Boy/Girl Child Preference*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
-