RESEARCH ARTICLE

WOMEN AS THE 'OTHER': A VICTIM OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Dr. SANGHAMITRA SWAIN

Email:sanghamitraswain5@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Society essentially subjugate women by characterizing and labelling them, as the 'Other'. The status of women in India has been transforming itself over the past few centuries. Gender-bias and subordination of woman crept into the Indian Society during the age of the Smritis. Outdated social standards and stereotypes have prevented women from achieving their full potential. The whole society conspires to deny her of subjectivity and crushes her into an object. The women are denied of independent work or creative accomplishment. Stereotypes reflect deep-rooted ideas of femininity and masculinity. Some of the strongest forces behind tenacious gender gaps are harmful social norms and prejudice that limit prospects for women. Women have gradually acknowledged their worth, hence striving to bring forth social transformation where they gain control over crucial issues which affect their lives.

Keywords: Women subjugation, Empowerment, Education, Gender inequality

Society essentially subjugate women by characterizing and labelling them, as the 'Other', exclusively in opposition to men. Man holds the role of the subject and woman as the object, the other. Man is essential, complete, and superior. She is inessential, incomplete, and inferior. In defining woman as the Other, man is effactually denying her humanity. It is normal to understand for humans in opposition to others, this method is flawed when applied to the genders. The status of women in India has been transforming itself over the past few centuries. Exalted and having acquired the equal status with the male counterparts in Ancient India they moved to an inferior status in the medieval period, and a further demeaned space in the British era. Practices like purdah, sati and child-marriage, combined with economic dependence stressed on female confinement and subjugation to male dominance. Indian women, according to social historians, gradually lost their position of pre-eminence in the society and were reduced to the marginalized 'Other'. Women have been in compliance with the status of all-forgiving and nurturing mother, the self-sacrificing and submissive wife, and the obedient daughter, the women were the epitome of sacrifice and subjugation. Throughout history, motherhood has been both revered and reviled. The mother both summons life and herald death. These mysterious operations are thrusted onto women, who are transformed into a symbol of life, purity and sacrifice and in the process, they are robbed of all individuality.

Simone De Beauvoir insists on the impracticality of comparing men and women without considering the vast differences in their situation. She hints at female development through the formative phases: childhood, adolescence, and sexual initiation. She argued that women are not born feminine but are shaped by thousands of external forces. She depicts how, a girl at each phase of her upbringing, is conditioned into accepting passivity, dependence, and subjugation. The whole society conspires to deny her of subjectivity and crushes her into an object. The women are denied of independent work or creative accomplishment and forced to accept a

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frustrating life of household, childbearing, and sexual slavishness. Having brought to the adulthood, the various roles women inhabits are of wife, mother, and entertainer. However, illustrious the women's home may be, these roles certainly lead to dissatisfaction, incompleteness, and profound frustration. At old age women loses their reproductive capacity, hence they lose their prime purpose and therefore their identity. Beauvoir mentions some women are complicit in their Otherness, mostly in regard to marriage. Women face difficulty in breaking free of security and comfort for some vague notion of equality. They are persuaded to adhere the traditional unfulfilling roles of wife and mother. Beauvoir recognizes the economic underpinnings of female subjugation and the economic roots of women's liberation. Only work can lead them to achieve autonomy and liberation.

Women empowerment through ages is a practice of social transformation where women gain control over crucial issues which affect their lives. Women's Liberation Movement in India did not stem from British Liberalism alone. The Indian women's craving for freedom is innate in their own cultural inheritance, which views women as radically perfect and morally sound. Western thoughts and ideals infused the spirit of individual rights and dignity in the women movement in India. As a result, an Indian Women commits herself to exploit the opportunities and contradictions in the social structure forcing the institutions of male domination to change. Coinciding with the beginning of the French Revolution and in the midst of England's own Industrial revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft pioneering work, *Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792),* was the first clarion call for the forthcoming battle of the sexes. The nineteenth century social reformers championed the cause of women emancipation and women came out of their cocooned existence and joined the national call for freedom from the British rule. Indian women thereby formed organizations at both local and national level to voice against gender-based discriminations i.e. a deep-rooted social malaise practiced in India since many centuries. The present generation and the women in the twenty-first century are an offspring of the generations of women struggling for a voice and identity of their own, as they move from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion, and from weakness to strength.

Social and religious reformers of the colonial India focused on female education for the smooth functioning of the society. Education acts as a major instrument for raising women's status and empowering. It has brought women in contact with the philosophy of liberalism and the democratic traditions of the west and enabled them to be self-reliant. It has deferred the age of marriage, postponed the mothering responsibilities, and enabled them to seek a career. It has given rise to uniform equations in the relationship of the sexes and enabled women to exercise their choice in the selection of the life partner. Social attitude to the education of girls vary from acceptance of the need to one of absolute indifference. There is also a marked difference of the enrolment of males and females in the educational system.

The story of Indian women moves from the golden age i.e. the Vedic period, a time of near equality with men to slow decline with lasting years of deterioration. Ancient India guaranteed women a fair amount of personal freedom, the freedom of expression and the right to knowledge. The position of Indian women acquired a lower status around 500 B.C. The victory of Aryans over Dravidians introduced slavery to India. The conquered women (shudra women/servile) taken as wives by Aryans had no knowledge of the Vedic rituals which further degraded them. Consequently, women's role in Vedic rites and sacrifices turned out to be a mere formality. The early exaggerated customs of chastity and fidelity introduced by Aryan's gave rise to number of issues. Divorce and remarriage were considered evil. Child marriage, sati (widow-burning) became social rule. Girls were married off before puberty to ensure fidelity and legitimacy of heirs. The importance of the male heir was highlighted in performing Vedic sacrifices to the family ancestors and daughters came to be irrelevant since they left their families after marriage. The privilege of studying the Vedas and performing the sacred ceremonies came to be the preserves of Brahmin males. The women only from the Brahmin families were educated in early Vedic period. Thus, women were subjugated, domesticated and subordinated to men under the patriarchal system. However, educated and socially uplifted women were looked down as inferior to men in intelligence. In the later Vedic period sending women to acquire education from hermitages situated in the far-flung forests were considered unsafe. It was preferred that women should receive training at home from their fathers, brothers and other male members of the kin. Such practices limited women education to the families only, which ended in curtailing women's religious rights and privileges.

Gender-bias and subordination of woman crept into the Indian Society during the age of the Smritis. Manusmriti tended to lower women's status and deprived them of their traditional status in a variety of ways. According to Manusmriti, a girl should be married off as soon as they attain marriageable age. Ideal of wifehood is in the negation of her personality. The husband must be constantly worshipped as God even if he is of immoral character or sought pleasure outside of marriage. Women should not be allowed any kind of independent activity without the supervision of male members of the family. The women were given no education and are entitled to the sacrament of marriage. Thus, the status of women deteriorated. Women were often considered as fickle, sensual, seducers and inconsistent, hence educating them was considered dangerous. They were allotted the walls of house and their independence was curtailed. The epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata depicts images of women who represent the moral standard of purity. Women like Sita, Ahilya, Draupadi, Tara and Mandodari were regarded as revered women. The scheme of education in the Mahabharata implies that both men and women should be educated but the content of education was perceived on different lines for men and women.

Women Identity centred on the proper working of a stable marriage and the rearing of a family. Venturing ahead of the boundaries of conventional societal restriction and finding a life of one's own was unheard of. The stable Vedic society crumbled under Alexander's invasions, the rule of the Mauryas and the Guptas gave way to the perilous Muslim invasions. But social and political unrest did not offer any modification in the status of women in the society. Most of the Muslim women from the medieval period remained submissive and ignorant. They were not permitted to enter into the mosque where males were educated. Women were considered safer in seclusion. This was the beginning of purdah system. There are instances of purdah system prevalent among the Hindus and Muslims. Purdah or the veil was not observed by the Indian women during Vedic as well as Medieval times. The increasing pressure resulted in a growing sense of insecurity in women with the ensuing disintegration of Hindu hegemony to the Muslims. Women were forced to remain in Purdah. It is a Persian word typifying seclusion or as a protector of women from the gaze of others. Purdah prohibited the movement of women outside the house and acted as an impediment in the way of women advancement. Protection of young girls became a problem for the parents and this gave rise to various social evils like, female-infanticide, child-marriage and sati. Practices like purdah, sati and child-marriage, infanticide, prohibition of widow remarriage combined with economic dependence resulted in women's confinement to male-dominance.

In the early nineteenth century, female literacy was extremely low in comparison to male literacy. Women education was informal and largely limited to practical and household chores. Women from respectable families often studied classical or vernacular literature as a pious recreation, and girls from well to do families received some education in keeping accounts. But mostly women learned only the household arts. Many social and religious reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy,Keshab Chandra Sen, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar,Swami Vivekananda and others made a dedicated effort to put an end to the social evils related to women. The Nineteenth Century, rightly called the age of Indian renaissance benefited immensely from the western influence by affecting change in the Indian attitude to life. The society, in which sati, child-marriage, female infanticides and purdah were in vogue, came to accept the social reforms, instituted through benevolent enactments and propagated by social leaders.

In several ways, the world is freer and fairer than ever before. People enjoy freedom to choose the career of their choice and marry the person they love. Yet there are many human right challenges that are restraining our lives, and one of them is the gender inequality. Gender refers to the socially created features such as customs, roles and relationships between groups of women and men. Outdated social standards and stereotypes can prevent women from achieving their full potential. Stereotypes reflect deep-rooted ideas of femininity and masculinity. Some of the strongest forces behind tenacious gender gaps are harmful social standards and prejudice that limit prospects for women. Numerous barriers are averting women from actively participating in the economy and realising their full potential, from discrimination in employment and unequal pay to the risk of harassment and physical violence are reinforced by harmful social norms and gender stereotypes. Women and girls very often face sexual harassment in public spaces, reducing their ability to participate in school, work and in public life, restraining their access to crucial facilities and enjoyment of cultural

and recreational prospects. An appalling segment of women around the world fall victims at some point in their lives. Many women today are not safe, either in public or in private. Problems related to dowry, female feticide and infanticide are increasing and are profoundly revealing in the urban population. Acid attacks and rapes are stirring the nation as one of the biggest social crises. These problems against women are deeply ingrained and are holding back the global economic growth and social progress that will come with women's empowerment and gender equality. There is no single solution to tackle gender inequality, it requires a holistic approach. It is gradually recognised that constructing more supportive social standards and challenging dated stereotypes will be the powerful agents of progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment. It needs to be understood that unless we change the basic social attitude which promotes gender inequality and gender bias, we would not be able to achieve much in terms of women empowerment in India.

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