RESEARCH ARTICLE

INDO-CANADIAN PERSPECTIVES WITH REFERENCE TO WOMEN'S STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In the entire world women have been neglected and marginalized. The social history of the world reveals that women have been considered as inferior beings and have been victimized in patriarchal social structure. In this study it has been exhibited that the bilateral relations between Canada and India have international recognition. Canada too, like India, has a complex and rich cultural heritage. The power structure prevailing in Canadian and Indian societies demonstrates the position of women in these countries. The present paper aims to study the perspectives of women in India and Canada.

Key Words- Canada, India, Relationship, Women, Marginalization

Since the dawn of human history women have been neglected and marginalized. This marginalization is not restricted to national boundaries only but it goes beyond the concept of cultural diversity. The social history of the world reveals that women have been considered as "inferior beings" and have been victimized in patriarchal social structure. Kate Millet observed, "The history of patriarchy presents a variety of cruelties and barbarities." (46) Katarina Tomaseviki observed that women's personality is disfigured and they are confined to "the footnotes of history." (xii) The notions regarding male and female are quite similar in various countries and most of the nations share commonalities in views about the binary relationship between the male and female.

The bilateral relations between Canada and India have international recognition. Canada too, like India, has a complex and rich cultural heritage. R.K. Dhawan has aptly remarked that "Canadian culture like Indian culture is a mosaic rather than a melting pot." (10) Canada like India is a multicultural country. The fact behind its multiculturalism is that four provinces – Lower Canada (Quebec), Upper Canada (Ontario), Nova Scotia and New Brunswick – were united to form the present Dominion of Canada under the British North America Act, 1867. In the year 1949, the tenth and last province, Newfoundland joined the Dominion. It has been pointed out that "Canada has witnessed the evolution of two national cultures, developing autonomously and simultaneously. We all know about these two 'home cultures' French and British and also the fact that Canada is quite vulnerable to the domineering American culture to the immediate south." (Dhawan : 2) While referring to the multiculturalism in Canada, David Staines called Canada a country of distinct regions and remarked, "Canada is a federation not only of ten provinces, the Yukon, and the North west territories, but also geographical and psychological units." (2) Thus due to the impact of these various ethnic cultures and regional differences Canada emerged as a multicultural country.

In the same way India has universally been recognized for its diversity in culture which is a result of diverse ages, races, religions and regional cultural practices. Krishna Kriplani has made the following observation regarding the diversity of Indian literary culture :

An offspring and an intimate expression of a composite socio-cultural unit, reflecting the impact of diverse ages, races, religions and influences, and maintaining simultaneously sometimes in harmony, sometimes in disharmony, different levels of cultural consciousness and intellectual development. (12)

Canadian history has always retained to its multi-cultural identity and has never imposed cultural homogeneity on the whole country. The regional differences existing in Canada have aptly been highlighted commented in the observation, "The Canadian preference for a mosaic structure in which all ethnic and social regions retain their distinctness is central to an understanding of the nation." (Staines : 3) Thus heterogeneity becomes an essential part of the cultures of these two countries and it not only makes them share an identical cultural mosaic but also gives both the countries a distinctive but similar identity.

The other feature of commonality shared by Canada and India is colonial and post-colonial experiences. Both the countries were the colonies of Europe for some period in history and the impact of colonialism is clearly visible in the literature of both the countries. K. Chellappan has observed that, "They [Canada and India] shared colonialism as a common fate in a particular stage of history and both are now members of the commonwealth, which is a symbol of certain old memories and new hopes." (12) Therefore there is a passionate urge for the search of identity in the literatures of both the nations. It is an interesting fact that while Canada like India share similar colonial background which lends commonality to their literatures, but the inherent differences cannot be ignored. Canadian literature also bears the impact of European past and the New World Literature, whereas Indian literature shares a similar Asian tradition and encounter of the west with the same canons. In the writings of many Indian English writers it seems as if they are trying to create their identity by giving a native representation of India and its culture. On the other hand it has been observed that Canadians wrote about the affairs of other countries and tried not to speak of their own nation and its culture. In this regard David Staines has made a significant comment about the Canadian current of thought. To quote, "For many years Canadians were reluctant to speak about their own culture; affairs of other countries occupied their attention." (19) Though initially Canadians did not make their country and its culture the subject of their writings but a dramatic change is seen in the writings of the later decades. The variety and diversity of Canadian culture is visible in Canadian literature of today. There are the reflections of complexity in the poetry of Northrop Frye, various forms of fiction explored by authors like Margaret Atwood and George Woodcock, theatrical development in Brian Parker's efforts etc. In these works it is established that Canada is not to be underestimated by anyone as it is exploring and expressing its cultural nationhood. Margaret Lawrence reinforced the dilemma of the complexity of this psycho-social and psycho-cultural Canadian construct and said, "We have only just begun to recognize ourselves, our land, our abilities. We have only just began to recognize our legends and to give shape to our myths." (217)

The investigation of the socio-cultural history of both the countries reveals that Canada and India not only share similarities of multiculturalism, colonialism and post-colonialism but the identical similarities can be traced in patriarchal structure. Patriarchy and colonialism are a part of power structures which are governed on identical grounds. Patriarchy is characterized by domination of male over females, suppression of females by males, assumed male superiority, forced female inferiority etc. It has been observed that in patriarchy the social laws are made according to the benefit and advantages of men. Canadian history of women gives a glimpse of patriarchal structure existing in the society. In Canada women have faced suppression and have been subdued in every field because in social hierarchy man holds superior position. It has been accepted in Canadian society that, "Positions of power and prestige have been occupied primarily by white, affluent, educated, and propertied men, and Canadian society has been built around the values that these men stand for." (Burt, Code, and Dorney :9) Thus Canadian society has given superior status to women and the entire society is constructed around the values glorifying masculinity. In Canadian society it is believed that men and women should live in separate social spheres – men in public world and women in private world. They believe that only men should take part in the competitive political and market place activities, while women should be restricted to the domestic and caring activities. In this hierarchical order the so called activities in which men dominate, are always considered to be

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on a higher platform as compared to the tasks reserved for women. In this regard following observation has been made, "There is, in fact, a hierarchy or increasing levels of power and influence, in which the sphere of activities dominated by one group (males) is frequently accorded more importance and status than the sphere of activities dominated by other (females)." (Lips : 2) Another observation also emphasizes that important activities of society are ruled by men whereas women are confined to activities of inferior order, "According to the doctrine of separate spheres, the important business of any society is conducted in the public domain, where men and reason rule, and society's frivolous and less significant activities take place in the private sphere, where women dwell." (Burt : 10) These less significant activities, i.e. domestic works, have always been undervalued and women have faced domestic violence in India as well as in Canada. Domestic violence dispelled the impression that the traditional patriarchal household is a place of harmony and peace. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines violence as, "that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to woman, including treats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private." (U.N : Article 2) An Indian human rights activist expanded the concept of violence to include, "exploitation, discrimination, unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of religious-cultural and political violence." (Kelkar : 20)

Women have always been underestimated as weak and unintelligent; this reflects the power structures prevailing in the Canadian society. It affirms that the ideas of power and gender go hand in hand and are inseparable. Hilary M. Lips has noted that, "Our society's notions of power and gender are so intertwined that it is next to impossible to separate the two." (20) This is so because women have always been portrayed as docile and weak creatures and these stereotyped images of women are visible everywhere. Like Indian society, in Canada also gender binary has its roots in religion. Christianity also emphasizes power relations in Canada. The Biblical reference of Adam and Eve clearly accepts this point. In the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve God punishes Eve and says, "I will increase your trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth. In spite of this you will still have desire for your husband, yet you will be subject to him." (Genesis : 6) Hence independence of women is suppressed and the spheres of power are monopolized by male autonomy. In the institution of marriage, wife is treated as private property of the husband. Christianity sanctions power relationship between men and women and men have been given the status of patriarchal God. Religious sanctity strengthens the existing prejudices in social order. This differentiation is a part of western culture. The following observation clarifies this point, "The dualistic imagery of female and male as opposites, with female as weak and male as strong, which pervades the mythology of white western culture, helps to ensure the individual's stereotypes keep developing in a set pattern and remain fixed." (Burt : 35) In spite of deep roots of the prejudices existing in male-female relationship, Canadian women registered their voice of protest. They collected their voice to wage a war against the existing patriarchal structure. Throughout the twentieth century Canadian women did vigorous efforts to alter the existing systems of power and patriarchal structure. The Canadian women have tried to shift the boundary existing between private and public domains and they have been successful in this endeavour to a large extent. As a result, the boundaries have shifted at various levels- history, culture, race, class and geographical regions. The most remarkable model of boundary shift was the woman's suffrage rights which were legislated federally in 1918. With suffrage women achieved access to public political realm and came in a strong position to demand legal provisions to ensure security to women. Through the changing patterns in social and economic spheres resulted in striking transformations in women's lives, but these efforts were sufficient to eliminate gender based discrimination. In jobs also women do not get equal opportunities, they get less prestigious jobs with lesser decision-making opportunities, lesser pay and lesser possibilities of growth. In spite of these limitations women have continued their struggle against patriarchy and Canadian scenario is changing as more and more qualified independent professional women are becoming evident in every sphere of Canadian society.

In Indian society also the status of women has not been in a better position at all. Women have always been subdued, suppressed and oppressed beings. They have been considered inferior and weaker to men in all respects and have been the victims of male authority. Sahab Deen Maurya has made the following observation regarding the status of women in India, "For countless centuries women in India had been subordinated to men

and socially oppressed." (1) The women were oppressed to such an extent that not even a reference is made regarding her. It has been observed that, "It is strange that half of the population [women] is so criminally and yet so impenitently forgotten by the other half, that not even a passing mention is made about the former's social, religious, legal or political status in any serious cultural chronicle of this country." (Indra: 1) Various religions practiced in India have given authoritative powers to men only as a result of which women remain subaltern to men. In Hindu religion this subaltern position of women has always been forced and a woman is not given the liberty of seeking her own individuality. Her identity is accepted in context of her relations and family – daughter, wife and mother. Manu, the lawgiver of Hindu *Dharmashastra*, had given his verdict regarding the subordinate and dependent position of woman. He said :

> During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons, if she has no sons, upon the near Kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father, if she has no paternal Kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself as she likes. (Emphasis added) (Qtd. Bader : 55)

Thus religion sanctions the existing secondary position of women denying all powers which they should have been given. Though it has been claimed that during the Vedic period women's position in Hindu society was comparatively dignified and they enjoyed equal rights with men during Vedic era. History is a witness of the fact that after the glory of Vedic period with foreign invasions women faced deterioration. In the medieval period, the condition of woman was wretched and pitiable. In Hindu as well as Muslim community polygamy existed due to which the position of women in the households was threatened. In many parts of the country like Bengal and Rajasthan Sati System prevailed that permitted no liberty and freedom to women. Moreover the widows were forced to lead a life full of restrictions born out of rigidity against women. The women were not allowed to play any role in public sphere and were confined to the domestic chores only. The following observation clarifies the position of women in Indian society to a great extent, "Indian society has all along been a male dominated society, where the women's place has been primarily confined to the home, her role limited to procreation, upbringing of children, and catering for the needs of men folk by way of creature comforts." (Maurya : 6) Not only this women were deprived of even the basic human rights like right to inherit property and right to education. Women were not given the liberty of terminating an undesirable marriage. Due to these confinements women could not get a chance to search their identity and assert their individuality. On the whole the position of women remained unchanged and there was an urgent need for a change. With the wake of 19th century, the need for women's emancipation became all the more important. In this period many individuals, reformed societies and religious organizations raised their demand for the liberation of women from these social taboos. The father of our nation M.K. Gandhi's arrival brought a change in the overall scenario. He acclaimed the concept of *Ardhangini* enshrined in Indian culture, but at the same time he encouraged the vision that men and women are complement to each other and one is never whole without the other. He proclaimed that even in the scriptures the oneness of *Prakriti* and *Purusha* is emphasized and reinforced concept of *Ardhanariswara* originally found in Hindu mythology.

With the dawn of social renaissance in India, there came a remarkable change in the position of women. Many women took active participation in the freedom struggle and the roles played by women established their efficiency and potential in Indian society. India's freedom in 1947 contributed to the upliftment of women. Gradually women started coming out of the world of domesticity to the world where reason ruled. They made spaces in all the spheres of human activities. The women started coming out of the four walls of the house and endeavoured to establish their individuality. Women were now creating their own identities in the nineteenth century and were emancipated greatly. A new role of women emerged and the hidden potential and attributes of women became visible and widely acknowledged.

But it is to be noted that there are many obstacles which are so integrated in society in such a manner that the process of growth in the direction of emancipation of women is hindered. India is a land of traditions and customs and Indian social structure is such that these traditions and customs are mostly centered on women's lives. These customs and social taboo's restrict women's liberation movement and it is next to

impossible to get rid of these dead customs which are deep rooted in the minds of Indian people. Sahab Deen Maurya has made a righteous observation that :

> A number of social and religious customs, taboos, inhibitions, rituals etc., prevail in Indian society which comes in the way of women's freedom, education and work participation and also other spheres of life. (6)

Thus it can safely be concluded that, of course, the status of women in India has gone through several improvements but still a lot is to be done in this direction.

It is noteworthy that India and Canada have different geographical regions – one from east and other from west still it is to be found that the graph of women's status in both these countries is more or less similar on several grounds. Canada and India share identical features like multi-culturalism, colonialism and patriarchy, but it is evident that these two countries also share similar social status of women. Canadian as well as Indian society is male-dominated where women are considered as inferior beings. In Canada and India women were associated with subordination and submission while dominance over them was the birth right of men.

Further, both in India and Canada religion sanctioned the existing patriarchy. Christianity in Canada considers woman to be subordinate to man and husband is given the status of worldly God. Similarly, in India, Hinduism permits male dominance by giving the status of God to husbands and by reducing wives to a passive identity.

In both the countries women were not allowed to participate in public sphere and were deprived of job opportunities. Even after the movements for women's liberation, discrimination on basis of gender can be noticed in various spheres. The economic status of women has long been deteriorated due to differences in male-female wages. Despite the fact that women's participation in labour force is essential for economic development, the conditions of women in Canada and India are not satisfactory.

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