

Indian Feminists: Voices from Margins

- Priyanka Vaidya

Abstract: Indian feminists try to break the patriarchal images of women, the images of goddess Sita, Kunti etc. they try to prove this fact that age-old customs should be changed. Despite the longstanding and vigorous women's movement, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched in India. Western feminists can never explain the pain of marginalized, dominated and exploited Eastern females.

Keywords: Indian feminists, Western feminists, patriarchy, motherhood, subaltern, empowerment.

*Many times we weep, we resist
We accept, we perceive
Life as true, as it is not
Life continually demands its share
But we forget its place...*

Priyanka Vaidya: *Little Life, Long Journeys*

Resistance to change is natural because old beliefs and attitudes have been ingrained in us for generations. Our mindsets are deep-rooted. They are hard to tear up from their soil. It will take great courage on the part of men to give up positions of power which have always been their domain and right. It will take great courage to move out of their comfort zone. Men must understand that empowering women will not pose a threat to them or disrupt harmony in the family and community. Rather it will enhance life. It is important to understand what an empowered woman is? An empowered woman has self-esteem and self-confidence to break the age old shackles. She respects herself and invites others to treat her with dignity and respect. She is capable of being self-sufficient, whether she works outside the home or not. Empowered women provide tremendous help and support to men; they do not overpower them. India has been a patriarchy for a long time, but it is time to move forward; it is time to develop into society that is neither male-dominated, nor female-dominated, but where men and women are equal- socially, politically and economically. This is not an impossible dream. Women in India have not been given their due place, though they are given great reverence as mother, wife, daughter and sister. In the early Vedic period, women relished rights, education and respective place in the family. The position of women has been deteriorated from the later Vedic period; it degenerated through early medieval ages, and became worse during the Muslim and the British period. The age of marriage was reduced to about ten, and women were treated as mere products. The position of women reflects the cultural attainments of a society. In the Vedic Age women enjoyed a relatively high position in society. They enjoyed freedom for spiritual progress. Manu, codifier of laws snatched the position of females in society. However, Buddhism tried to restore the

lost status of females. During the periods of Islam and Mughal rule, the position of females degraded. It touched the lowest ebb during the British Raj. In 19th century serious efforts were made by the reformers to give women an honourable position, the foremost among them was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, made persistent efforts for female education, re-marriage of Hindu widows, and prevention of childhood marriage and removal of polygamy. Although men were the first to take up the case of Indian women, women too were involved in the race to attain female's status. Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya and many other tried to attain female freedom. Many feminists are in the way to break the shackles of femininity, weakness and inferiority. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft articulated the case of women through her revolutionary text *A Vindication for the Rights of Women*, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) followed the route. Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (in French) in 1949 is a great pioneering feminist work. Wherein she desperately raises the ideas against the myth of femininity:

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete way; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women, within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which shall mean practical subordination to man, for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid, economic and social foundations. (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 30)

Despite the longstanding and vigorous women's movement, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched in India, influencing the structure of its political and social institutions and determining the opportunities open to women and men. The negotiation and conflict between patriarchy and the women's movement are central to the constitution of the nation-state. The decade of the 80s assumes a special significance due to the fact caste, gender and religion became important reference points in history, subaltern history in particular understood the need to document the lives of all the oppressed people, like peasants and workers, tribal and lower-caste women and *dalits*, whose voices were seldom heard before in history. If, in the west, women have had to question the findings and conclusions of Englishmen's philosophies of men like Rousseau, Darwin and Freud. Rousseau who was liberal for male was liberal for male was most illiberal for females. He considered women to be made for the pleasure of men and placed them as subservient and secondary to man (Qtd. in Jain *Indian Feminism* 93). Similarly, Manu is quoted everywhere in Indian context. He becomes the final defense of those who feel threatened by feminist questioning of social structures and power relationships. Pundit Rama Bai's *The high caste Hindu woman* (1888) is an analysis of Manu's position and exposes its in-built gender biases and the nature of its authoritarian control over women by controlling all that goes to constitute or develop the self as well as identity. Feminists are not necessarily females but also males. Men have contributed to it at several

levels in many ways and to different regions of thought and experience (Jain *Indian Feminism* 84). Some major examples are Tagore's *Yogayog* (1929), Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Shesh Prashan* (1931) and Jainendra Kumar Jain *Tyaagpath* (1937). Tagore's focus is on the nature of incompatible marriages, and woman's lack of freedom in her responses; Chatterjee projects through the character of kamal, a woman who survives with dignity through widowhood, a fake marriage and loneliness. She defies social norms, is at times ostracized but is never really without self-generated strength which helps her to sustain herself. Mrinal, the young woman, in Jainendra kumr's *Tyaagpath* is an illustration of a woman struggling to reconcile her personal freedom and love with the moral norms defined by the patriarchal society. The system doesn't allow her any personal freedom. She explores her real self only outside marriage. These writers are not perceived from feminist perspective.

Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marjani* is read as a text celebrating female sexuality. The novel is about the dynamics of family life, about patriarchal structures and paternal authority. Fathers are either absent or old and weak, and without power. Dalip Kaur Tiwana in *Puchhde Ho To Suno* writes that perceptions of Indian womanhood are broadly classified into Devi and not-Devi, and this is a division into the good and the bad, the domestic and the public space, the wife and the whore. The image of motherhood as a protective feminine principle is also under attack from several directions and several women writers have challenged it, Anita Desai presents woman as either absent or ailing or weak. Manu perceived womanhood to be the main purpose of a woman's life and placed a mother a hundred times above the father (Jain *Indian Feminism* 87). Motherhood, needs to be understood, subjugates the female body, and is primarily a sexual relationship without power. Dalip Kaur Tiwana turns to a family saga in *Katha Kaho Urvashi* (1999) to explore the union of self, lineage, marriage, responsibility and personal relationships.

What should I carry for / the newly born girl?

A few flowers / from some garden / A few sentences
from some poem / and the belief / that after growing up
she shall see the world / with her own eyes
then she shall break shackles / shackles with shackles
ask for freedom / and nothing less than freedom.

Nirmala Garg (Qtd. in Singh *self or Motherhood* 119)

Indian feminists try to break the patriarchal images of women, the images of goddess Sita, Kunti etc. they try to prove this fact that age-old customs should be changed. One of the most deep rooted obstacles in achieving the goals of women's liberation is the ideologies in the form of religion (Tiwari *Women's Liberation Movement* 19). Major religions all over the world preach the superiority of men over women:

A woman could be free at all, only as Amrapali or Mira ... either sell off her body ... negate her body ... or a spiritual devotee ... she can be Sita or Mira or Amrapali. Indian feminists intend to choose their own course, follow their own ideals, so she rejects her father's notions of greatness ... patriarchy and morality. She does respond

to her desires but carefully without even making her coward father think of suicide. That makes one think of Indian feminists different from the Western feminism, for Indian women have different history, different ethos and forms of stratification and patriarchal domination. (Singh *Self or Motherhood* 120)

Western feminists can never explain the pain of marginalized, dominated and exploited Eastern females. Western feminists can never explain the Mahasweta Devi's account of the tribal Jasoda or Draupadi. Many of Mahasweta Devi's stories are about tribal's fighting oppression, resisting exploitation, rebelling against authority. Mahasweta Devi's *Rudaali* is a moving portrait of two widows who join hands to act as professional mourners for lecherous zamindars after their death. It is a powerful critique of a socio-economic system which renders widows vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of zamindars, moneylenders, priests and their touts. Indian feminist theory should be Indian. Shashi Deshpande asserts regarding feminism:

"... to me, feminism is not a matter of theory: it is different to apply Kate Millet or Beauvoir or whoever is the reality of our daily lives in India and then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism here. They often think it is about burning ... walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. I always try to make the point now what feminism is not ... a lot of women in India are feminists without knowing it ..."

(Qtd. in Jain *Indian Feminism* n.p.)

The problems of women have been raised in the works of many Indian writers like R. K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhle, Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, Mahasweta Devi, Bama Uthiramerur and Arundhati Roy etc. Kamala das may perhaps be regarded as first voice of the woman.

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