

WOMEN AS GLORIFIED IN THE PAST AND RENDERED SUBORDINATE IN THE PRESENT : A BRIEF NOTE

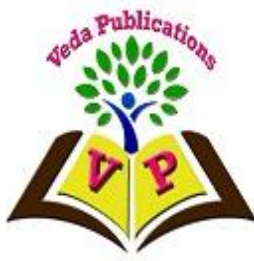
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Abstract



This paper throws light on woman in derogatory manner and position of woman in the society, which considers women as the most oppressed group and upholds their rights by presenting them as individuals and human beings and affirms, place of women in society is different from culture to culture and from age to age.

Keywords: *Female subjugation, Religious belief, Liberation, Chastity, Self-sacrifice.*

Woman, according to Engels, was “the first slave within civilization and women the first oppressed group.” Men all over the world speak about the woman in derogatory manner. The position and role of women in society is very critical, for they are abused in every sphere. On every level, the attacks must be, in some measure, commensurately random and chaotic Juliet Mitchell writes:

“That woman was the slave of men at the commencement of society is one of the most absurd notions that have come down to us from the period of enlightenment of the eighteenth century” (P 365)

Feminism may be articulated as a social movement which considers women as the most oppressed group, upholds their rights by presenting them as individuals and human beings and affirms their capacities to be autonomous, intelligent, strong and successful women are an integral part of human civilization. No society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women for its overall development. Although the place of women in society is different from culture to culture and from age to age, yet one fact common to almost all societies is that woman has never been considered the equal of man. Her status largely depends on the simple biological fact that she is the bearer of children whose care is her responsibility; thus her sphere is usually restricted to her familial roles.

Since times immemorial, woman has been the victim of male domination and oppression and treated like a beast of burden and an object for pleasure. Man has always looked down upon her as the weaker sex, as his property, servile to him. Different religions of the world have given sanction for female subjugation to the male members of society. Thus perpetuating the myth of female servitude, the Bible clearly states:

“Wives, submit yourself to your husbands as to the Lord”

(The Bible, Ephesians 5: 22)

It further states:

“Woman is regarded sub-ordinate to man because it is believed that she was made out of man.

This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh.
She shall be called woman,
because she was taken out of man”.

(The Bible, Genesis 2:13)

Even in ancient India, woman’s lot was no better and they were assigned secondary roles in a male-dominated society by religious injunctions and social conventions. The ancient Hindu law-giver Manu, whose philosophy occupies a significant place in the mainstream of Indian ideology and culture, does express some noble sentiments about women:

“Where females are honoured, there
the deities are pleased; but where
they are dishonoured these all
religious acts become fruitless”

(Manon Dharma Shastra 68)

That a woman is a sub-ordinate to man is repeatedly stressed by him. A wife must ever remain devoted to her husband and always please him while he is alive. After his death, she should never think of any other man. Even if the husband is of bad character and seeks pleasure elsewhere, must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife. Manu divides Indian society into four Varnas: “Brahmanas”, “Kshatriyas”, “Vaishyas” and “Shudras” and the position of woman has been equated with the lowest class, Shudras and like Shudras, women are denied various religious privileges. Even *The Koran* repeatedly stresses the superiority over women. A woman’s function in life is to provide the male with sexual gratification and progeny. *The Koran* states:

“Men are superior to woman on
account of the qualities with which
God had gifted the one above
the other
virtuous women are obedient,
careful during the husband’s
absence because God hath
on them been careful” (*The Koran*, 415)

In a traditional society, young girls are also oppressed. When a young girl reaches puberty, her movements are restricted, whereas there are no restrictions for her brothers who cross that age. In the South-Indian social set-up, the parents of a girl do not act boldly and firmly out of fear of the society. Instead of bringing the guilty ones to law for punishment, they prefer to suppress the matter because they know all too well the hypocrisies of the society. Conforming to the social ways, they keep their daughters secure within the four walls of their house till they are handed over to their rightful masters. But these women are not happy in their lives. Most of these woman end their life by hanging themselves, taking sleeping tablets and poison because of the distress – distress for want of a bridegroom; probably also due to male-chauvinism and cruelty of their husbands. Such a distress buried daily number of women. Here women's liberation is only a fun. The housewives are suffocated by the knots of Thali which seem to be variables shackles. The society criticizes house wives for various reasons; while not a working woman, not a beautiful woman, not potent to give birth to children and so on. They are given dumb roles as silent spectators. On the contrary, if they speak, they are branded as talkative. The sacred 'Thali' sometimes drives them to commit suicide and many times towards lifeless living.

In the Indian classical literature, a woman is always shown in relationship to man; the husband – wife relationship is given more importance than the daughter – father, sister-brother or daughter-mother relationship. Traditionally a good woman is always synonymous with good wife and a good wife must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like Sita or Savitri:

“For both men and women in Hindu
Society, the ideal woman has been
Traditionally personified by Sita
Who is portrayed in Ramayana, as
The quintessence of wifely devotion”

(Chakravarthy, 70).

In Ramayana, Sita's identity is solely seen or estimated in relation to her husband Rama. Her sole purpose in life is to follow in the footsteps of her husband. Sita's image as mother is glorified and she is repeatedly referred to as Mata Sita, but as wife she is subject to the whims of her husband, who abandons her only because of the derogatory remarks of a commoner. However, one finds that Sita shows some sign of awareness of being wronged and refuses to

go back to Rama and finally takes refuge in the lap of Mother Earth. In scriptures and myths, women is depicted either as a goddess or a sub-human creator, never as a complete human being where on one hand, she has been described as an object of worship; on the other hand, she is treated like an object of sexual gratification and considered to be man's property. In every age, the recurrent symbol of seed and earth further degrades her position:

“Man provides the seed, the essence
for the creation of the off-spring;
the seed determines the kind;
the child's identity is derived
from the father for the group
placement. The role of mother
is just to receive the seed
and through her own blood
provide warmth and nourishment
and help it to grow” (Desai 29)

Apart from the religio-cultural factors, the historical and political events also appear to have had their impact on the status of women in ancient India. Due to the repeated invasions by the foreign rulers, women lost the honour and respect earlier commanded by her in Vedic society. Sons were valued more than the daughters as they could participate in wars because ancient civilizations were constantly exposed to such dangers.

There is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of woman in Indian myths and scriptures and her actual situation in life. On the surface, she enjoys a very high status known as Devi (Goddess), Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth) or Shakti (Goddess of power), but in real life, she is harassed, oppressed and tortured in various ways. Female infanticide, Sati, harassment of widows, rape, wife beating, family violence, dowry deaths are some of the visible forms of the oppression on women. With the exception of some gains in education and employment for middle-class women, the women's position in practice is still very bad. Even the economically independent woman's position in practice is still very bad. Even the

economically independent women's lot is no better. She has to bear the double burden of job and household responsibilities. At home, her contribution is seldom recognized while at her working place many times she is treated as inferior is harassed and exploited. The rural woman, apart from looking after family and children, also work the whole in the fields, but instead of receiving any word of gratitude, they are slighted by the various members of the family and are often found to be victims of physical violence as well. Even in America where women are supposed to be more liberated, they are found suffering sexual harassment from their superiors in office and other places.

Even since antiquity, there have been woman fighting to free their half of the total population of the world from male oppression. The movement obviously had to create certain theories so that they could be employed successfully to effect some political changes. The early feminists focused upon genders. The sexes, according to them, are culturally and not just biologically formed. Their immediate aim was to oppose mistreatment of women. By opposing ideology, prejudice and narrowness, they stood for a general conception of humanity.

In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the view that she is to be given to a new master, her husband who will determine, and shape her for the rest of her life. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage market. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent individual self. The decision in terms of her career or even marriage is taken by her father, brother and mother. As Simone De Beauvoir observes, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society". Marriage is considered to be the greatest ambition of a girl. As such, a woman is always someone's daughter, some one's wife or some one's mother, minus her own identity. The feminists highly resent these culturally constructed norms which make women subjects of men in various forms.

The patriarchal practices which reduce woman's status to inferior social beings are further perpetuated by myths and traditions which unfortunately have been embedded in the fabric of every society. What is generally understood and expected is that in India, since woman is considered to be "an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge". She should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful and devoted to her

husband and his family. She must seek pleasure in these relationships. The faintest of any such ideas that every being exists primarily for the realization of oneself can never occur to her in the wildest of her dreams. These attitudes exemplify the belief that women should not have any right on her own, that she has only duties in relation to man. In a patriarchal society, the birth of a female child is traditionally less welcome than that of a male child. Being born as a boy is itself a privilege investment. The female child is looked down upon as a transitory member of the family in contrast with the boy, who is supposed to be the transmitter of the family name to future generations and therefore, a male child is more carefully and lovingly brought up and given more advantages. This is true not only of Indian society but also of the white society in British colonies like Rhodesia.

Women are brought up strictly according to the traditional codes. The moment of a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity. The media are also responsible for projecting the image of women in a distorted manner. In the T.V. or Newspaper advertisements, women are portrayed as sexy, glamorous and empty-headed. Indian films too preach feminine values of submission, devotion and self-sacrifice.

To conclude, in ancient history, women are deified, glorified and also regarded as myths but in reality, they have been from the past till now treated as subordinate to men, who have to act as efficient mistress, faithful wife, and painstaking mother who possess the virtues of thrift, frugality, chastity, hospitality and other domestic excellences.

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