

GENDER, CLASS, AND CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The aim of my paper is to deal with the literary as well as cultural representations of Indian women – almost from the very old age – that of the great epics the Mahabharat and the Ramayana and up to the modern day India.

I also want to show up the trends attitudes and practices related to Feministic Criticism and Women Empowerment. At the same time it is also to expose the sentimental notions, angry oppositions and confrontations of the so called feminists apart from revealing stereotype and celluloid representations. I have used the illustrations from the learned literary figure, Somadatta Mandal, the first, the Documentary by Ananya Chatterjee Daughters of the 73rd Amendment in which the success stories of three different women leaders of different lands are described. The second a Bengali film Paromita and the third the a ward winning feature film Dahan, which proved to be very controversial for the stereotypical representation of man and Ananya's confrontation there on to reveal the hypocrisy and aggression of mere feminism.

Moreover, I have also tried to show up the interrelatedness of caste, class and gender and the politics and exploitation by the dominant. I have illustrated this interrelatedness and hypocrisy by providing illustrations from Premchand, Sharadbabu and Arundhati Roy. The exploitation of women and patriarchal treatment expressed in some Bengali collections and the stories of modern day Punjabi writer Kartar Singh Duggal.

Finally, exposing the aggressive feminism which by mere confrontation may harm the man-woman relationship and consequently the civilization, I have shown up the representations like Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, Mandodari, etc from our great ancient heritage. I have also covered examples from Toru Dutt's Ancient Ballads, like Savitri. At the end I have mentioned the lofty and sublime representations in our folklore from Dineshchandra Sen to Padmashree Dula Kag who has created some wonderful Dohas and Poems regarding mother in particular and women in general. His poem Rajpootani is the striking example of the 'Shakti' or 'Jagadamba' form of woman, wherein the Rajputani performs almost every role as an ideal, generous and dominating woman, as wife, as mother and as the queen. She doesn't hesitate even to drive her husband away, if he follows the corrupt path. I have ended my writing with the beautiful, exquisite, celebrated poem by a Gujarati poet Botadkar, who creates a wonderful and miraculous image of mother – the incarnation of extreme, ever flowing and overflowing affection



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MEETHAN MADHU NE MEETHA MEHULA RE LOL,
ETHI MEETHEE TE MORI MAT RE,
JANANEE NI JOD SAKHI ! NAHI JADE RE LOL,
PRABHUNA E PREM TANEE POOTALEE RE LOL,
JAGATHEE JUDEREE ENEE JAT RE.

JANANEE – NEE....

[Sweet is the honey, and sweet is the rain, the sweeter though (honeyer than honey) is my mother. There is no equal to mother, my dear She is the idol of Godly love Her own self is different from the rest of the world.]

The Dictionary of Literary Terms & Theory says: “A development & movement in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature which was well under way by the late 1960s and which has burgeoned steadily since, feminist criticism is an attempt to describe, interpret and reinterpret women’s experience as depicted in various kinds of literature”.¹ One of the most revolutionary changes of the twentieth century was the rapid increase of women in leadership roles in our society and nation. Throughout the world women’s history has developed differently in different countries and among groups within these countries and can not be separated from the political context. In India too, the case is somewhat similar. Although ‘feminism’ because of its origin in the west and emphasis on individualism, is a problematic concept in India as noted historian Geraldine Forbes rightfully argues, “The first women to enter political and social organizations were deeply concerned with improving women’s status”.² She further tells how the parameters of women’s entry into nationalist politics were set by male leaders and defined by women. The freedom struggle legitimized women’s involvement in politics and presence outside the home but it did not liberate them from deeply held notions of modesty and necessity of male protection. However, women rose to unprecedented promise in every sphere including business, government, science, the arts, education, etc.

Adopted unanimously, in 1995, a remarkable Declaration and Platform for Action, produced by the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing linked women’s rights to human rights for the first time in UN history and laid out detailed and ambitious plans for the advancement of girls, and women in health, political decision-making, education and economic opportunity. The Declaration and Platform were just pieces of paper--there was no real enforcement mechanism but it inspired women’s vigorous relations and consequently statistical surveys are made each year to see how self-sufficient &

self-reliant women are gradually turning and what dramatic progress they have been making in their own sphere of activities and also in those areas where they have to compete equally with men. Some women's organizations have insisted on reservation for women. Both reservationists and anti-reservationists for the cause want the right kind of woman in politics but neither group wanted women of all classes, castes and religions to answer the question "What do women want?" Because of miss-interpretations, political motifs and worn aggression, some wrong and artificial representations are made. Thus, problems are created not only by male dominance. To some extent, women themselves are responsible for the plight and problems of women.

Somdatta Mandal in her article "Women's Empowerment in India" questions the stereotyped notions of women's empowerment in the Indian context vis-a-vis the illiterate rural figure that has been overly represented in celluloid representations as well as other media, versus her liberated and educated counterpart living in the city.³ To, illustrate this point she takes recourse to three audio-visual representations, one a documentary made by a woman journalist, two, a feature film made by the same director, and the third, an award winning Bengali feature film made by a director of repute and shows how this common belief about the vulnerability of the illiterate village woman is a myth as is the belief about empowerment of her educated feminist, city-bred counterpart :

The first illustration, Ananya Chatterjee's documentary *Daughters of the 73rd Amendment* produced by the Institute of Social Sciences, Calcutta, shows the empowerment of three women panchayat leaders from different parts of India. The amendment that made it mandatory for Panchayats (village councils) to reserve one-third of the seats for women has often been ridiculed, and elected women often regarded as wooden dolls controlled by existing male power. But the amendment has also thrown up many achievers Ananya's chronicle is of such women of grit who have been given the opportunity. The 50 minute long documentary focuses primarily upon three specific cases.⁴

- Gundia Bai Ahirwar of Pipra village in the Bundelkhand district of Madhya Pradesh. Married at the age of two, and mother of several children, Gundia Bai holds up a success story in the manner in which she functions. Like all villagers, her prime interests are micro-level roads, primary school, and drinking water. It is very ironic to hear that even as the village Sarpanch she has to wait in queue to draw water at the village well till all the higher caste women finish their jobs because she belongs to a lower caste. So much for ground realities in most states of India.

- Sudha Patel, from Anand District in Gujarat. Blind since birth, Sudha has a bachelor's degree and she reveals that she is alive today only because a good harvest the year she was born prevented her parents of infanticide as some villagers thought her to be lucky as 'Lakshmi'. Sudha's grit for working from a doubly marginalized position is also revealed in the way she sings and laughs her way to office.
- A middle-aged, burkha-clad Fatima Bee, whose house shelf is full of so many achievements and award medals that one might mistake it to be a leading sportsman's or performer's house. She is also the recipient of an award from the President of India. Her case is perhaps the finest example of what women can achieve if given the necessary support from the family member and from society at large. It has to be mentioned that Ananya titles the Documentary "Part -I" as she feels that the mission is still incomplete and many other Sudha Patel or Fatima Bees might be existing somewhere else in India, or are in the process of gaining empowerment.

The second illustration is of the film *Paromitaar Ekdin* (A day in paromita's life) by Aparna Sen, in which the heroine, a middle-aged well-to-do woman of Bengali house hold commits the cardinal crime of falling in love with a young photographer. She had an ally in her mother-in-law. Her conviction on how economic independence has a vital role to play in this effort comes through. The third illustration is Rituparno Ghosh's award-winning film *Dahan* (1997), where the focal point is a well-reported rape attempt. A bunch of ruffians try to molest a newly wed woman, Romita while many pass by, none offer to help, until a brave young teacher, Jhinuk infuriated by what she sees, turns on the men and saves the girl. All this happens in the first 20 minutes of the film, the next two hours is about how various people react to the incident and the scandal it brings to the family reputation, Romita, her husband, her-in-laws, her parents, the teacher, her grand mother with whom she shares a special bond, her brother who idolized her. All these add depth to the screenplay that is a brilliant insight into Indian middle class moralities and what is justice, bravery, right and wrong, morals, crime, punishment and so on. It portrays the plight of a woman assaulted by a group of men and who succumbs to the pressures of her husband and in-laws by giving a false statement in court making Jhinuk realize that her feminist ideals of being an equal partner in society is a sham and however much one might talk of gender empowerment, in real life that does not work. The writer here refers to an interesting controversy raged in Kolkata regarding *Dahan* and Ananya Chatterjee was directly involved in it. The film was

screened on the third week of November in Kolkatta as part of the international fortnight of violence against women, organized by a NGO, Sanlaap On 27th November, 2002, the audience at Nandan Theatre got an insight into the situation of the couple harassed by four youths at the Tollygunj Metro station in 1992 and the woman who fought for the couple seeking justice. The author Suchitra Bhattacharya and Ananya Chatterjee, the journalist who inspired the character Jhinuk in the film: By making Jhinuk as the loser she wanted women to realize the pain and suffering, wanted readers to act. Ananya Chhaterjee lambasted the film. In an act of unusual courage, she had come to the aid of a young couple when they were being roughed up. But when her story was adapted on celluloid, she found that it was flawed by male stereotyping. She felt that it had been majorly unfair to the male characters, especially the victim's husband. She reported:

“Though the film says that it is based on a true life incident, I am surprised at the way the characters are portrayed. The woman's husband has been portrayed in a negative role whereas in a real life both the woman and the man fought against social pressure and always appeared in court seeking justice. In real life, the couple, who were college students, had got married after the incident. The man stood firmly by his girlfriend, and had supported her against immense societal pressure. The couple married in UP and the case is still in court”. She further says - “If this stereotypes has to be broken it has to be attacked from both sides. For it is not some men who need to be broken, it is this easy, short cut method of stereotyping to justify one's actions and mind-set that needs to be addressed and broken down. When such stereotyping happens in a group or in a home it is dangerous enough. But when it happens in literature or in a film which leaves lasting impressions on people's minds it is likely to be catastrophic. We are not yet ready to accept real men and real women.”⁵

In 1960s, there began a spate of diverse criticism often of a polemical nature, which shows no sign of abating. Much of it-especially that on literature-was often political and expressed anger and a sense of injustice that women had been oppressed and exploited by men. Indeed, a substantial amount of feminist criticism goes well beyond literature to explore the socio-economic status of women. But as far as Indian culture and societal point of view is concerned the relationship of woman as a mother, sister, wife, and daughter is important .

While observing the women representations, my intention is to show up gender, not simply as an isolated category, but as constantly transforming and intersecting with class (economic) and caste issues of modern day India to form a complex matrix. It is also my intention to show up that this interrelatedness of class, caste and gender go on to shape

national identities, and influence economic, political and social activities in India today. A fundamental quality of the Hindu social organization was to construct a closed structure to preserve land, woman and ritual quality within it. It is impossible without controlling female sexuality and preventing 'Varnashankar', the mixing of castes. The upper caste woman is regarded the entry point into the caste system. Thus, while a lower-caste man's sexual relationship with higher caste women brings swift and violent retribution, the upper caste man's use of lower caste woman is naturalized sometimes as a man's right. Premchand has exposed this hypocrisy and double standard in his stories like "Sudra" (1925), "Ghaswali" (1929). In his celebrated work *Godan*, Silia, an untouchable girl is seduced by the Brahmin Priest Matadin. The mother of the helpless girl cries out in protest "You will sleep with her but you won't drink the water touched by her?"⁶ The same example is found in Sharadbabu's novel *Bamuner Meye* (1920), wherein the upper class Brahmin leader Golak exploits different people through excommunication. He takes sexual advantage of his wife's widowed sister Gyanada, impregnates her and shifts the blame to poor, Priyonath. The Brahminic ideology contains within it forms of class/economic exploitation as well as patriarchal domination.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of small things* also explores the same complex relationship between caste, class and gender. The novel looks at problems of casteism in not just Hindus but Syrian Christian community in Kerala through the sexual union of a high caste woman and a low-caste man- Ammu and Velutha (an out caste Paravan) When Mammachi discovers her daughter's involvement with an 'untouchable' man: "Mammachi's rage at the one-eyed Paravan standing in the rain, drunk, dribbling and covered in mud was redirected into cold contempt for her daughter and what she had done. She thought of her, naked coupling with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie. She imagined Paravan's coarse black hand on her daughter's breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs this particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter ... brought the family to its knees."⁷ Thus, Saradbabu as well as Arundhati Roy consider all kinds of victimized and powerless people in society in the same plight as 'outcaste' or 'Dalits'. Saratbabu's character Sandhya, the daughter of the destitute Brahmin, Priyonath, has been rejected both by her lover, Arun and the man of her parent's choice- involving caste, class and gender issues.

Moreover, we may find some fine examples of women representations in the short stories of the well-known modern day Punjabi writer Kartar Singh Duggal. His shortest (A Mini story) and the longest one in his collection, "Mitti Musulmanki" involve women representation. For example, the titular story "Mitti Musulmanki" is a great story dealing with the theme of partition of Indo-Pak. The Sikh girl Rukko's tragic end - ironically she is killed by both the men who love her to craziness the brother and the Muslim husband - she is a lady killed with kindness - if ever there was one. A really touching story! Another group of his stories are around the struggle of East Bengal with West-Pakistan. Stories like "Freedom to die", "Samina's Secret", "Allah, No More" deal with the brutality of Muslim soldiers from Pakistan to defenseless Muslim citizens. Women were raped and brutalized with impunity treated as fair game. Several Bangla women all victims of war - stand out as women of spirit and grit as well as mystery. "Allah, No More", contains the character of Fatima Bi, a woman of steel, her suffering and finally crumbling down.⁸ One more collection '*Three sides of life : Short stories by Bengali Women Writers*' ed. by Sumitra Chakravarty, is noteworthy as far as exploitation and patriarchal treatment to women is concerned. Mahasweta Devi's "Dhohli" deals with the extreme suffering of a low-caste young widow who becomes the victim of the lust and ruthlessness of the well-to-do Misrilal, as reviewed by M. N. Chatterjee⁹, who in the beginning of her review raises the argument, why the women writers are presented as 'Women Writers' and not 'writers' only. This is considered to be discriminatory. But ironically, women themselves claim to be women writers as evident from the title of the above-cited book.

Therefore, mere aggression, angry opposition or confrontation will never serve any purpose of literature. On the contrary, it may render the man-woman relationship and moral values at stake and harm the basis of civilization. Moreover, we are especially concerned with literature, rather than socio-political or legal aspects. Literary and cultural representations of race, class and gender may be found everywhere in world literature in general and Indian literature in particular. We find wide range of striking, influential and beautiful representations of women in the great national epics the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan*, the inexhaustible sources of any type of literature. Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Mandodari are some excellent examples of the ever-heightened womanhood, generous, pious and devoted. On the other hand, Manthara and Shurpankha are the aggressive and damning shrews, the villainous protagonists. Toru Dutt has used the sources and created some wonderful, poetic, characters such as Savitri and Sita. As Nateson & Co. cites, "... She has successfully striven

to interpret the spirit of the east to the west....”¹⁰ In the very beginning of the poem “Savitri”, She depicts the charm and grace of the young lady:

*The Sweet simplicity and grace, Abashed the boldest; but the good
God’s purity –there loved to trace, Mirrored in dawning womanhood¹¹*

The Ramayana is actually the poem of ideals. Not only the ideal woman and wife but the ideal man and husband, too -- the perfect balance. Some people regard Sita as of too much ideology – “Bharatiya Nari”, idolized and stereotyped. But there are Kaikeyee and Manthara too. Now, it is up to the people to follow or pick up the ones. Recently, I attended a lecture of a well-known woman in a programme for women empowerment, wherein she referred the role of Manthara and sympathized that Manthara is actually victimized by men. What a thought! Yes, we know actually it is not Manthara who was utterly responsible for Ram’s exile, as she was motivated by ‘Daiv’ or ‘Vidhata’, and not men. And the same is true in the case of Kaikeyi. But there are some noteworthy citations regarding women, such as:

SATYA KAHAHIN KAVI NARI SVABHAU SAB VIDHI AGAM AGADH DURAU|
NIJ PRATIBIMB MUKUR GAHI JAAEE JANI NA JAI NARI GATI BHAI ||¹²

[Poets truly say: the nature of woman is totally inaccessible, imperceptible and unattainable. One can catch one’s own reflection in the mirror but can’t comprehend the state of woman’s mind] Tagore also says, ‘Inscrutable are the ways of a woman’s heart’.

To sum up there are some lofty instances of the representations of women even in the folklore of India, and some times of the creations by women themselves in the forms of tales and songs. As Dinesh Chandra Sen writes, “That women composed these stories in Bengal will be easily proved by the style and manner in which they are delivered ... even hundreds of years ago.”¹³ The famous Gujarati writer and poet Jhaverchand Meghani also edits many Rasa - ballads, composed by women in Saurashtra, in his book *Radhiyali Rat*. W.R. Gourlay gets utterly impressed by the beauty of one of the tales, as he writes:

‘The beautiful story of Malan Chamala is a tale of which a nation might well be proud: it has all the attributes of a beautiful lyric: it contains a conception of purity and love which evince a high state of civilization.’¹⁴ Indeed and that is why we have sublime songs and stories of our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. In one of his lofty and sweet Dohas addressed to mother famous Gujarati folklorist Padmashree Dula Kag Says,

MODHE BOLU ‘MA’ SACHENY NANAP SAMBHARE,
MOTAPNI MAJA, MANE KADAVI LAGE, KAGADA. ¹⁵

[When I utter 'ma' from my mouth, I really recall my childhood. Then, the joy of being big (important) is felt bitter, O Kaga!]

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