

**‘Contesting’ the Discourses of Womanhood: A Historical Reaccount
of the Conditions of Women in British India and Beyond**

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***Abstract:**In the past women in India were dependent on men. Their religious practices and traditions ascribed for their subordination to men in all matters. They were denied education, access to social justice and equality. They were also unaware of their basic rights due to their ignorance. With the arrival of the British, the Christian missionaries were shocked to see the dependant state of women and wanted to build schools to educate them about their rights, along with their true intention of spreading their religion. More alarming at that time were the practices of Sati, child marriage, female infanticide, Devadasi system, pardha system and others which they wanted to free women from and also create a political platform for them. Independent India saw more liberated women who have created a literature of their own, placing women in the context of the changing social scenario. But increasing education, better job opportunities and awareness of rights and privileges of women have forced her to ponder and define her role in society. The objective of the study is to analyze the portrayal of women in today's world in comparison to the past. An attempt to understand whether the modern women is truly liberated of her ignorance or has she entered a new arena that has more shackles to offer.*

***Key words:** Education, Exploitation, Patriarchy, Subordination, Women Empowerment etc.*

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Introduction

The status of women in any society is a true index of its cultural, social, religious and spiritual levels. The investigation of the status of Indian women, to be completed, has to be traced back to the ancient period of Indian civilization. Therefore, the analysis of traditional and contemporary roles of women in Indian society may be appropriately prefaced by a brief historical survey of the changing position of women. The Indian women surrendered meekly to the supremacy of the

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patriarchal system and accepted the roles assigned by traditions and allowed themselves to be dominated in the past. Indian women today have greater exposure with education and economic independence that has put them in a conflicting state where though they desire independence they also dread their traditional role and are hesitant to courageously walk out of the situation. Women now was faced with the challenging task of redefining her status which is not an easy endeavor. Women writers have caught the Indian women in this flux and have portrayed them realistically both psychologically as well as physically in their novels. Such literature has certainly contributed to a fresh exploration of the role and status of women in the Indian society.

Women in prehistoric India were held in high admiration. The woman according to the Vedas and the Upanishads was considered as a mother or goddess and in the Manusmriti, a woman was in the protection of her father and her brother and then in the care of husband and finally her son. In the early Vedic age, girls were considered precious and were given the facilities of education. Remarriage of widows was permitted.

As time went by, the status of woman was further lowered as Muscle power and money power conquered the societies. while men fought the wars and ran the enterprises of industrial production, they considered themselves superior to woman. Added to this in the later Vedic period, daughters were considered as a source of misery and the practice of polygamy further deteriorated the status of woman.¹

In the later civilizations women were not permitted to go to schools. In the Gupta period, they were tolerable to listen to the scriptures. During the medieval period, the practices of pardha system, dowry and sati came into being. Sati and Polygamy were glorified.. It is thought that the right place for woman is the home. Her main duty is to cook and do all other tedious jobs. They are considered fit for producing and bringing up children. Thus, women have been deprived of their rightful place in society and exploitation has been going on for centuries.

Sati, infanticide, slavery, child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage and lack of women’s rights were some of the social problems which attracted the attention of the British and social reformers. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the practice of sati was confined to Hooghly, Nadia and Burdwan districts of Bengal, Ghazipur of Uttar Pradesh and Shahabad of Bihar. It was also found in other parts of India, but only as a rare phenomenon.²

In southern India, it was practised in Ganjam, Masulipatnam and Tanjore districts. In Rajasthan, Punjab and Kashmir, the practice was confined mainly to women of high castes. In Delhi, Charles Metcalfe stopped the practice. Aligarh and Agra seldom had occurrences of sati.

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In Bengal alone three-fourths of the total occurrences of sati occurred in British India. It occurred among all castes, but it was more among the Brahmanas and Rajputs. Among the princely families, the sense of pride and heroism elevated the sati into a noble act. But, on the whole, the rite was practised by women whose husbands belonged to the middle and lower middle classes.

The following factors could be attributed to the practice of sati:

- (1) The position of women in the Hindu system,
- (2) The institution of polygamy, especially among the kulin Brahmanas,
- (3) The enforced widowhood and austerity,
- (4) Social convention,
- (5) The sense of salvation attached to the rite, and
- (6) Antiquity and adoration of the practice.

The British had shown interest in the abolition of sati in 1813. The persuasive propaganda techniques failed to prevent the occurrence of the practice. The police also did not prove effective. Raja Ram Mohan Roy took it upon himself to eradicate this social evil.

He announced that the rite of sati was not a part of the Shastras. It was not an integral part of the Hindu religion. A number of religious leaders opposed Ram Mohan Roy’s crusade against sati. Through the cooperation of the princes, it was virtually stopped in the princely states. But it was not made an illegal act for a long time.³

Even today, occurrences of sati are reported from various parts of the country. And in most of the cases, the police have either reached late or remained ineffective. In Jhunjhunu town of Rajasthan, a huge temple of sati – known as Rani Sati Mandir – is a place of worship by all castes and communities. Nearly, two decades ago, in Sikar district of Rajasthan, a young Rajput woman committed self-emulation. This particular sati occurrence invited protests from all over the state and other parts of India.

Female infanticide was found mainly among the Rajputs of Benaras, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and in parts of Punjab and Sind and among some Sikhs. The institution of female infanticide arose due to (1) the deplorable position of women in Hindu society, (2) the dowry system, (3) hypergamy, and (4) the sense of honour and pride. Marriage of a female is considered compulsory. In 1779, infanticide was declared to be murder by the Bengal Regulation XXI. In 1804, this was extended to other parts of India. However, the practice continued in secret

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till recently, particularly among the Rajput’s in Rajasthan. Dowry is its main cause.⁴

Child marriage is prevalent even today among the rural people, and among the urban illiterate and poor. The institution of child marriage is also the result of hypergamy, dowry, and notion of virginity and chastity. It has resulted in the problems of overpopulation, poverty, unemployment, ill-health, dependence upon parents, etc. The first legislation was passed in 1860 under which the minimum age for consummation of marriage in the case of girls was raised to ten.

In 1891, the age of consent for girls was raised to twelve, and in 1925 to thirteen for married girls and fourteen for unmarried ones. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sharda Bill) was passed. Under this Act, which came into being in 1930, the minimum age of marriage for a girl was fixed at fourteen and for a boy at eighteen. According to the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, the minimum age for a bride is fifteen, and for a bridegroom it is eighteen.

The legislations have not proved effective in this case. Education, economic pressures, and migration to towns and cities from rural areas have certainly contributed to the raising of the age at marriage of both the sexes. However, child marriage persists unchecked. Many a time, even political leaders of repute have enacted child marriages of their wards. No stringent actions are taken for violation of the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955.⁵

Slavery was of two types:

- (1) Domestic
- (2) Predial (agricultural)

There were also institutions of the nautch (dance) girls and prostitutes. The latter was found particularly in the princely states. Predial slavery was found in Bengal, Madras, Assam, Coorg and southern Bombay Presidency (presently in Karnataka and Maharashtra, respectively). The slaves of this category were insolvent debtors. Some of them were migrants from Rajputana. Even slaves were sold out.

There was also the practice of entering a contract by a person to work for a specific period of time either to pay the debt or to “have a fresh one”. Domestic slavery was confined to females. The foreigners also indulged in the purchase of children in a clandestine manner and exported them overseas.

Proclamations were made in Bengal, Madras, Bombay, etc., to prevent the institution of

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slavery. Today, the institution exists in the form of bonded labour. It is known by different names in different states. The British policy of apparent and selective non-interference in social matters encouraged the institution of slavery and other institutions which supported this evil.

With the efforts of Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. In 1861, a Widow Marriage Association was formed. The Arya Samaj gave top priority to this programme.

The following legislations have enhanced the status of Hindu women in matters of marriage, adoption and inheritance:

- (1) The Hindu Law of Inheritance (Amendment Act) of 1929
- (2) The Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act of 1937
- (3) The Hindu Marriage Disability Removal Act of 1946
- (4) The Special Marriage Act of 1954
- (5) The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955
- (6) The Hindu Succession Act and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956
- (7) The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- (8) The Maternity Benefits Act, 1961
- (9) The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- (10) The Criminal Law Amendment, 1983

Today, both sexes have the right to a civil marriage. The age without parents’ consent has been increased to 18 for girls and 21 for boys. Thus, monogamy, judicial separation, nullity and divorce are some of the salient features of the post-independence era, which put man and woman on an equal platform.

Inheritance, adoption and divorce (even consent) have enhanced women’s status in India. These reforms have a long history, and are outcome of the efforts of several reformists through various movements that they launched in the pre-independence period. However, there is no uniform civil code in India. Muslims continue to have their personal laws.⁶

In the post colonial women were given more importance. The constitution that was drafted after independence made many provisions for the safety of women and for their betterment, through education, reservations and equality. Women too began to strive hard and excelled in all fields that were once dominated by men. We have seen remarkable leadership of women as politicians, as entrepreneurs, as astronauts, as sportspersons who bring glory to the

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nation. The prominent line of difference between man and women began to become thin till the beginning of modern times that saw women getting greatly influenced to the western culture and fashion. They failed to strike a balance between the Indian and the Western cultures. They got carried away with their education and modern lifestyle and made themselves vulnerable to the men who considered women as objects of pleasure. Rape, sexual harassment, molestation, eve-teasing, forced prostitution, etc are a common affair today. The crime graph against women is increasing at an alarming rate today. The condition of an Indian widow is quite deplorable. At home, the woman's contribution towards home as a housewife is not recognized.

The women of today play a major role not only nation building but also in supporting the family financially. The cost of living in cities is so high that it demands both men and women to work to earn and manage their expenses. A majority of people work in private or corporate sectors as government sector jobs are hardly prevalent. The work pressure is so high that every day is a struggle. The employees are constantly kept in fear of losing their jobs which adds to their stress. Today's job market has fewer jobs but many aspirants which lead to underemployment. Thereby women are forced to bear the exploitation of men in workplace due to their desperate need to sustain in their jobs. Sexual harassment at work places is also a common affair. It is a shame that even after over sixty years of independence women are still exploited. Women have now started demanding their rights. They want to work side by side with men and contribute towards the social, economic and political development of the society.⁷

Women in the colonial period depended on others to voice their problems however, post colonial women being educated, hidebound and aware were ready to speak and stand up for themselves. For instance Sabarimala Shrine entry movement. The post colonial period has seen a rise in incidents of sexual abuses against women in the form of rapes- pre-marriage or marital News of voice against Triple talaq shows how women are empowering against draconian traditional rules. Government of India initiated to make National Commission for Women and established it in 1992, and 73rd, 74th Constitutional Amendments gave reservation to women not less than 33% in local bodies. This shows “Equality” towards women. The evolution of India as a society since the last two centuries or more has focused on the issues and movements concerning women. However, it's high time that women of our society feel safe and secure and the issues despite of evolving in nature are solved sooner.⁸

Literature is considered as the best tool for the stressing on any issue or to reiterate any position. In Post-independent India specially though constructive contribution of women in the

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past two or three decades has been great and continuously increasing, which the male-dominated Indian literature consciously ignored their supporting role. The more recent women may not be as prolific as their predecessors yet they also deal with themes related to women and society or more specifically the man-women relationship in their novels. Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* visualizes the whole cultural scenario from a locus of isolation, oppression, depression, frustration and amalgamation.⁹

In *Woman and Indian Modernity: Readings of Colonial and Postcolonial Novels*, Nalini Natarajan, through readings of 20th century novels and (in some cases) their film versions, explores how „gender is reconstructed in the literary representations of modernity“ Natarajan's study is a useful and timely contribution to the field of social 'modernity and reform in India as well as to larger discourses on colonial, cultural, and feminist studies that continuously engage with, debate, and examine the intersections of gender, nationalism and modernity.¹⁰ Natarajan's book presents exciting ideas and is a welcome addition to ongoing academic discussions of the ways in which policies and cultural practices affect and shape notions of women and modernity in colonial and postcolonial contexts.¹¹

In the novel of the 1960s women in Indian fiction were depicted as ideal creatures having various virtues, with no concept of revolt while the later novels portray. Women as educated and conscious of their right and privileges demanding their proper place in society. Undeniably, recent years have witnessed the impact of western feminist theories put forward by writers like Simone de Beauvoir [*The Second Sex*, 1952], Betty Friedan [*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963] and Kate Millet [*Sexual Politics*, 1970].¹² Under these influences the Indian women writers have successfully attempted to break the literary and social norm of the past. They delve deep into the psyche of their characters and also herald a new concept of morality. At the outset writers like kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha de, Bharati Mukherjee and some others have denied any sort of feminist bias in their writings but an in depth analysis proves a strong feminist intent, for women's issue pertains to be the chief concern of their plot.

Conclusion

In comparison to the colonial women , today's women are educated, employed , earning very well, have made a mark in every field and most importantly are multitaskers, taking care of

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family and career. But with the increase in the rate of crime against women and innocent children, gives us an alarming contradiction on the status of women in our country. On the one hand we boast of women empowerment and on the other we have to confront the reality of women abuse like rape, dowry, female infanticide, child abuse, murder and cyber bullying. The modern time has only seen increase in crime against women when compared to the past. This makes us retrospect whether modernization worked for the betterment and upliftment of women or has our Democracy failed to make provision in law to safeguard the dignity of women. The process of investigating and punishing the accused for crime against women in India is very slow. The corrupt system is one of prime reasons for delayed judgment and no strict punishments. Only quick prosecution and severe punishments can restore the safety of women in the country. The best way is to educate our sons to respect women. It is not the fault of an innocent child who is abused sexually; it is the improper upbringing of the boys that is pivotal to crime against women. A progressive society is one that respects women and understands her role in nation building.

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