Volume : 2 | Issue : 11 | Nov 2013 • ISSN No 2277 - 8160

Research Paper Literature

Democracy & the Status of Women: Reflections From Literature

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ABSTRACT

The notion of Democracy implies Equality for one and all in each and every field. However, woman was considered as an inferior being to man, who was fit only to do household chores and had no potential to participate in literary, financial or any other activity. This gender inequality even in democratic countries led to the eclipse of her mental accomplishments, creativity and her forced seclusion and consequent isolation from the productive process of the contemporary society. Literature holds a mirror to the society and the injustice meted out to woman is portrayed in its works. The gradual rise of Feminism resulted in the awakening and participation of woman in every walk of life, including Literature. This paper aims at studying the status of woman in a democratic set up by providing apt illustrations from Literature. It also traces the development of Literary forms and works by woman writers in the process.

Summary: Writing is an aptitude acquired after many extractions and women writers have given voice to their experience in diverse forms and works ranging from literary works to critical works. And still, there are many dormant seeds waiting to bloom in future. This work is a midpoint in a journey, which is an ongoing one. It is an attempt to bring to our notice the female voice which is strident enough to demand a worldwide hearing. On the other hand, it is also soft enough to conjure up an intensely private woman's world. The thrust, both centrifugal and centripetal, lends woman's writing a dynamism and stir. And of course, literature is a sky with no limits and hence there are innumerable doors open for women writing.

KEYWORDS : Democracy, Equality, Feminism, Literature, Status of Woman, Society

Introduction

Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.
Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln

Democracy is a very popular notion and yet misunderstood by most and misused by many. The idea of democracy has evoked some of the most profound expressions of human intellect from Pericles in ancient Athens to Vaclav Havel in the modern Czech Republic, from Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence in 1776 to Andrei Sakharov's last speeches in 1989. Plato also toyed with the idea of Democracy when he argued in the *Republic* that the best government would be led by a minority of the most highly qualified persons—an aristocracy of "philosopher-kings."

Democracy & the Status of Woman

The word "Democracy" comes from demos which means "common people" and kratos which means "rule, strength". In the dictionary definition, democracy "is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system." In the phrase of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

In a Democracy, the power is vested in the people, who rule either directly or through freely elected representatives. Granting power to people would mean equal rights and opportunities for one and all, whether the person belongs to any caste, creed, religion, community or gender. In spite of the Democratic system of government existing in so many societies and nations of the world, male dominance was an accepted part of the system. Kamal Das, in her poem *An Introduction*, writes:

> I don't know politics
>
> But I know the names
>
> Of those in power
>
> And can repeat them like
>
> Days of weeks or names of months.
>
> (Ramamurti 1995, p. 148-9)

Initially, woman was considered as an inferior being to man, who was fit only to do household chores and had no potential to participate in literary, financial or any other activity. Women who went against the norms were ridiculed, humiliated and finally made to see the wisdom of accepting their allotted role in family and society. Man saw woman simply as one who displayed physical charms. This led to the eclipse of her mental accomplishments, creativity and her forced seclusion and consequent isolation from the productive process of the contemporary society.

One also needs to contest the oft-quoted view that in India, women have been privileged as 'Devis'. But ironically, the respect and privileges that accompany the position of a Devi are not only anti-individualistic; they are also anti-humanistic and deny women a personhood. Sarla Palkar observes in this regard:

> Cultural representations of women in the image of a Sita or a Savitri or an Ahilya- women known for their exceptional devotion to their husbands- still proliferate in popular media as well as in serious literature. In most of the popular films and fiction, traditional roles of women as dutiful daughters, devoted wives, self-sacrificing mothers are valorised.

The renaissance of the Indian woman began with the Independence. Gandhiji's clarion call of Swaraj brought woman out of the four walls. For years she had been hidden behind the Ghunghat, at the beck and call of her husband, father or brother, subjugated by male. She had no identity or individuality but with the changing political scenario, the social stage also underwent a dramatic change.

The modern woman has become more aware of her potential; she is mentally and physically equipped to take stride with the fast changing values of life. Yet her journey towards liberation cannot reach its zenith without the support of her companion's comradeship. Here the story of the modern woman takes a sad twist; while she has adorned the mantle of self-emancipation, the modern man has lagged behind. Hence, the renaissance of the Indian woman continues its slow travel.

The awakening and struggle of woman all over the world has led to her active participation in literature and every field of human life and activity. Mary Wollstencraft announced:

> It is time to affect a revolution in female manners - time to restore to them their lost dignity - and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners.

This revolution is visible in the fact that women's literature has established its credentials everywhere. They have been using all forms of literature and have drawn attention as well as appreciation. They have excelled because of their clarity of perception and vision, immaculate articulation, depth and variety of subjects, and universality of appeal. They have also made innovative experiments in forms and narrative techniques. Lakshmi Kannan comments:

> For a woman, her works are no less a process of self-actualization as her life is. In both, she wrestles with a host of obstinate paradigms and syndromes, precipitated by not just the myths, legends of the collective memory of the inherent conservative elements within a community, but equally with the ones thrown up by the movement of feminism itself. (Kannan:31)

The feminist movement produced both feminist fiction and non-fiction, and created new interest in women's writing. It leads to a general re-evaluation of women's historical and academic contributions in response to the belief that, women's lives and contributions have not been properly presented as areas of scholarly interest. Consequently, much of the early period of feminist literary scholarship was given over to the rediscovery and reclamation of texts written by women. Studies like Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) and Jane Spencer›s *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986) were groundbreaking in their insistence that women have always been writing. Parallel to this growth in scholarly interest, various presses began to reissue long-out-of-print texts. Virago Press began to publish its large list of 19th and early-20th-century novels in 1975. It became one of the first commercial presses to join in the project of reclamation. In the 1980s Pandora Press, responsible for publishing Spender's study, issued a companion line of 18th-century novels by written by women. More recently, Broadview Press continues to issue 18th- and 19th-century novels, many hitherto out of print, and the University of Kentucky has a series of republications of early women›s novels.

In *Toward a Feminist Poetics* Showalter traces the history of women's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases:

1. Feminine: In the Feminine phase (1840–1880), "women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature" (*New*, 137).
2. Feminist: The Feminist phase (1880–1920) was characterized by women's writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women's rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.
3. Female: The Female phase (1920 —) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, "women reject both imitation and protest - two forms of dependency - and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature" (*New*, 139).

Hence, the last stage shows a complete independent and balanced development of women's literature freed from the influence of the Male dominion. As Sylvia Plath writes:

> You do not do, you do not do
> Any more, black shoe
> In which I have lived like a foot
> For thirty years, poor and white,
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

To trace the journey of women's writing from non-fictional works of Mary Wollstencraft to modern fiction of Virginia Woolf and most recent Fantasy works of J K Rowling, shows a whole rainbow of forms and works and opens up a fresh avenue of hitherto unexplored ideas and realms of imagination. Virginia Woolf, a member of the Bloomsbury group, captured the very dreams and motives of her characters by her experimentation with the stream of consciousness technique. . Her novels are highly experimental: a narrative, frequently uneventful and commonplace, is refracted and dissolved in the characters' receptive consciousness. Intense lyricism and stylistic virtuosity create a world overabundant with auditory and visual impressions.

The present era shows an immensely well-nourished and flourished women's literature, the most dazzling example provided by J K Rowling whose Harry Potter series has become a global brand. *Harry Potter* is worth an estimated $15 billion and the last four *Harry Potter* books have consecutively set records as the fastest-selling books in history. The series, totalling 4,195 pages, has been translated, in whole or in part, into 65 languages. The *Harry Potter* books have also gained recognition for sparking an interest in reading among the young at a time when children were thought to be abandoning books for computers and television.

Conclusion

Writing is an aptitude acquired after many extractions and women writers have given voice to their experience in diverse forms and works ranging from literary works to critical works. And still, there are many dormant seeds waiting to bloom in future. This work is a midpoint in a journey, which is an ongoing one. It is an attempt to bring to our notice the female voice which is strident enough to demand a worldwide hearing. On the other hand, it is also soft enough to conjure up an intensely private woman's world. The thrust, both centrifugal and centripetal, lends woman's writing a dynamism and stir. And of course, literature is a sky with no limits and hence there are innumerable doors open for women writing.

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