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WOMEN THROUGH AGES

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Abstract

Women who are considered to be the architects of any society have had to face several glass ceilings in the process of evolving themselves as empowered women. Even several great philosophers also looked down upon women across globe. The paper throws light on how women have been treated since the dawn of the civilization and how even several religious inscriptions spoke about subjection of women. It also portrays how many women, even before the awareness of rights to women came to light, really represented themselves against subjection and secondary status of women. The paper also delineates how women started expressing themselves through literary world.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Subjection, Self-Expression.

Introduction

I am a woman  
and my blood  
cries out:

Who are you to deny life  
to the life givers? (“The Blood of a Woman” 1-5)

The history of humankind reveals that woman has always been a victim in the hands of man. The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions of the First Women’s Rights Convention in America, Seneca Falls in 1848, observed that the history of humankind had an objective of establishing an absolute tyranny over her. The scientists acknowledge, “Women are the race itself, the strong primary sex and man the biological after thought” (Davis 34-35). The Italian nobleman and diplomat Castiglione in his book *The Courtier* (1561), which was regarded as the Bible of the age, says, “The virtues of the mind are as necessary to a woman as to a man” (Faolain 202). This is what later, Virginia Woolf explains in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929): “... but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do ...” (Woolf 103).

It is evident that since the beginning of the history of human race, the role of woman in the evolution of human race has been of immense significance. A woman’s task has always been to secure a future for humanity. It was believed that the biological aspects of woman and her labour helped the evolution of mankind. For some time in the history, women enjoyed not only equal status with men but also treated like a supernatural power. Even today the mythological stories in Indian culture describe women as ‘shakti’ or the great goddess of power.

The position of woman in the early societies when compared to that of the present, was better as she enjoyed freedom and lived a life of dignity and significance. From such a position, there was a gradual change and finally woman was reduced to mere child bearing machine, resulting in complete deterioration of the position of woman.

The new social systems denied woman of her freedom, because she had lost the basic right of control over her own body, and was considered to be the property of man. Many written records, chronicles, epics, archaeological and anthropological evidences indicate that woman was traded as a slave and even killed on the death of her husband. Thus, the history reveals that woman was abused in every way until she became a proponent of sacrifice. The destruction of woman spread like a viral disease across globe. But it would be historically unjust, to say that the whole of the female sex lived as victims, and died as slaves as there were exceptions. During the time of Aristotle 4th century B.C., a woman by name Agnodic, studied medicine and practiced gynecology, in the disguise of a man as the profession was restricted by law, to man alone. The Byzantine Empress Pulcheria, (A.D. 399-453) was an example of the woman, who fought to achieve her deeper goals. Theodora, a circus artist who married Prince Justinian of the Byzantine Empire in A.D. 525, secured for women, the rights of property, inheritance, and divorce, and at her own expense freed the girls from prostitution.



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In England during the ‘Age of Queens,’ the female monarchs achieved some rights for women, and explained that no patriarchal system was monolithic and absolute, and what a woman needs is courage to gain access into the patriarchal world, and create history.

The phenomenon of subjugation of women is a Universal feature. Man’s ignorance about reproduction was bliss to women. Jean Markale, a historian, in *Women of the Celts* (1982) mentions that: “When man began to assert that he was essential to fertilization, the old mental attitudes suddenly collapsed. This was a very important revolution in man’s history... He now understood the full implications of his power ...” (Markale 14). Once he was enlightened, he began dominating and her position became pathetic. Men and women complementing each other in any society became an oxymoron, for in reality women were always subjugated. In the opinion of Aristotle, the Greek philosopher of the 4th century B.C, man is active and the woman is passive. In the book *Not is God’s Image: Women in History* (1973), the authors quote Canto’s words on restrictions to be imposed on women. He believed that: “... Women want total freedom, or rather total silence. If you allow them to achieve complete equality with men, do you think they will be any easier to live with? Not at all. Once they have achieved equality, they will be your masters ...” (Faolain and Martines 57).

Woman has internalized her secondary status and it has been a silent acceptance, because even to think about her status was considered a ‘sin’ and her subjugated status has a divine sanction. All religious inscriptions of the world carried these notions with no exception. Obviously, women were more oppressed; more suppressed, and were extremely marginalized, in every sphere of human activity. In her monumental work *The Second Sex* (1953), Simone de Beauvoir opined that “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute, and she is the other” (de Beauvoir 16).

The ancient texts that have influenced the Universe for many centuries which are being read, and revered even today such as Homer’s *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeniad*, The Old Testament, pontifications of Aristotle, Plutarch, Hippocrates, Philo, Cicero, and even the Indian epics - all justify the subjection of women. In the Indian traditional system suffering of women is often exalted. The law of Dharma approves and affirms her life of bondage. It is

The law of Dharma and the over-riding of this concept of Karma, ... has contributed to women’s tolerance and self-effacement. Even when they are completely crushed by the injustices done to them, they take it as the dispensation of their previous Karma. The more the suffering, the sooner will it wash away their sins. And ‘to revolt will be to display further moral depravity (Rege 38).

Various religions of the world have propagated the myth of female servitude and endorsed female subjugation. The Holy Bible clearly tells the women ‘Wives, submit yourselves to your husband’s as to the Lord’ (The Holy Bible, Eph.5.22). ‘Woman is regarded as subordinate to man because it is believed that she was made out of man’(Gen.2.13). ‘She is regarded as the glory of man” (1 corinth.11:7). Kidwai opines that ‘as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to the husbands or the head of every man is Christ, but the head of woman is man’ (Kidwai 20).

The Koran also stresses superiority of man over woman. A woman’s duty is to provide the male with sexual gratification and progeny. It says: “Men are superior to women 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” (415).

Judaism also did not give equivalent status to woman in ancient times. A Jew made his morning prayer in the following words ‘Blessed be God ... that He did not make me a woman’ (TSS 22).

Pythagoras, who belonged to the sixth century B.C. also relegated woman to secondary position, with his manifestation in the numerical symbolism. He maintains that the number one stood for God, head and maleness, the number two represented femaleness and divisiveness.

Since centuries women have been oppressed by patriarchy and sexual politics in all their walks of life. The most prominent and influential philosophers of the world like Plato and Aristotle, represented woman in a poor form. She was assigned an inferior status. Julia Annas in her article “Plato’s Republic and Feminism” quotes Plato in the following words:

It is only males who are created directly by the gods and are given souls. Those who live rightly return to the stars, but those who are cowards or lead unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation. This downward progress may continue through successive



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reincarnations unless reversed. In this situation, obviously it is only men who are complete human beings and can hope for ultimate fulfillment; the best a woman can hope for is to become a man (Gould and Wortosky 33).

Rousseau, the champion of liberty during French Revolution ascribed a subordinate position to a woman in society because the female species give birth. According to Rousseau:

The mutual duties of the two sexes are not, and cannot be, equally binding on both. Women do wrong to complain of the inequality of man-made laws; this inequality is not of man's making, or at any rate it is not the result of mere prejudice, but of reason. She, to whom nature has entrusted the care of the children, must hold herself responsible for them to their father ... Vague assertions as to the equality of the sexes and the similarity of their duty are only empty words; they are no answer to my argument (Ruth 117-118).

Man was the Lord in each country of the World. Women did not have a way either to appeal or escape. Suppressed for many centuries women began to think. They realized that the best weapon with which they could fight against the atrocities was 'education.' They strongly believed that only 'learning' would help women to realize their abilities. They did not want to be ignorant and inferior, and so education became the crucial centrality without which there was no hope for women to penetrate into the world of man.

Transition in the societal structure led to changes in the concept of power which was possible only through knowledge. Thus, for women the pen became a greater weapon than the sword and within a short span of time women were able to set out ostentatiously their creativity and intellectuality. Women believed that:

... in order to understand woman's position in the world, one has to understand the system of patriarchy. Men all over the world looked at women from their point of view. And they have also taught and even forced women to look at themselves from male point of view. No wonder that Helen Cixous has reiterated the den and for self-assertion by women writers ... in unequivocal terms: woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement (Feminism: A Paradigm Shift 36).

Virginia Woolf believed that literature should include woman's writing about women. The primary concern of the traditional feminist critics was expressed by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as 'the difference of view, the difference of standard' (AROO 204). Neeru Tandon in her *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* (2012) quoted Mary Daly's opinion from *Beyond God the Father* (1973) that 'The iconoclasm must begin from within. Women must exercise and reject any sense of otherness that they have marginalized' (FPS 51), women started voicing themselves. Of all the genres of literature, 'novel' is a dominant genre in world literature, since its first inception in the eighteenth century of England. It endowed women with a platform to assert and express their 'self.' Gradually, women novelists emerged. The new strength of women lies in the recognition of one's self. As stated in the *Encyclopedia of Feminism* (1986), 'We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters' (Tuttle 42).

**Conclusion:** Women through centuries are being subjected to patriarchal notions, sexism and sexual politics. Only 'education' helped them to understand their capabilities and started to raise their voice against their 'assigned' inferior status. Women alone can represent their real self. They alone can speak for themselves. The more they voice out the more they can create awareness among fellow women and could carve a niche for themselves in the world of men.

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