

Empowerment of Woman: Myth or Reality the New Woman

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Who is the New Woman? Does she really exist? Or is she only a figment of the imagination of Feminists and some Women writers? This paradoxical situation forms the basis and crux of today's situation. Women's empowerment —Is it a myth or reality? If we look around us, and look sharply, we shall find that she really exists, yes she does.

We meet her every day in life, at every rung of the social ladder, only we do not realize it. She exists from the modest vegetable seller to the Head of state, from the clerk in the office to the IAS officer, from the maid-the bai to the successful businesswoman, from the labor woman who carries bricks on her head to the woman who has reached space and will traverse the moon, and from the housewife to the woman who talks of live-in relationships. Although we meet this woman with ever-increasing frequency, it is only in recent years that we have recognized her features.

Life in the last decades under the heavy hammer blow of necessity has forged a woman with a new psychological sense, new needs and a new temper. She has evolved as a being who views the world differently and expresses differently towards life. She is newly awakened to life. What distinguishes this new woman from the woman of the past is the realization of her autonomy, of stepping outside the bounds of her hallowed past, and a shaping of life for herself out of her own choice. She is the woman with her independent demands on life, who asserts her personality, who protests against the universal servitude of women in the state, the family, the society, who fights for her rights as representative of her sex. She has a singular inner world, full of general human interests, she is independent inwardly and self-reliant outwardly.

This woman is seen as the single woman-she is seen in those girls and women, the IT Professionals, office workers, and glamour girls living independently in metropolitan cities who pour out of their flats and rooms on their way to work The single woman of which our grandmothers and even

our mothers had no idea whatsoever, she is a real living phenomenon. Even in the role of a wife, a mother and a divorcee, this new woman is determined to realize her personality to achieve self-determination through life, growth and experience. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman described her: 'Here she comes, running out of prison and off the pedestal, chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman.'

She is the woman who asserts her individuality in livelihood, relationships, habits of dress and living. In balancing home and office today's working woman may be much busier than her earlier counterpart, may be overworked but when she becomes economically independent and self-reliant, she is growing and satisfying herself in more ways than one. It gives her an opportunity to exercise her full human capacity to the full.

She is also finding a balance between woman's duties and woman's rights. She sees them not as two poles-duties on the one hand and her demands for women.

Rights on the other which include the removal of social, political and economic discrimination based on sex, but seek rights and duties on the individual capacity alone. She has moved away from her self-sublimating image and instead of self-sacrifice or submergence in family she stands for self-development. The freedom to choose work regardless of one's marital status is the hallmark of the new woman.

She represents to herself and to society a combination of social usefulness and personal autonomy-independent womanhood. So while being true to her feminine nature of nurturance and maternity, she has also moved ahead with the aim of the individual release of personality with that of concerted social action. Thus the boundary and concept of womanhood have been extended to include all that the woman stands for and her realization of the self as an individual being.

This does not go to say that there is no victimization or suppression of her individual personality or that there are no atrocities perpetrated on women. She has to constantly fight against patriarchal structures, societal norms, and the male ego. She is accorded a secondary status in society. As Simone de Beauvoir, the famous French feminist has pointed out that she is the 'other' of the male side and treated as such. Hence woman's otherness is not realized by man when she becomes the subject, though she remains the object of man's subjecthood. When she becomes the receiver, the receptacle, she is denied her own humanity. (Beauvoir, 15)

Newspapers are full of incidents of bride burning, dowry deaths, female infanticide, and mass rape. In villages, women marrying outside their community are stoned to death. A Dalit woman is made an easy target of caste discrimination and caste rivalry. She is humiliated and paraded naked in front of the entire village. These are horrendous facts recurring again and again. Domestic violence raises its ugly head and is prevalent in all stratum of society. There is physical abuse and mental harassment. Women in the lower class are regularly beaten and tortured by their drunken husbands. When laws are made against domestic violence, it proves that it exists on a large scale. Even educated women sometimes suffer indignities at the hands of their male counterparts. In cases of extra marital relations, it is the woman who loses her honor and name. The man enjoys a double relationship. The concept of morality since ages has been associated only with women. So in all spheres of life there exists a disparity in the status of the two: in morals, code of conduct and behavior. There is suppression, violence, subjugation, and harassment in relationships. These realities cannot be denied. Does this bleak picture make women's power a falsification?

Then where does the image of the new woman fit in? We Would say that given her circumstances, the woman in the present scenario is still moving forward. She is constantly fighting against odds and carving out a place for herself. Shouldering the responsibility of bringing up her children and bearing the financial burden of her family is the maid—the bai—the lower class woman. She is bereft of the support of education. She has to ceaselessly wage war with the grim struggle for existence. She

is rarely supported by her spouse. Instead, he is the bullying, threatening being who abuses and assaults her. When these lower-class women put up a fight to counter the male hegemony and refuse to be cowed down by their circumstances, they become the representatives of the new woman.

How do these women manage to survive their dire conditions? They do not present us with pictures of pathetic, lost and depressed creatures. With their defiant and rebellious spirits, they continue with their tireless, unbroken struggle against fate. Here is the true life story of an Assamese girl now working as a housemaid. She was picked up from school in skirts, along with some other girls, all of them extremely young, in the age group of twelve to thirteen. They were lured into believing that they were being taken to Delhi for sightseeing and would return in a day or two. On reaching Delhi they were separated from each other and made to work as bonded laborers—as housemaids. This young girl worked in a well-to-do household for a year but was not paid for her work. When she started questioning them and threatened them with the Police, they threw her out of the house. She had nowhere to go. She fell into the hands of a Pimp who first raped her and was ready to sell her. She somehow escaped from there in the middle of the night with her clothes torn, hiding and seeking help. A couple in the car managed to spot her. They gave her shelter for a week and then sought work for her as a laborer on daily wages. She started staying with an Assamese family. This girl realized that she was pregnant. The man in the family was extremely kind to her, treated her as his daughter, and got her married to a rickshaw puller in Alwar who was also a cobbler by profession and a low caste by birth. He knew all about her, but when she gave birth to the baby he slandered her name and told people that the baby was not his. Her- in-laws in the village kept the baby as it was a baby boy, turned her out of the house, and asked her to leave the village. She kept crying for many days and somehow managed to reach Gurgaon. She could speak very little Hindi. She stayed in a Mahila Ashram for seven months, refused to get married again and with the help of the Police was able to trace her husband back to his village. She came to know that the baby had died. It could not survive without the mother. She started staying with her husband in Alwar. After three years of marriage, she gave birth to a baby girl. He

did not stop beating and abusing her. He would often threaten of leaving her. He called her a whore. He did not give her enough to eat. Being an outsider with her language problem she was scared of approaching people. She often begged him not to leave her. She was mentally harassed. When she could take in no more she finally decided to go to the Police. She knew that she would lose her husband and the safety of a secure world but she was prepared to face her unknown future with a small baby to feed and take care of. Her husband left for his village with his belongings. She was once again left alone with nowhere to go. She waited for him for a few days, was extremely afraid of staying alone but finally gathered her courage and started working as a housemaid. She could not work in many houses as the baby was only seven months old and would not leave her. She lived a hand-to-mouth existence. Her colony people were sympathetic to her and gave her a one-room house to stay in. But a few days later her husband came back and expected her to return to him. She refused to go back. He instigated all the people against her. Everybody wanted her to patch up with her husband. Now it was an open fight. She was living an extremely difficult life. She needed milk and food for the baby. The people of her Mohalla asked her to vacate the house. Nobody would rent her a house. Everybody started doubting her character. Her husband added to her miseries. Wherever she went he spread stories about her. He threatened the landlord. She had to change four rooms in two months. He realized finally that coercion would not help. He started begging her to come back. He began to feel the need of family, love and care. It was only when she saw that he was repentant when she saw tears in his eyes that she relented. He would come to her on the pretext of seeing the baby. Now she has gone back to him and has stopped working as the baby is too small. As soon as she patched up she asked him to get a marriage certificate made as he would deny his marriage and tell people that she was living with him without marriage. She fought for her dignity, made him realize that she could merely as a sex object and that she would not put up with any kind of violence. With meager means of living, she found happiness with her daughter. This girl had character, strength and determination. She had to put up with the unsavory advances of men who considered her an easy target. She had started getting offers of

remarriage. But she put up a hard fight and fought against all odds.

Here is the New Woman who pushed her way forward through the thick undergrowth of harsh realities clearing a path for herself with a calm, proud, determined gait. The thorns of life tore at her hands and feet, and the blood flowed, but there was no wincing. She stood stone-like and hard as steel. This young girl in her skirmishes with life has emerged strong. She is not beautiful in the physical sense. But her beauty lies within her. It is the beauty of spirit that has made her a winner in life. Freshness, youth and health of life ooze from her. This lonely girl without the support of education and family proved her inner strength and proved that she was proud to be her own self. She became self-reliant as the occasion demanded. She was not afraid of life. She bore her pure human ego through life with an unshakable naivete. She savored the joys of motherhood and could feel the happiness of pure love with the baby. With every new suffering, every new page of life her personality grew richer and tougher. She did not bow under the blow of life's scourge and moving through life sought happiness. Under the threat of being shelterless, of suffering hunger and privations, this woman learned to stand alone without the support of her father or husband.

Here is the picture of the new woman who has found that the feminine virtues on which she had been raised for centuries: passivity, devotion, and submissiveness have become superfluous and harmful. Harsh reality demands other characteristics from independent women. activity, resistance, determination, toughness, that is to say, characteristics that were hitherto viewed as the hallmark and privilege of men. The obedient slaves of the husband have turned into a respect demanding army of fighters for their own and general interests. The personality of the woman has steeled itself and grown; though atavistic feelings interrupt and weaken the new experiences; outlived conceptions still hold the feminine mind thrusting towards freedom in their clutches.

But all women are not fortunate enough to stand on their feet. There are several unfortunate and unlucky women who have fallen a prey to men's sexual lust. They have been sold as prostitutes and live a hellish life.

Their pain is hidden away from us. We are either indifferent to their fate or distance ourselves from them. We need to empower victimized girls by educating them, making them self-reliant, by giving them an awareness of Mahila Police stations, and establishing women's courts of law. We have to empower them by building their self-confidence. Only women can help their sisters by showing empathy with their plight, and by engaging them in fruitful ways. This way they can defeat male domination. The old and new struggle in the souls of women is in permanent enmity. The new woman, therefore, must wage a struggle on two fronts: with the external world and with the inclinations of their grandmothers dwelling in the recesses of their beings. The old in all women does not die easily although they possess the intellect and willpower.

The male mindset has to change too. Yes, it is changing, slowly yet surely. And hence there is hope for women. The transformation of the feminine psyche, which has to be adjusted to the new conditions of its economic and social existence, will not be achieved without a strong dramatic self-overcoming. Woman, by degrees, is being transformed from an object to an independent subject. From all fronts she has to wrest the power to build up her strength.

References:

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