

Voices of Valour: The Resilient Women of Biblical

Jincy J L

Postgraduate, Department of English
Christ Nagar College, Maranalloor, Trivandrum
University of Kerala

Abstract

From the ancient centuries, people have had a false consciousness that women are the weaker section of society when compared to men. Society is eager to impose all the weak qualities on women such as women being giving, tolerant, and submissive. The people praise such qualities to make them believe that they are doing something great and that defines a woman. The people are unable to realise the fact that the dominant class uses gender roles to marginalise a section of people in society. The study looks into the life of women in biblical times who came out of those false consciousnesses. The research paper focuses on the women who proved their identity in an unfavorable environment, the women who dared to raise their voice in a society where she is prohibited from speaking.

Keywords: False consciousness, Gender roles, Identity, Marginalisation.

The words woman and mother have been used interchangeably in the past centuries. People thought there was nothing more women could do than give birth to children and do household work. Everyone knows Cleopatra, Indira Gandhi, Deborah, Queen Victoria, were women from different parts of the world and marked their existence in history. But the society does not show any interest in spreading their achievements. Instead tried to marginalise them by giving gender roles to limit their achievements. According to Simon de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 295). Yes, society makes a person a woman and a man by giving socially constructed gender roles. It was necessary for the male-dominated society to remain in power. So, they intentionally portrayed women as a weaker section of society and made them believe that they have nothing to do with public life. The men confined them in the four walls of the kitchen. Filled their minds with a false consciousness that life outside the house is dangerous and it is safer for women to sit inside the home with the protection of men in their family. They taught them that to save their chastity they shouldn’t go outside of the house.

There were women in the male-dominated society who dared to break all these false consciousnesses. Society always forgets about a thing that nothing can stop a well- determined

woman from her path. If she is determined she is strong enough to break all the barriers that block her path. Through the lives of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla, Phoebe, and Lydia the Bible portrays the powerful women in the past. While penetrating the deeper levels of history anyone can understand how terrible the situation was for them to come to the front line of society. Then also they never bothered about the powerful people or about losing their lives in the struggle for equality. The fear of death couldn't extinguish their fire to bring justice.

Mary, the mother of Jesus

The world recognises Mary as the mother of Jesus, she is confined to that title. Because of the blindfolds by the dominant class, people were unable to see how she stood out at her age. She was a woman who believed in her strength and feared nothing. She accepted the blessing when Gabriel said to her, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Luk. 1.31). She did not question God why did he choose a virgin like her, instead she was ready to conceive that baby for the salvation of many. She knew that the Jewish society was not going to believe her and if they knew about it, they would stone her. And her fiancée may abandon her because of the child in her womb. A normal woman doesn't get ready to conceive a baby in such a society even if it is by the holy spirit. Because society doesn't value her if it happens to her. She could have aborted that child or hidden her pregnancy to save her face and status in society. But she didn't think that way. She listened to her inner voice.

"The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience" (Lee 120).

It is easy to follow the majority but difficult to believe in one's conscience. Mary did not follow the footsteps of the majority. She thought about what is necessary. She knew about a thing that the society didn't know, the child that is growing inside her womb is not a normal child, he is the Messiah, who comes to liberate people from oppression. She saw her life as less important when comparing it to the great purpose. She didn't fall in front of any threats or attempts that tried to take the life of that child. The king Herod and his people also plot to kill that child for securing their power and evil deeds. But she stood courageously and gave birth to that child and brought him up to save many from marginalisation. She was self-reliant and inspired others to be self-reliant.

Messenger of the Resurrection

The Jewish society considered women as less important and inferior to men. In that male dominated social structure women have no right over land, education or anything. Women

were considered as merely childbearing machines and one to do all the household work. They are forced to follow the rules that are made by the patriarchal society and they have no voice to say their opinions. In Jewish courts their testimony is considered as less reliable and it is not admissible. Only by the corroboration by a man it will be considered as valid. Through these descriptions we can assume the plight of women in that Jewish society. To that society Mary Magdalene dared to speak about what she has seen and heard.

“Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, ‘I have seen the Lord!’

Then she gave them his message” (Joh. 20.18).

She didn’t think like, will they believe her or accept her as the witness of the resurrection. She didn’t bother about the opinion of the masses if she testified about what she had seen. She didn’t zip her mouth by the thought that society won’t listen to her, instead she dared to pass the message of resurrection. Actually, it was not only the message of resurrection but also it was the message to the world that she will speak no matter how many times they shut her mouth or no matter if there is no one to listen to her. She echoed the quote,

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will” (Bronte 258).

She realised that she is also a human being and she has the freedom as man enjoys. The words freedom, independence are not someone’s monopoly. There is no difference between men and women to attain it. The society is responsible for making that division. She made the dominant class realise that no one can suppress a section of society for a long time. People will rise from them by breaking all the walls of false consciousnesses.

The First Female Teacher

“I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ships” (Alcott 574).

A good sailor is not the one who is afraid of the storm, a good sailor is the one who sails the ship during adverse conditions and reaches the shore without drowning. It is easy to blame the situation and end up in that situation. But people like phoenix birds never end their life in that difficult situation, instead they rise from the ashes. Life is not an easy path all the time. Sometimes it is the path of stones and thorns. The braver is the one who overcomes it. Priscilla in the land of Jews is one among them.

She lived in a society where women were considered as invisible to men. They had no role in societal matters. From childhood the society shows indifference to the girl child by denying her education. Girls received only little formal education while boys taught the Torah and other religious texts. They trained girl children to develop domestic skills. In their concept women are meant to be doing household activities. But the Jewish society couldn't stop Priscilla from learning and teaching. Like Ekalavya learned archery by himself she learned religious doctrines by herself. She became more knowledgeable than the men of her times. The book of Acts of the Apostles says,

“When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately” (Act. 18.26).

According to this Priscilla mentored the man Apollos in his preaching. She never waited for a time where men and women got equal opportunity and right in education, instead she made it in the time where it is denied. Through her life she taught society that nothing is meant for any gender alone. She proved that women can also achieve in the fields where it is considered as men's. The men in her society go to synagogues and to religious teachers to learn religious texts and doctrines. But she acquired knowledge without these aids. Through that she enlightened the society that nothing is impossible to a strong determined woman.

The Deacon of Church in Cenchrea

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon in the church in Cenchrea. Welcome her in the Lord as one who is worthy of honor among God's people. Help her in whatever she needs, for she has been helpful to many, and especially to me” (Rom. 16.1-2).

Here Apostle Paul admires Phoebe who is spending her life as a patron and benefactor of the church. In a Jewish context it is forbidden for women to do responsible work in religious places. Women were not allowed to take leadership among the members. Such things are reserved only for men in that society. No one will show any courage to break those rules. Because the punishments are as harsh as the severity of Jewish law. A small level of courage is not enough to break all those norms and stand against the majority.

“I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what” (Lee 128).

Phoebe exhibited that kind of courage among her people. She knew that the rules, the society, and her family all are against her adamant beliefs. But she wasn't ready to turn her back on her decisions. In front of her courage, the society knelt. Society realised the fact that nothing could back her from her decisions. So that she became well-known among her people and other women were invisible to the society. She proved to the world that her decision wasn't wrong and her decision was for the greater good of society. Because she took the leadership, she could support Paul in his ministries and became helpful to many. She did far more than the men could do in her society. The right breaking of one rule in society brought her great honour among people. Apostle Paul mentioned her good deeds in his letters and the people who know about her also admired her. If the men are also ready to accept her as their deacon then there is no doubt about what she was to them. She was like any other woman in her society but she chose the way that the majority were afraid of, the way of equality and justice.

Lydia of Philippi

For the past centuries, people have had a false consciousness that women are not good at money management and that men can only handle money wisely and productively. Lydia is a woman who broke all those false consciousnesses through her entrepreneurship skills. She spoke louder to the world through her actions that women are not someone to be marginalised by society in the name of predetermined gender roles. Without allowing them to exhibit their talents no one can judge a person about their ability. The dominant class knows that if they give some opportunity to women they will become equal to men and it will become a competition to them to cling to power. That's why they strategically marginalise women and spread false consciousnesses in the minds of everyone.

Lydia was different from the women of her time. She didn't look for an opportunity that was granted by men. The Apostle Paul says about her,

“One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. She and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests” (Act. 16.14-15).

Instead of waiting for an opportunity by someone she became a merchant. She was not an owner of a small-scale industry, she was a merchant of expensive purple cloth. She became a small amount of intelligence is not enough to stand in business in such an environment. She was a beginner in this industry and through her success, she proved to the world that nothing

is impossible if you have a strong mind to stand against the opposing powers. During her time gentiles were marginalised by the Jews. Gentiles were like the untouchables in the Indian caste system. The Jewish people were not ready to mingle with such people. She faced marginalisation from two sides, from her family and society, because she is a woman and because she is a gentile. But it couldn't make her emotionally weak, the thorns that pricked made her sit on a throne as a successful merchant. Her conversion to Christianity is also a notable thing. It shows her courage because the Jewish society persecuted those who were converted to Christianity. She didn't fear society or power. She stood by her decisions, and that's why she became different from other women and history tells her tale of courageousness.

Conclusion

"There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me" (Austen 189).

These lines echo the courage of women from the past to present who broke the castles of false consciousnesses. There are written and unwritten rules for marginalising women that exist in society in one form or another. The powerful people blindfold the eyes of everyone with false consciousnesses and do not comprehend it and follow without any force. They will impose their rules in the form of ideologies and the majority of people will follow them without questioning it. When someone looks at the past from the lens of the present he will think the oppression and marginalisation were in the past and now everyone lives in a modern era where there is no marginalisation in the name of caste, colour, class, etc. But the reality is people became unaware of the injustices in the present because of the ideologies and false consciousness of the dominant class. The marginalisation is also undergoing evolution. That's why people find it difficult to notice it. In the past women were confined in the house, they had no role other than household activities. After some period, the people who broke those false consciousnesses realised that it is not something that is securing the women rather it is something imprisoning women. And the next generation taught that marginalisation and oppression were in the past, today we are living in a place where there is equality for everyone. But the true reality is that now also women are undergoing marginalisation. In the so-called democratic country, India, women are the only representatives in parliament. Women are confined only to their reserved seats in parliament.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the witness of the resurrection, Priscilla, the first teacher, Phoebe the deacon and Lydia of Philippi were some of the women in the

Middle East who understood the deeper layers of the propaganda by the dominant class. They came out of it by breaking all the false consciousnesses. The people may see them as demon-possessed like the people who hunted empowered women in Europe in the name of witches. But they never thought about the consequences of being self-reliant. They lived in a society where people were persecuted because of choosing a religion. But those persecutions and harassment couldn't stop them, instead, they burned the fire to fight against the injustices in the society. They lived in a society where women were stoned without any trial. Women had no voice to give their explanation or question the unjust judgements. Men were only valued in that society, and they taught the people it was for their good. There are women in the past and present who dared to raise their voices against injustices in society, and who dared to be self-reliant. It is evident when we turn the pages of history. The dominant class is spreading the false consciousness that women are weak or dependent to remain in power. The women who realised those false consciousnesses proved that they were not weak or dependent, they were as strong and independent as men throughout their lives, no matter what period they lived.

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