

Redefining Femininity: A Stride towards Women Empowerment

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Article Received: 02/01/2022,

Article Accepted: 03/02/2023,

Published Online: 05/02/2023,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.02.11

Abstract

Man, since antiquity, has viewed women as something inferior to him. She has been treated as "his" property and an object to be fully utilized and exploited. A woman is categorized in terms of her biology. Biology has made her destiny. The concept of gender determines her lot. Gender, which is a socio-cultural concept, associates "male" with "masculinity" and "female" with "femininity." The construction of gender has its roots in patriarchy. It attempts to control women and determine their roles in society. While "masculinity" is associated with terms like power, assertion, domination, and Independence, "femininity" is associated with obedience, modesty, chastity, and dependence. In this patriarchal set-up, women have never been allowed identity and individuality. They have remained strangers to education, Science, Technology, and fine arts for centuries. Their only functions have been to bear children or satisfy men's lust. However, now, women have demanded equal rights and are no longer ready to be discriminated against only because they are females. Today, women are trying to deconstruct the myth of "femininity," an imposed socio-cultural construct perpetuated by patriarchy. Women are now trying to assert their identities.

Keywords: Femininity, Liberation Movement, Patriarchy, Socio-cultural Construct, Deconstruction.

A woman in a patriarchal set-up is a weak and miserable being. Most of the so-called civilized societies of this world are patriarchal. In patriarchy, a woman is defined only as a man as she is divested of a distinct identity. Paradoxically enough, one can only encounter "liberated" or "free" women in primitive tribal social structures. As society moves towards progress and civilization, the situation of women, who are its integral units, gets worse. Thanks mainly to the development of women's studies worldwide, recent studies have focused on the predicament of women in a male-dominated social set-up. It has also been realized that one has to question the so-many well-entrenched notions floated and sponsored by patriarchy, which eventually aims at subjugating and dehumanizing women—feminism, a political movement geared to effect attitudinal as well as institutional changes in society.

Women are now coming into their own and have started questioning and redefining the age-old stereotypes and identities imposed on them by the patriarchal authority.

Women have been made prisoners of their sex since time immemorial. Even though women constitute half of the human race, the world has always remained in the hands of men. In this hostile world, which belongs to men, a woman has never been treated as "an equal." Man is, perhaps, the subject of almost all types of discourses prevalent worldwide, while a woman has deliberately been marginalized as an object. Her worth has always been measured in terms of her body/sex. She has usually treated nothing more than a commodity. She is defined as "nothing but the Sex, the womb, the ovaries" (Iqbal Kaur, 11).

A woman has always been supposed as an accessory to a man. She has never been allowed any independent existence of her own. She is defined only in terms with which man has provided her. She has always been associated with weakness, passivity, folly, vice, and lack of intelligence. Men have made a woman's biology her destiny. She is defined only in biological terms. Women have always been suppressed and differentiated as inferiors. Simone de Beauvoir puts it correctly: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir, 295). However, times have changed now. The woman is no longer ready to be treated as inferior. She is struggling hard to get equality. She is awakened now: "The New Woman is trying to deconstruct the myth of male sovereignty. She is trying to come out of the margins and to occupy the subject positions" (Iqbal Kaur, 2). This all has been possible due to the propagation of feminist discourse, where feminist critics and writers deconstruct the well-entrenched norms and notions of "femininity." In this patriarchal society, women are continually suppressed and subordinated. Women are oppressed physically, mentally, and socially and denied individuality. As Rich argues that in this system, "men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labor determine what part women shall play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (Quoted in Iqbal Kaur, 14-15). Women are treated as nothing more than commodities for men to use in whatever way they like. They exist as accessories to men and perform the roles that men assign to them. A woman has no identity "apart from the one that man gives her" (Iqbal Kaur, 11).

The concept of "femininity" has its roots in a patriarchy where women are made prisoners of their sex. Biological differences from men force them to bow before the wishes of men. Biological differences should not be the criterion of such categorization. However, in patriarchy, for ages, women have been controlled by men due to these differences. According to Feminists, "the construction of gender has its roots in male attempts to control female sexuality" (Iqbal Kaur, 12). Barret aptly remarks: "Here lies an explanation for the construction of femininity in patriarchy, with its twin images of women as, on the one hand, the sexual property of men and, on the other, the chaste mothers of their children" (Quoted in Iqbal Kaur, 12). Due to biological differences, women have always been supposed as the weaker sex who needs male protection, shelter, and guidance. They have always been

supposed to be unfit for any responsible deeds. Women have always been supposed to seek fulfilment in their submission, modesty, and docility. Gender has always been the construction of patriarchy and has placed males on a higher pedestal. The patriarchy establishes “the omnipotence-impotence relationship between men and women” (Iqbal Kaur, 15). In this system, a man is taken as the “sovereign subject while a woman is required to find her total fulfillment in domestic drudgery” (Iqbal Kaur, 15).

Patriarchy has also defined the socialization of males and females based on sex. The patriarchal convictions about women "doom them to the repetitive domestic tasks as well as the task of childbearing and child-rearing" (Iqbal Kaur, 16). Feminists have noted that women have got nothing except agonies and suffering in this world. They have always "suffered from historical stereotypes as the pure virgin holy mother/goddess on the one hand and the fallen woman, the whore, who is degraded and a source of defilement and temptation for men on the other" (Luanne Armstrong,8). Oppression of women based on gender is the direct product of patriarchy. According to Warren, ‘Patriarchy oppresses women in sex-specific ways by defining women as beings whose primary functions are either to bear and raise children (i.e., to be mothers) or to satisfy male sexual desires (i.e., sex objects)' (Quoted in Tzeborah Berman, 17). However, now things are not the same. Women's liberation movement has stressed the marginalization of women in all spheres of male-centered institutions. They are trying to make women the actual subjects of the world. Women's liberation movement aimed at "deconstructing the myth of woman as absolute 'other.' Women demanded equal rights with men because there was no logic in discriminating against women simply because they were females" (Iqbal Kaur, 19). Feminism has come forward as a philosophy of life. It opposes "women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them, thereby offering a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization, and control mechanism" (Sushila Singh,29).

The basic argument of feminism is that patriarchy is a social and historical construct that can be deconstructed. Likewise, "femininity" is also a social construct rooted in patriarchy. Thus femininity, which is aimed at docility. Modesty, chastity, and sacrifice on the part of women are open to deconstruction in present times. “Femininity” in itself has no meaning. It has been assigned a particular meaning by a male-dominated society which should be deconstructed to provide more meaningful space to the subalterns of humanity, i.e., women. In a patriarchal system, a woman is given a role, not an identity. The patriarchal set-up in which we have lived so long justifies the exploitation of women by taking examples from religion, philosophy, and theology.

Women have never been allowed to think freely. Till the onslaught of the Feminist movement, the oppression of women was so intense that they were not even allowed admission to educational institutions. They did not have any right to vote even. They were not allowed to ask for a divorce. They were not allowed to hold any property. In short, the myth of masculinity did not allow women any rights. The patriarchal convictions doomed

women to domestic tasks and well-defined sex roles. Laxmi Lingam rightly sums up the state of women in this patriarchal set-up: "To be women is to accept suffering. Suffering ennobles. Endurance is a part of femininity. Woman is patient like the earth- she can accept all the trampling" (Quoted in Sujata Rama Chandran, 61). With the rapid development of the feminist movement, women have become conscious of their rights. They are no longer ready to be oppressed and exploited. Women's liberation movement has deconstructed the traditional notion of "femininity ."

Now women have demanded equal rights and are no longer ready to be discriminated against only because they are females. They have come out of the stereotyped roles and are participating in social and political life with males on equal footing. A "New Woman" has necessitated a reinterpretation of "femininity ." A woman is no longer a slave to a man now. She is no longer ready to be confined to the roles of a mother, a wife, and a sweetheart. These roles have been imposed upon her since antiquity. She has tried to liberate herself from these roles. She "wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: "She prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal"(Beauvoir, 727).

Today, women are trying to deconstruct and redefine the myth of "femininity," which is an imposed socio-cultural construct perpetrated by patriarchy. They are trying to come out of the margins and are occupying the central positions. More and more women are becoming writers now. They are creating their texts. Gone are the days when women were forced to write under pseudo names. They are becoming "Subjects" now. In this new situation, differentiation based on gender is denied. Old myths about "male" and "female" are redefined. As these entire concepts are arbitrary and tentative, they are open to deconstruction. In feminist literature, women are depicted as "heroes," not as victims of men. Women have rejected their defined roles and have tried to establish their identities. They are no longer ready to be treated as commodities to be sold or bought. No doubt, men, and women have biological differences, but gender and femininity are mere socio-cultural constructs that must be 'redefined' and deconstructed. The well-entrenched socio-cultural concepts of femininity that eventually decide what a woman becomes in a male-dominated world are being dissected. The crying need of the hour is for women to become mainstream society. This is possible only if women get equal status with men and are not considered burdens or liabilities. Women's identities in society and literature are getting reconsidered, re-evaluated, and redefined, leading to their empowerment, yet much needs to be done in this direction. Conscious, sincere, positive, and concrete efforts are required to sensitize society to bring attitudinal changes toward women. In the real sense, women's empowerment can be achieved only when the contribution of women in society is acknowledged as an independent entity, without any social, political, or cultural inhibitions in her journey towards empowerment. Undoubtedly, many things are happening today in the name of Women's empowerment, and many resources are being spent in this direction.

However, only attitudinal change and proactive action against violence, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, dowry, and female foeticide can empower women in the real sense.

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