



A STUDY ON CURRENT TRENDS ON THE PREROGATIVE OF WOMAN THROUGH THE SELECTED WORKS SPANNING AGES: RISEN OR RUSTED?

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Abstract: In 1800, Charles Dickens had come up with a fascinating question on the prerogative of woman and an interesting answer in his well noted novel “*Oliver Twist*”. He made it to the point by highlighting an element that the prerogative of woman is to obey. Many modern thinkers and feminists had started exploring intensively on this line and eclipsed the degrading perspective of men by raising their voice time and again. Nowadays, Gender studies in literature has been a stimulating area to be explored as queer theory has started picking a drastic momentum in pursuit of equity and a respectable position in society. The pointed issue has been missing the equilibrium when it comes to the prevailing notions of gender equality. My interaction with a group of students has opened the doors of doubt and astonishment as they say vehemently that woman empowerment is the cause of misery in Indian context. At this juncture, my paper would be focusing on the issue of gender equality by spanning through western thinkers and subaltern thinkers on woman’s condition. A thorough research is required to strike a balance between gender groups by comparing and contrasting past and present situation of woman condition.

Keywords: Gender equality, Humanism, Postmodernism, Popular culture.

1.1 INTRODUCTION:

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word ‘Prerogative’ - *an exclusive or special right, power, or privilege: such as one belonging to a person, group, or class of individuals*. Mere meaning of the word would provide us with enough reflections to contemplate on the topic. It is better to underline and understand a couple of key words – *Right, Power and Privilege* - from the mentioned definition. One has to closely look into and come to a conclusion on certain questions which pop up in the process of comprehending the meaning of the words as in “Who does have the Right to say?” “Who does have the Power to command?” and “Who does have the Privilege to enjoy every bit of life?” These questions are directly related to gender aspect. Is it Man or Woman or Transgender? There is a general perspective added to it that is Man has the superiority. Some condemn it and say ‘Woman has the advantage of exercising the right or the power or privilege’. It is fascinating to see that both the sides carry a relevant argument to take a stand on these questions. At this juncture, I would like to explore different situations, people and experiences to draw a conclusion on the mentioned condition by rolling back to the ages.

1.2 THE RUPTURE BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN

The rupture seems to have been growing at a pace because the society is segregated on the notion of gender equality. A part of society says that women are equal enough by highlighting a few instances where women law makers, scientists, engineers...etc. are managing the society and another side of it says that women are yet to be

uplifted to create their own identity. A few opine that a woman creating her own identity remains in a state of confusion and doubt. It is very alarming to know that most of the women still feel out of place. They still crave for a time to raise their voices and break the shackles that bind them for a long time. On the other hand, men feel that women are given enough to chances to explore themselves in every way possible. Men do consider women's rights, choices and voices and as a result we can witness how women come out and how they are encouraged to have their own preferences. It is fascinating to see how the arguments build on while justifying one's own stand on gender. Drawing a conclusion and having a fair comprehension stands out to be challenging as the issue seems to be a double-edged sword.

While the rift continues between both the genders, there emerged a new section of people raising their voices for identity and equality. They are explicitly mentioned in Queer studies. Queer studies, as defined in Merriam Webster - *an academic field of study focusing on matters relating to gender, human sexuality, and sexual orientation with emphasis on LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) issues and culture* - has emerged suspiciously gathering a lot of awful speculations. Its inception seems to have raised many eyebrows because it is destabilizing concrete norms and discourses in nature. It has questioned the roots of every discourse that being followed for ages together. It was not welcomed and encouraged on religion grounds because no creator had not come up with these creatures initially. Even religions started disowning them as they were unholy in nature as it was against the rule of creation by God. The situation gathered a lot of attention when LGBT groups started staging innumerable protests in order to gain an identity in society. As a result, many western countries legalized homosexuality as well as a few conservative nations. Even India, which is a secular state but conservative in nature, gave a nod to homosexuality in 2018 as a result a few important personalities such as Menaka Guruswamy and Arundhati Katju, the Supreme Court lawyers who were a part of the historic win in bringing Article 377 and Dutee Chand, India's fastest woman revealed their sexuality. Of course, it brought a lot of ostracism to them. Indeed, it is an outstanding achievement for LGBT groups for getting a platform. The movement has taken a complete shape just in 50 years to voice out their rights and equality. They have achieved a lot within no time. However, the question of women rights remains in doubt.

1.3 A SPECTRUM OF PERSPECTIVES THROUGH THE AGES:

Rolling back to the ages would help us to comprehend how women's rights movement started and how it is being carried forward throughout the ages. The movement started around 17th century and went on. A constant question pops up in my mind whenever I think of the women and their position and the question is "*what is the prerogative of women?*" It immediately takes me back to the year 1800 as *Charles Dickens* comes up with the same doubt on the prerogative of women through his characters from the well noted novel "*Oliver Twist*". Let me quote the conversation between Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Bumble;

'Are you going to sit snoring there, all day?' inquired Mrs. Bumble.

'I am going to sit here, as long as I think proper, ma'am,' rejoined Mr. Bumble; *'and although I was NOT snoring, I shall snore, gape, sneeze, laugh, or cry, as the humour strikes me; such being my prerogative.'*

'Your PREROGATIVE!' sneered Mrs. Bumble, with ineffable contempt.

'I said the word, ma'am,' said Mr. Bumble. *'The prerogative of a man is to command.'*

'And what's the prerogative of a woman, in the name of Goodness?' cried the relict of Mr. Corney deceased.

'To obey, ma'am,' thundered Mr. Bumble. *'Your late unfortunate husband should have taught it you; and then, perhaps, he might have been alive now. I wish he was, poor man!'*

Perhaps, Charles Dickens highlights the existing condition of woman in 18th and 19th centuries in Europe. He clearly mentions the fact that prerogative of woman is to obey and in addition to that he brings out the inner voice of men of 18th century. As Mr. Bumble clearly establishes his power and rights as man if we closely look into the expression from the above-mentioned conversation "*Such being my prerogative*". The character brings out the true shade of society in him that man can decide anything on his own and no one can question him. He does not give any space to Mrs. Bumble to speak out as well as he decides her prerogative to obey. Merely, obedience has been made a hallmark of women folk without any fraction of doubt in the society irrespective of situations. It is fascinating to observe how Mr. Bumble reiterates the power of man by mentioning about the deceased husband of Mrs. Bumble. He indirectly points out that if man knows how to command, he can survive and live longer. In a way, he says that Mrs. Bumble's husband lacks the prerogative of man and he dies early otherwise he would have been alive. It does look bizarre but it is the fact we can dig out through the characters of Charles Dickens.

After having looked at the women's rights through the ages of 18th and 19th centuries, the wheels of understanding the condition would go a little further to 20th century of western world. While the search is in swing to reflect on a better writer to explore the century, a few thoughts run in my mind to go with *Adeline Virginia Woolf*. There is no second thought but to confirm Virginia Woolf. It reminds me of to go with her

master class piece of writing “*A room of one’s own*”. She goes on questioning the stance of society how it is tolerant one gender and on the other hand a deprecating in nature. Double stance of society is clearly depicted while she mentions about the situation of an imaginative sister, Judith Shakespeare, of William Shakespeare. It is quite daring to create such a character and calls upon each reader to look through Judith Shakespeare’s perspective. It draws an immediate attention. Let me quote from the text;

“If Shakespeare had a little sister as talented as he, would have got the same opportunities to develop her skills?”

An immediate answer to the mentioned would be a big “No” if we get into the shoes of women of the era. Even Virginia Woolf makes a sensational comment on that situation where she continues to highlight in the novel;

“...any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at.”

It is quite deplorable and pathetic to see how talent and skills are stamped down to hell in the name of gender. In fact, an evident sign of suppression is prevalent while going through the facts of writing. Throughout the novel, Virginia Woolf highlights every minute detail of segregation in the name of gender. Every reader feels empathetic towards the end of the story and questions oneself “what can be done to erase the difference?”

If the plot races through western to subaltern world, it is quite promising to witness a plethora of instances. Let it go through the sub continental situation to have a glance at how women are being treated and given space to speak out. Perhaps, Sri Gurajada Apparao, a well-known writer and a renowned social reformer, would surely give us a lead to go through the 20th century at sub-continent. The well noted poem “*Puttadi Bomma Poornamma*” by Gurajada paves a way to look into the societal norms and conditions that go with woman. The poem narrates how Poornamma’s, a young girl, life is blossomed initially and turned down to suicide. A young girls’ aspirations and dreams are dusted off in the form of a social evil – Kanyasulkam where the young girls are bought and sold for the sake of money. The girl was not given any choice to pick her husband or at least to say her opinion.

1.4 A CONTEMPORARY OUTLOOK:

Unfortunately, if a girl questions the authority of man and the society, she is attached with a spectrum of taboos. She is thoroughly scrutinized at every point of her life whether she prefers or not. She is always expected to meet the expectations drawn by the male dominated society. It continuously examines her way of behavior and likes and dislikes. Though it sounds quite frivolous but it is a fact shared by a few girls whom I have interacted with to know their current perspective in this modern era where everyone believes that a lot has been done to uplift women in general. Even my expectations are shattered after having a fruitful conversation with the girls. They have made quite interesting comments. Let me quote a girl’s statement who speaks out for rights;

“Whenever I come forward to raise my voice to seek for what is mine, boys tag me “An errant feminist! It is really disappointing that I am not allowed to ask for something that is promised to me” - Jessica N, a student.

Another girl, **Manogna**, who wishes to be a leader shares with me an incident that how hard it is to go through the process. She says;

“I am continuously questioned about my preference to be a leader and my ability to be a leader. I am out rightly asked to be silent as it seems to be really odd for boys to follow a girl. They do not want a girl to be the leader as they say it is degrading in nature. In fact, at one point of time, I just want to step down from my responsibilities”

Another girl, **Lavanya**, who wishes to be a silent observer, speaks out and highlights;

“Every day seems to be a challenging as I walk into college and go around in the town. The comments that are passed on remain to be quite disturbing and degrading. I wonder why I cannot walk freely in the society as man does. The society seems to be absolutely biased favoring man”

I have taken a step ahead and interacted with **SK Jasmin**, a budding woman entrepreneur, to know about her view on the society. She says quite emotionally;

“I have lost nearly 7 projects because of the clients’ misbehavior with me. When I have resisted and stood up strong against the harassment, I am colored negatively in my workplace. In addition to it, my associates are asked to step back as long as I keep on resisting. I always feel, after having experienced these situations, that my desire to be a flourishing entrepreneur is in doubt. I am prohibited to go further”

My curiosity has risen to a level where I am propelled to ask **Ravi**, a student, about the condition of gender discrimination. I asked “*Can we think of a day where every girl and woman walk freely without being segregated?*” His reply is quite alarming “*Perhaps in my dreams*”

1.5 A HYPOCRITICAL EQUALITY:

At this juncture, these statements would take us back to the points mentioned above where a section of the society feels that women are given enough space to speak out and be themselves. Yes, I do agree with it. Women are not same as they were before centuries back. Situations are improved and they are getting a say in choosing what they want. They are allowed to experiment the life in full and go out to be social. It does really seem to quite satisfactory and sounds well. Everyone seems and appears to be liberal but there is always a thin layer that creates a storm in the condition of woman. Women are liberated at a periphery level as it is a tip of iceberg. A tip is enough to sink all conditions of woman to grow as the hidden iceberg, the biased and hidden agenda of the society, is always intimidating. It is hypocritical while establishing a note on the equality of women.

Let me conclude by referring to *Bapsi Sidhwa*, an American Pakistani writer. She is known for her most acclaimed novel “*The American Brat*”. She highlights the hypocrisy carried on as it reflects the 21st century impeccably through her characters. It is a clear manifestation of modern society. The story deals with a young girl, Feroza Ginwalla, a Pakistani girl, who is given a free will to decide things on her own. She enjoys the utmost freedom at home. On this note, she is even encouraged to go to America to pursue higher studies. After a while, she falls in love with David, an American Jewish. It paves a way for us to comprehend the real hypocrisy maintained by Feroza’s parents who turn to quite conservative from being liberal. The author clearly underlines the fact that we all act in the name of equal rights to women while giving a point out where a woman loses her right on her property if she marries a person outside her community. The same rule of out casting a girl in marriage is not applicable to man. What a hypocrisy it is!

1.6 CONCLUSION:

At the end, I get the answers for the questions mentioned above that it is the man who does have the Right to say, Power to command and Privilege to enjoy every bit of life. It has to be changed and every section of the society should exercise all the rights, powers and privileges. I do not say that nothing has changed from ages to ages. Indeed, there is a change but I wish the change should start from the gross root level where every woman is respected and regarded an equal partner in irrespective of field they choose. I wish a day comes where every girl and woman walk freely without any shackles, hesitation and taboos around her.

After having a proper reflection on the present situation, it demonstrates an indication where I feel that the prerogative of women through the ages is not risen but rusted as they remain same. They are being treated the how they were in 1800 as it is mentioned in Charles Dickens “*Oliver Twist*” An equilibrium can be maintained if man’s perception towards woman and attitude changes. It is possible when every girl and woman is to be educated about the rights and should fight for rights relentlessly. Finally, education is the key to success as it is said by Gurajada Apparao. On this note, I hope a day of equality emerges from the shackles of suppression broken.

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