



## POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE WEST AND INDIA: A BRIEF APPRAISAL

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to lay focus on the position of woman in the society especially in the modern life situations as reflected in the West and the East making it a point that the position of woman in modern life has gone a long way towards being completely revolutionized with the daily growing consciousness of the rights and responsibilities of every human being in his or her sphere of life and in the society of which he or she is a member. It neatly examines how a considerable change has been effected in the position of women of the East and particularly of Indian women even if there exists a wide disparity between the advance made by the women of the West and that made by the women in the East.

**Key Words:** Growing Consciousness, Modern Life, Modern Woman, Sphere Of Life, Welcome Change, East And West, Worship, Household, Fate, Status.

With the daily growing consciousness of the rights and responsibilities of every human being in his or her sphere of life and in the society of which he or she is a member, the position of woman in modern life has gone a long way towards being completely revolutionized. In the West, the position of woman was much better even before it was felt in the East that a change in the position of their women was urgently called for. So, though within recent times, a considerable welcome change has been effected in the position of women of the East and particularly of Indian women, there still exists a wide disparity between the advance made by the women of the West and that made by Eastern women. In both the countries, women are gradually coming into their own and are slowly wresting from the hands of men all those rights and privileges to which they are legitimately entitled as human beings and of which they had so long been deprived.

A misconception on the part of men that women were unfit to exercise any right or privilege was responsible for this deprivation. But it has now been abundantly proved that given equal facilities with men, women can intelligently and beneficially exercise their rights and discharge their responsibilities. In the days of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, women enjoyed a position of great eminence and respect. In every sphere of life, they were equals and co-workers of men. Learning and scholarship, statecraft even active participation in war – nothing was denied to them. With the advent of Muslim rule, however, they were pushed into the background. They had to live in ‘purdah’ and slowly restrictions like child marriage were imposed upon them. Only now and then a few illustrious exceptions like Rani Padmini, Mirabai, Chand Bibi, or Rani Laxmi Bai attracted public notice. The majority of Indian women lived an obscure and insignificant life. During a large part of British rule, nothing was done to improve their lot. They continued to be the dumb-driven cattle they had become during the Muslim period.

It was Raja Raj Mohan, who during the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century took up the case of Indian women and put new life into them. Owing to his selfless and enterprising activities, Indian woman began to come out of ‘purdah’ and receive English education. Slowly even co-education gained popularity and women’s outlook underwent a revolutionary change. In our days, the emancipation of Indian woman was enthusiastically advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, who preached that woman is not a mere instrument of satisfying the physical desires of man. She has a much vaster and nobler field for her activities. Gandhiji’s book “To the woman” contains his enlightened views on the woman question. “Divine souls take birth in such houses, where the women are respected. Where they are not respected, all works become useless there” (Manusmriti 3/56). It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness” is an apt-quoted proverb. To the women, Gandhiji gave a directive to become fearless and courageous and work for their own emancipation as well as for the freedom of their nation.



Women were “worthy of worship. They are the fate of the household, the lamp of enlightenment for all in the household. They bring solace to the family and are an integral part of Dharmic life. Even heaven is under control of women. The God resides in those households where women are worshipped and in households where women are slighted all her efforts at improvement go in vain” (Sharma 10). During the vedic period (1500-100 BC), women were regarded like mother Goddess (Shakti). A symbol of life with immense capacity of tolerance and sacrifice they had respectable place in the society, for it is universally held that the faces of women are like flowers, their words are like the drops of honey, but their hearts are like sharp razors, the interior of them no one can know. In the ancient Rig vedic period, women were co-partners of their husbands in their life, all pleasures, joys enjoying and bearing pains and sorrows together. Women used to enjoy freedom in their personal life and had access to education and thus society started giving due respect to them. They were also familiar with social and life playing significant roles in those matters. Remarriage was allowed for widows. Basham writes:

“In Rig vedic period, polygamy was not unknown. Kings and invariably chiefs were almost polygamous, as were many Brahmins and wealthier members of lower order” (P 173).

Efforts were made to understand the position of women in different period of time for which literature was used as a healthy tool and instrument. The problems and agonies of women have been handled as themes of novels by many writers. Naturally any novel that depicts the life of a woman attracts women in general. A woman holds an important place in society. The claim that one has understood society will be partial unless one has understood the position of women is true. Contemplations to remove the difficulties of women are mostly useless, unless the difficulties themselves are understood in the proper perspective. A growing society depends largely on the women who play a significant role at home and in the society. Hence the study of women can never be underrated and ignored. Any woman is interested in the stories about women stories that highlight the pain, pleasure, accomplishments and failures of women do kindle a deep interest in the women readers. The stories that reflect the real emotions and feelings of women in general, do have a perennial charm. Since novels are a microscopic analysis and portrayal of the society, women play a greater role in them. A careful analysis of any novel throws light on a few important aspects regarding women. The society’s attitude towards women and its concept of a woman in her different roles can be discovered in an author’s depiction of women characters.

This paper highlights the position of women in India and England against the historic background. The cultural heritage and behavior pattern peculiar to both the countries have evolved two different images of women but both the pictures that evolve do have many common traits. A woman’s plight in society, the related woes that engulf her and perennial efforts to keep herself safe in the surrounding gloom are all matters of interest. The status of women in Tamil Nadu is a peculiar one. At least in the ancient days, she was constrained to seek a job outside to eke out the living, but today she has to face the hazards and dangers of the world outside. Toiling hard with all her feeble strength, she has to rush along the crowd exposing herself to the open dangers and silent antagonizing criticism. If the atmosphere at home is bleak and dark, the weather career woman who returns seeking relief is greeted with gales of hatred. Dr.Thirupurasundari who wrote under the pseudonym ‘Lakshmi’ is a notable Tamil writer said to have won the hearts of many through publication of 106 novels. She being a woman portrayed the travails and pains of women in a captivatingly realistic manner and gave a wide panoramic view of the sufferings and feelings of women in her interviews. According to her, men always dominate and woman holds very different roles and dangerous responsibilities as a daughter, mother, wife and even servant. While commenting on her novel –writing process, Lakshmi said:

“All my novels deal with social themes, most of the arising out of real life incidents, I have constantly found that any social problem mostly affects the women. So I concentrate on my heroines. If the heroes linger in the shadow, it is not my fault”

(Indian Express).

The heroines of Lakshmi are mostly patient and never grumble. As she has put it,



“The society set-up in India is such that the responsibility of making a home happy mainly rests with the women of the house. It is imperative that each woman has infinite patience to keep her home intact?”  
(The Indian Express).

Further, she confesses that she manages to end her novels with a happy note so that women may find solace atleast in the world of imagination. When the reality is sickening and morbid, at least a fresh wisp of air can be breathed in the world of fancy. This awareness of the intensity of pain endured by the weaker sex is the cause of the powerful strokes that proceed from the magical brush of Lakshmi.

Women held a high status equal to that of men in the vedic period. This reverential attitude towards women was sustained in the ancient culture. There were women rulers. The vedic pattern of social existence was based upon genuine concepts of equality of sexes. The growing complexity in life resulted in general withdrawal of women from social sphere. Under the pretext of protection, they were denied the rightful place in society. She was not only protected but jealously guarded. This continued till the time of Independence. A big revolution headed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sarojini Naidu, Subramania Bharati and Leelavathy Munshi brought about a few changes. Sati, Child marriage and Devadasi system got abolished. Right of succession was granted. When the emancipation of women was just gaining momentum in the West, women like Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Madam Bhikage Cama (1861-1936) struggled hard to free women from social injustice and tyranny. Leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai felt that the first thing which the Indian mind requires to be accustomed to think is that the personality of a woman is as important, even if not more, as that of a man in the progressive evolution of mankind and the attainment of that state of emancipation leads to salvation.

Yet, in the modern world, the professional women from the middle and upper income groups braved difficult situations and have stepped out of the narrow confines of the family. They are caught in the conflict of divided loyalties, between the demands and professional responsibilities. Their difficulties are aggravated when they fail to get co-operation and sympathy, from the members of their family. Even a married woman continues to experience mental torture since she is doubtful whether she discharges fully and adequately her primary duties as wife and mother. Marriages very often prove to be a mirage where envisaged happiness is just a mere illusion. Dowry balance unhappiness at the promised time triggers off volcanic reaction caught between consideration for parents and desire for personal fulfillment, the heart of a wife is torn by the conflicting emotions. Further marital bliss is very often wrecked by lack of fidelity on the part of the husband, ill-treatment by mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, revelation of an innocent affair in the past and the consequent suspicions. These factors that cause the invisible cracks in the psyche of a woman are numerous. Since ‘motif’ is unlimited, these situations that harass a woman multiply by permutation and combination. Lakshmi provides numerous instances to portray the situations that threaten the peace of a woman. Her counterpart A.J.Cronin also dealt with the same aspects. Both the writers being doctors by profession, have rich experience which frame the ‘rockstaff’ for the ‘staff’. Their repeated encounters with numerous situations of intense pain and pleasure and their interactions with diverse people from different walks of life, have supplied characters that throb with life and vigour. Lakshmi herself observed once:

“When I was working as a doctor, I have met different people – good ones, loving people, violent people, quarrelsome ones. I have come across many people of different disposition and mentality. All these characters find a place in my novels” (The Indian Express).

The concept that the position of women in the West is completely different undergoes a change after a deep perusal of the novels of A.J.Cronin. The same male domination that renders the position of women insecure and the suppression of women’s right are to be found in the West also. The plight of young girls and the pursuit of them by men of lust are not strange there also. The plight of young girls and the pursuit of them by men of lust are not strange there also. Women have a significant role to play in the novels of the West:



“From Samuel Richardson in the 18<sup>th</sup> century upto the present day, beneath the shifts and changes in attitude which have undoubtedly taken place towards women in the novel, there is a fundamental continuity which firmly places them in a private domestic world where emotions and personal relationships are at once the focus of moral value and core of women’s experience. In the novel, women are prisoners of feeling and private life” (Stubbs 10).

There are important historical reasons why the novel has always seen women in this way. Novel, emerged as a literary form, at a time when industrialization was beginning to exclude women from production. Her participation in the public life was distinctly isolated from her private life. Women’s role in the industries was not much encouraged. Richardson’s *Pamela* started a trend in the novel that highlighted the association between women and private life. It is from this association that all the familiar images of women in fiction are derived – the virgin, heroine, wife, mother, the spinster etc. That’s why despite the active feminist movement and the expansion of opportunities for women outside home, the novel showed no sign of evolving a different frame work. The steady growth of women’s emancipation movement and the political and cultural uncertainties at the end of the nineteenth century, discredited the traditional images. The struggle to accept women as separate and complete human beings with individual and sexual rights was fought out to a very great extent in some books. There was an attempt to alter the woman’s image in fiction. What took place was an evolution and not a revolution in the portrayal of women.

The position of women in the West, before 1765 was not very discouraging. Women, along with men made powerful efforts, tried to maintain their individual freedom. This is not a deny that there were discriminations between men and women. There were many discriminations against them. Yet, women were not treated like chattels. Even regarding marriages, the parents arranged the marriages. Sometimes boys and girls made vigorous attempts without avail. The general rule of marriage for convenience prevailed. Women in general preferred men with property. Marriage ties in the middle ages were loose and confused, and the conception of marital virtues was very low. But in course of time church authorities tried to regularise marriage and wedded life at all events. Medieval sermons against sinful females, indicating the desirability of their subjection, were accompanied by sermons exalting their virtues and condemning men for masculine grossness, brutality and irresponsibility.

The family life in that period was rough and boisterous. Chaucer’s wife of Bath, tore three pages out of her clerkly husband’s book and clouted him on the cheek with her fists. Women, married or single had extensive rights to property under the law of England in the middle ages. They found nunneries, monasteries, hospitals and orphanages. With money at their disposal, they travelled far and wide through Christendom as far as the Holy Land. Women displayed great force directly and indirectly in the affairs of State and in the management of the underlying economy which sustained the monarchy. Not until the commercial and political revolution, accumulating full force in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, actually disrupted the solidarity of royal and aristocratic families founded on a landed wealth, did women lose most of the power which they had so long exercised in the affairs of the State and society. The period between the dissolution of women’s political power in royal and aristocratic families and the general enfranchisement of women was relatively short as measured against the long centuries of royal and aristocratic rule. Women were winning the suffrage in more progressive societies years before manhood suffrage had been women in other societies. In due course with their interest and impulses as wives and mothers, an ideal of harmonious family living was evolved related to interfamily unity in their society.

As in India, there were many attempts to improve the position of women in England. There was a campaign to improve women’s education opportunities – a campaign which included foundation of Queen’s and Bedford Colleges in 1848 and Cheltenham Ladies college in 1853. The first attempt by a woman to register as a medical student was as early as 1856. The married women’s property Act was passed in 1870. The vague but popular phrase ‘The New Woman’ was coined in the nineties in an effort to describe women who had either won or fought for a degree of equality and personal freedom. The novelists also were moving towards new and radical, images of women. This concept of ‘New Woman’ is similar to the ‘The New Woman’ of Bharathiar of Tamil Nadu. Even in the West, some novelists were not much bothered about these changing phases in the role of women. Women are



portrayed as the centre of the private emotional world and are defined and delineated almost exclusively through their personal relationships.

A woman who works is very rarely the centre of interest in the novel and even when the heroine does work, the emphasis is still on her emotional life. A.J.Crocin's novels also bear witness to this concept. His novels show women as wives and mothers. Their career show women as wives and mothers. Their career and other aspects fade into insignificance and they captivate the readers' attention as individuals capable of deep feeling and abundant love.

Truly speaking, nowadays Indian women are socially, politically, economically, as in the West, are equal to men changing their mindset and coming out of the shackles of social evils. Due to change, they are entitled to enjoy greater freedom, receive better education, become self-reliant, get good jobs and receive better treatment from men. There has been remarkable increase in the number of women going out of their houses for working in different sectors. They are now teachers, doctors, nurses, advocates, bank employees, clerks, telephone operators, receptionists, personal assistants etc. This is seen everywhere throughout India. Employment has, no doubt, given economic freedom to women. This has boosted self-pride and self-confidence among women folk.

In a nutshell, the post-modern age has, no doubt, witnessed the growing awareness of people as well as the zest of women to reform society's ideology on justice, dignity, freedom and equality. A good number of women have managed to get to higher positions in different fields which were once forbidden to them. Women in the postmodern age claim to be no less than men, but rather to be their equal for women have proven their intelligence, wisdom, working ability in every field that there is no need to deter them from anything. At the same time, women have proven their interest ability to silently endure all the injustice and violence against them.

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