

Defining Feminism Through Subversion of Superiority and Inferiority Complexes: A Gender-Just Perspective

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Abstract

This paper proposes to establish how a gender just society can be created through assimilation of masculine and feminine traits as per the demand of modern times. The comparison of cultural and religious lineage of western and Indian societies gives us an insight into the misogynistic and gender just approach of two distinct cultures. The sharp contrast that exist in seeing the woman as sinner in the western religious beliefs and glorification of women in its different forms in Indian religious practices clearly indicate that the balanced society is possible when the prejudices of inferiority and superiority are thrown away both in theory and practice. The demands and needs of modern times seem more closer to the gender just society of ancient India, though in a new perspective as with the passage of time the gender roles have undergone several changes. Interconnectedness and interdependence of two distinct genders that was the norm in the ancient Vedic period is the only way through which the importance of both the genders can be maintained.

Keywords: gender parity, equilibrium, interconnectedness, dignity, womanhood

The idea of feminism arose as a rebellion against patriarchal superiority in the 18th century in the west. It advocated for equal rights for women in each sphere of life. It became a voice for the women who were not considered worthy enough to move beyond the sphere of domestic work, were denied the right to voice their opinions and did not have legal rights and rights of inheritance of property. The women are still said to be a weaker sex in the west. The misogynistic perspective that is embedded in the psyche of the people prepared the ground for the demand for equality with the other gender 'the stronger one; the man. The struggle to bring women on the equal pedestal with men has not been easy. The transition from 'frailty, thy name is women' [1] from "I am stronger than fear" [2] has been achieved by encountering massive hurdles. The mental constraints on the part of both women and men had posed a constant hurdle to the cause of woman empowerment. Despite constant opposition and mockery of the idea of women empowerment, women have shown the world that they are capable of accomplishing any task

that were earlier reserved for men. But the tendency of fitting into the framework that was designed by the men for men, the essence of womanhood seems to be getting lost and the struggle for gender equality seems to be turning towards a battle for supremacy, where women are copying the men, their mannerism, their personality traits by shedding away the feminine traits that make them unique. The question arises, "Are we heading towards a world that will be devoid of feminine"? Therefore, we need to look at the idea of feminism from a new perspective; the feminism that instils self-respect and dignity among women for being a woman and not for being an image of man. We need to create a world where both masculine and feminine abound with their distinctive qualities and a balance is maintained between them as "male and female are just manifestation of either the masculine or the feminine being present in an enhanced way. if you only nurture the masculine, the crassness of machismo will find expression. If you only nurture the feminine, an excessive sense of

decorativeness and emotion will find expression". [3]

The feminism that originated in the west has sensibilities unique to the collective consciousness of woman as the original sinner, the one who was responsible for the downfall of man from Eden garden. It is strange to note that in contemporary Western society, women's unique ability to become pregnant has been used as a justification for numerous and diverse discriminatory practices against women. This discriminatory practice has its origin in the bible "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children." [4] Eve, the mother of humanity was punished with intense pain for complete process right from the conception till child birth. On the contrary, Adam was chastised for listening to his wife and his only punishment was hard work to earn the bread. The notion that the mental infirmities of women may cloud the wisdom of man has kept the women away from the matters that required logic, reason and vision. The great Greek epics Iliad and Odyssey too project women as inferior to men. In Iliad, women are seen as prized possessions, their fate purely dependent on the whims of their owners, while in Odyssey they are seen as objects of beauty having no achievement of their own, playing second fiddle to their fathers, husbands and sons. Similarly, Cleopatra who ruled Egypt is presented not as a great ruler but as a seductress who charmed men to her benefits. Against this backdrop of belittlement of women, it was quite natural for the women to raise their voices against the injustice that was continuing for centuries. When the ideas of liberty, equality and individual freedom started finding expression in 18th century, the human in woman too rose in rebellion to find a respectable place for herself in the society. The women have since then proved their mettle in almost every field and it is a well-established fact that the male bastions are now being subverted, but unfortunately, these male bastions are being ruled not by women but by women with traits that are masculine. The ideal of excellence still remains the same; masculine. Emma Watson has rightly said, "When feminism is defined as becoming equal to men it is a clear admission that men are the default by which we ought to measure ourselves and therefore no feminism at all.[5] That's why

we need to redefine feminism that makes women rise in self-respect and dignity and make a place for themselves in the modern social set up with the traits that are unique to them; the feminine traits.

It is an undeniable fact that social conditioning of roles of men and women was not man made but it was based on the biological differences that exist between two sexes. At the same time, it cannot be doubted that the social conditioning of distinct roles of the genders relegated women to a place of insignificance in a social web in which power and brute force became synonymous with success. The agrarian economy too gave men an upper hand over women. The traditional role of a woman remained that of caretaker. It started changing when the industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of capitalistic economy resulted in migration and disintegration of extended families, and the nuclear families came into existence. Women also started working outside and it gave them an opportunity to understand their capabilities in the changed scenario. They were able to break the stereotype they had been living with for centuries. The transition from a life enclosed in four walls of the house to positions in academics, industries and politics dispelled the myth that women are meek, submissive and lack reason and intellect. But, the economically empowered women continued to face difficulties in chalking out a balance between their work at home and outside home and found themselves in throes of guilt and depression for not being a pillar of support for their children and family. The men, too were yet not ready to adapt themselves to the demands of the changing times. The women and society are still conditioned with the idea of women as the caretaker of the families. Besides, men too were not able to shed their prejudice of taking up the domestic chores and child care responsibilities. This led to confrontation in the family. Furthermore, the disparity in salary of women and men for the same work also aggravated the issue of injustice and inequality. The feminist movement addressed the issues that were being faced by women in the family as well as in the workplace and brought a change in the century old mind-set of fixed gender roles.

Society takes time to evolve. In ancient times when wars were waged to conquer lands,

wealth and resources, the masculine traits such as ferocity, aggression, and valour were regarded as the supreme virtues, but in today's time, when the concept such as 'say no to wars' is being popularised and the world is becoming global, the feminine traits such as cooperation, compassion, creativity, empathy and kindness are being set up as ideals. The corporate set up, which is ruling the world, now wants people trained in soft skills so that people working there should remain happy and stress free. It is just similar to what women were expected to do in their traditional roles of a caretaker. The qualities that are appreciated in the new social setup are just not masculine but feminine too. This going together of feminine and masculine must be the ideal of feminism. It must focus on gender parity and not on gender rivalry. Gender rivalry will end up in unnecessary blame game and victimhood, which in turn will be detrimental not only for the well-being of individuals but for the society as a whole. "The moment we create a divide between the polarities, judgements about perceived superiority and inferiority between the two arise. Out of these judgements, many layers of confusion, ugliness and exploitation have occurred." [6] We have to move towards resolution of conflict between two genders and "see gender as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals." [7] Therefore the aim of feminism should be strengthening of the essence of womanhood. The feminine traits such as kindness, affection, compassion and humility should be highlighted as the need for the survival of humanity. The men may be superior physically, but women display a high level of emotional stability. Human beings survive with power play but humanity survives with emotions and the emotions are the treasure a woman has in abundance. This essence of womanhood is to be established as the ideal for all human beings. Instead of adopting a supremacist attitude, feminism must focus on a harmonious interconnectedness and interdependence between two sexes.

The problem with the feminism lies in the fact that it has started seeing the gender equality as the war between genders. The family is the oldest institution existing in this world. It owes its existence to the union of male and female not only physically but mentally and emotionally as well. It is considered as the building block of the society. If the family disintegrates, the

society too will disintegrate. If the society disintegrates, chaos and disorder will be the order of the day. The feminism in its present form advocates subversion of family and society. For them, the family and society thrive because of patriarchy. The feminists direct their ire at the family as for them it is the family that has kept the women entrapped in domestic chores and child care, without realising the fact that it is the family that has brought discipline in the society and uplifted human beings from their animal existence. It is the family that works by maintaining a balance between masculine and feminine. The feminists fail to realize that the nature itself works in harmony by bringing together the diverse elements present in it. The principle of harmonious interconnectedness of diverse elements applies to male and female too. Therefore, the differences of the genders must be celebrated. The concept of Ardhnarishwar in Indian philosophy sees man and woman not as two different entities but as one unit. Society can flourish for the good of humanity if it manages to strike a beautiful balance between masculine and feminine. "Establishing an equal balance between the masculine and feminine within you is the only way to intellectually and experimentally know about deeper dimensions of life." [8]

In this context, the ancient Indian Vedic view of participatory existence in which both woman and man partake not for their individual rights but for the preservation and furtherance of familial and social duties at all levels is the right approach to answer the questions raised by the feminist movement. The current issue of women's empowerment could be amicably settled if we are able to shed gender bias. Both the sections of society have to be free from their inhibitions and prejudices to live with mutual regard and dignity. This is evident from the hymn of the Rigveda embodying the nuptial ceremony, as well as from many other references to the wifehood of a woman, where she is depicted as sharing the burden of her husband, not only in domestic life but in social and religious ceremonies as well. While performing seven steps, an integral part of Indian wedding ceremony, the husband says to his wife, "By these seven steps that you have taken with me, you have become my best friend. I will never move out of this relationship. God has united us in this bondage.

We shall perform all activities together with love and affection and with good feelings. Let us be friendly in our thoughts. Let us observe our duties and rituals together. If you are the lyrics, I am the music. If you are the music, I am the lyrics. If I am the heavenly body, you are the earthly world. While I am the life source and you are the carrier of the same. I am the thoughts and you are the speech. When you are like the words, you work with me who is like the meaning of it. With your sweet words, come with me to lead a prosperous life begetting our progeny with children.” [9] From this it may be presumed that husband and wife denote an ideal couple, a perfect pair, and equal partners in domestic and social life, carrying out their responsibilities through the principle of interconnectedness and harmonious interdependence. The Rigveda says, “the wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore, both should join and take part in all works, religious and secular.” [10]

The demand for equality of status does not find mention in ancient Indian society as it was a duty oriented society where both husband and wife would take vows to lead a blissful married life by performing their respective duties. No one was superior or inferior. There was a perfect concord between the two which is expressed in the Vedic prayers where oneness of hearts is sought between the husband and wife. Here there is no better half or the worse half but just the two equal halves. Marriage in Vedic philosophy is not a compromise or a contract undertaken for physical pleasures or material comforts, but a sacrament, aimed at attaining the highest goal of life, a perfect companionship. Vedic marriage is an inseparable bond which gives equal status to both husband and wife. Women, unlike women in ancient Europe, were viewed not as a thing of pleasure, “whose place was in home....and not in the world of affairs” [11] but as a partner in religious duties. Hence there is no scope for dominance or subjugation and oppression or exploitation. Similarly, the pairing of motherhood with divinity in India indicates the important status women enjoy since ancient times. The rites and rituals that start from the time of conception till child birth speak of the position of significance women had. A son remains indebted to his mother throughout his life. He can repay the debt of a father and of a

teacher but the debt of a mother can never be repaid. The dedication, sense of duty and unconditional love a mother has for her child has a value that can't be counted. This lofty status accorded to motherhood in Indian scriptures is actually the celebration of feminine power that creates and nurtures. Even the beginning of first menstrual cycle is celebrated as it makes a girl, a complete woman. The attributes that are integral to being woman should not be taken as a sign of weakness, rather they must be projected as the mark of strength for the upward march of the world which is looking for happiness despite great strides in the field of science, technology and economics.

The problem with the feminist movement that originated in the west lies in the fact that it seems to defy everything that is intrinsic to the idea of being a woman. This aggressive feminism looks down upon the women who want to take up traditional roles of being a wife or mothers and fail the women who don't want to conform to the standards set by the feminist movement. In fact, women should have the choice to do what they want; either to work at home or to work outside home. Elske Rahill writes for the Irish Times “Not all women want to be mothers. Not all women can be mothers. But many of us are, and all of us have come from a womb. As long as we denigrate maternity, we are denigrating women.” [12]

All that is required today is to give women or the world what they have been deprived of, i.e. to inculcate in them a sense of self-respect. They need to be self-driven, strong enough to take decisions and then to act on them. We should try to create a society where women grow in self-esteem, self-respect and be conscious of their rights when they are performing their duties. They must be recognized as respectable, moral, responsible human beings. Ernestine has rightly said: “Humanity recognises no sex, mind recognises no sex; life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognise no sex. Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers.” [13]

The emancipation of women is closely linked up with a perception of the place for women in the social order. Women's rights, roles and

norms of behaviour as also those of others towards them, are still greatly influenced by cultural factors like the institutions of family, religious and other traditions. We have to keep in mind that a happy family alone can create a healthy society and so there should be cooperation between the family members with equal opportunities and responsibilities in all walks of life for both males and females; a perfect parity between the two sexes in the family can alone bring harmony in the society, as “Both sexes have the same essential need for one another; they can gain from their liberty the same glory. If they were to taste it, they would.... [give up] fallacious privileges, and fraternity between them could then come into existence.” [14] The recent judgement by supreme court of India that a homemaker’s work contributes in a very real way to the economic condition of the family, and the economy of the nation, regardless of the fact that it may have been traditionally excluded from economic analyses. It is a reflection of changing attitudes and mind-sets and of our international law obligations. And most importantly it is a step towards the constitutional vision of social equality and ensuring dignity of life to all individuals.” [15] and is very much similar to what a woman in Rigveda says “My destiny is as glorious as the rising sun. I am the flag of my home and society. I am also their head. I can give impressive discourses. My sons conquer enemies. My daughters illuminate the whole world. I myself am winner of enemies. My husband has infinite glory. I have made those sacrifices which make a king successful. I have also been successful. I have destroyed my enemies.”[16]

This glorification of womanhood is actually a way to attain the ideal of gender just society. In accordance with the philosophy of the Vedas, women must be educated and given their due and their contribution to the family and society must be respected. It must be understood that the more advanced we become, the more we need the finer attributes of a human and these finer attributes are feminine in nature. When the human was savage and barbaric, he needed power and force to exploit and dominate. Exploitation and dominance can’t last for ever. They are bound to face rebellion and disintegration. Love and compassion last forever. Therefore, power must be balanced

with love and care. The attributes that are integral to being a woman should not be taken as signs of weakness, rather they must be projected as the mark of strength for the upward march of the world which is looking for happiness despite great strides in the field of science, technology and economics. The rhythm and rhyme of the society can be maintained only when both the genders work in cohesion and the principle of coexistence directs their actions for the survival of humanity.

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