

WOMEN AND POLITICS OF MARTYRISATION: DECONSTRUCTING INDIAN PATRIARCHY

Written by **Dr. Debasisha Pati**

Asst. Professor of English, KKS Women's College, Balasore, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt at problematising the prevalent popular perception of feminism in India. As a postcolonial nation state, we tend to look at the theory of feminism primarily as a western/colonial construct. The theory has originated in the west but what it theorises on probably applies to the historical reality of India as well as the west. Great scholars have therefore sought to indianise feminism by trying to trace in Indian history the different forms of feminist resistance. I strive to contribute to the Indian feminist studies by seeking to redefine Indian patriarchy. What the paper tries to figure out is why the 74-year-old gender-neutral state continues to struggle to ensure safety and equitability to its women. The western theory of feminism falls short of applying wholly to the Indian context not for the obvious reason of India being a different culture but probably for the different character of its patriarchy.

Keywords: *Problematising, feminism, postcolonial, patriarchy, indianise, colonial construct*

Of all things upon earth that bleed and grow, a herb most bruised is woman.

-Euripides

Feminist discourse in India over the last two centuries has been shaped by our colonial past, on the one hand, and our opposition to foreign domination, on the other. Also, it has always struggled to create space for women to fight against cultural impositions and religious restrictions, which underline and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological

[Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review \(AJMRR\)](#)

ISSN 2582 8088

Volume 2 Issue 3 [June - July 2021]

© 2015-2021 All Rights Reserved by [The Law Brigade Publishers](#)

suppression. The dichotomy between the Indian state striving towards the de-gendering of its citizens and the Indian patriarchal society perpetuating the ideology of gender is something that the Indian feminist has to concern himself/ herself with. With the best of laws to safeguard women against discrimination of all kinds, India still is far from being safe and equitable for women. The state of affairs, therefore, calls for a continuous probing into the problem.

The unsuitability of the western feminist theory in the Indian context of India, however, does not absolve the Indian culture of its patriarchal character. Looking back at Indian mythology for powerful feminist role models has probably not been very empowering for the Indian women. I therefore find the Indian feminist stance of drawing inspiration from the so-called powerful mythological women for feminist resistance problematic. Such a stance seems to be guilty of patriarchal intent. The formulation of the Indian feminist position would require the proper perception of Indian patriarchy. The very fact that Indian feminism is different from the Euro-American variant precisely points to the character of Indian patriarchy being different from its western counterpart. Patriarchy in India is more powerful than that in the west as it is more covert. The persistence of the ideology of patriarchy has, everywhere it has happened, depended upon the prescription of the virtue of self-denial and self-obliteration for women to aspire to and their faithful adherence to it. What makes Indian patriarchy different from but stronger than the western one is that it has made women its unpaid cadre.

Patriarchy in the West has effected, through its myths, an erasure of female subjectivity. It has not recognised the significance of the half of humanity in human life. The propagation of the idea of women as the weaker sex has led to their exploitation by the stronger sex. But patriarchy in India has recognized the sacrifice and suffering of women. In recognition of the importance of women in human life, godhood has been conferred upon women. Unlike the Western conception of God as male, the Indian Hindus have conceived of both gods and goddesses. The Indian tradition of invoking women as powerful speaks of the ideological effort at guarding women against exploitation by the males. So, **while Western patriarchy has been abrasive in its approach towards women, Indian patriarchy has been ameliorative.** It is probably in this approach that the insidiousness of Indian patriarchy lies. It is like a chameleon “never revealing itself, and never appearing not to”, to use the words of Arundhati Roy. (GST 14)

Having thus problematized the general perception of the Indian feminist concern, I will now attempt to show how patriarchy in India does what it does – perpetuate itself.

Mythology has been used as a potent tool by patriarchy in India to secure woman's subordination to man. The reason behind the unquestioned acceptance of myths in the shared existence of the masses may be attributed to the fact that "myth makes particular world views appear to be unchallengeable" (Barker 93). The famous feminist, Kamla Bhasin analyses the problem of women subscribing to the patriarchal ideology in the following words:

...through a rich and imaginative mythology women were narcotised into accepting the ideology that genuine power lies in women's ability to sacrifice, in gaining spiritual strength by denying themselves access to power, or the means to it.(37, Emphasis Mine)

Alladi Uma acknowledges the way patriarchal ideology has indoctrinated women:

Subtle indoctrination atrophies a woman's desire to change her position as an object and to exercise her free will; she compromises her stand, for she is taught the importance and necessity of a stable marriage and family - family as security, as a source of emotional strength.(4)

Thus, to see the subtle snare of Indian patriarchy is what concerns the Indian feminist. The question s/he has to answer is how patriarchy has perpetuated itself into the 21st century India, a modern, democratic, gender-neutral state.

The Indian Hindu culture attributes power as feminine (*Shakti*). Hindu myths have portrayed powerful idols for women such as Sita, Draupadi and Gandhari. The Indian feminist stance, thus, is different from the western version not simply because India is just another non-western culture but because Indian culture has perennially looked upon women as being powerful. What, however, intrigues a probing mind is why this gesture of invoking the female as powerful not empowered women down the ages. How do we explain female feticide in a culture that

avowedly worships women? How has the Indian woman, idolized in mythology, been subalternised in society?

The problem lies not in the deterioration of the cultural values of the Vedic age, as many traditionalists would argue but in the very construction of the grand myths out of which Indian culture has evolved. The argument that Indian culture has looked upon woman as powerful derives essentially from the myth of Goddess Durga, who killed *Mahisasura* before whom even the Gods were powerless. What is to be noted here is that it is the male Gods who conferred upon Durga all their powers in order that She can annihilate the evil that *Mahisasura* was. This myth can be read in two ways. One is that women, if given power, can do everything that men do with power, an idea that is close to what modern feminists fight for - gender equality. Two, and more important, is that women need power from men, an idea which implies that nature has made men powerful and women powerless. The myth thus validates the patriarchal ideology that women are born inferior to men and that men share their superiority with women to make women their equals. Thus, men and women are equal but, to borrow the famous Orwellian words, men are more equal than women. Unlike in the west, where patriarchy sought to obliterate women from the dominant discourse, in India, patriarchy has included women into the dominant discourse defining their presence as secondary to that of men, and thereby sanctified women's secondariness in the human universe.

Let me bring in here two oft-quoted verses from *Manusmriti*, translated "Laws of Manu" or "Institutions of Manu," regarded as the most important and authoritative Hindu Law Book (Dharmashastra), which served as a foundational work on Hindu law and jurisprudence in the ancient Indian society. The first one preaches respect for women: "Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards." (*The Laws of Manu* 3:56) The second one denies freedom to women and prescribes male protection for women: "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence." (*The Laws of Manu* 9:3) The second one, many scholars have alleged, has been misinterpreted in modern times as pleading for the denial of freedom to women. They argue that it, in fact, pleads for the protection women deserve. **What problematises this reading is that it talks about male protection against male assault.** What I find problematic about this law of Manu is not its

intent, as it is a 2nd century BCE text addressing the prevalent social context, but its effect on the evolution of Indian culture. Far more difficult than rejecting the text as an anachronistic one is undoing the effect it has had on the formation of the myth of woman by patriarchy. The troubling question is: how would women look at a text that talks about men honouring women who must submit to men for protection? They have not only felt glorified by it but also accepted their submission to men as being natural. Further, the verse quoted first is different from the second in a significant way. While the second seeks to codify female behaviour, the first seems to be a caution against men tending to dishonor women who submit to them for protection. And caution is always given to the errant. What we can therefore infer from this is that women were not probably as honoured in the ancient times as the traditionalists claim.

The Indian feminist stance of looking at some mythical women as powerful needs to be problematised. Sita in *The Ramayana* and Gandhari in *The Mahabharata* are two cases in point. Sita subjected to humiliation and suffering is finally disillusioned with life and asks Mother Earth to swallow her up. For thousands of years, patriarchy has chosen to see Sita's end as her supreme sacrifice, whereas it could be seen as her suicide. Some scholars rightly argue that Sita's act was not one of suicide but one of powerful feminist resistance against patriarchy that sought to put women into ordeals in order to uphold its ideology of female fallibility. In the light of this contention, patriarchy's projection of this myth into the popular lore as Sita's supreme sacrifice for the honour of her King husband, Rama can be questioned. What can be seen in this projection is the double benefits it has yielded for patriarchy. One, it has sought to validate suffering in silence as a supreme virtue for women to aspire to. Two, it has obliterated both the act of oppression causing the suffering and the resultant resistance. Similarly, Gandhari chooses to remain blind-folded for life after she is married off to a blind prince without her consent. Patriarchy has chosen to describe it as a gesture of unflinching devotion of a wife towards her husband, an act of abnegation of the privilege providentially denied to her husband, whereas it might well be a protest against male hegemony. Again like Sita's, Gandhari's is a resistance through suffering.

To define the position of such mythical women as Sita and Gandhari, who can be looked at as feminist role models, vis-à-vis patriarchy requires a re-thinking of the victim status accorded to women in a patriarchy-ridden society. Unlike in the West, where women were abject victims,

these women were aware martyrs. While the victims resist the infliction of suffering, the martyrs resist its cause. Martyrdom may appear to be a heroic embracing of suffering but at the same time it unwittingly helps cycle the cause of suffering - oppression. Just as martyrs of war validate, through their martyrdom, the ideology of the necessity and inevitability of war, so do women martyrs of patriarchy seal its ideology. This explains why the story of suffering and sacrifice of the mythical women has not improved the lot of women in the succeeding generations. It, on the contrary, has worsened their lot by disarming them against patriarchal onslaught, with its preaching of *suffering as resistance*. It has only helped patriarchy perpetuate itself in Indian culture from time immemorial to the 21st century through the politics of what may be termed as *martyrisation*.

The word 'martyr' can be seen as a euphemistic alternative of the word 'victim'. All victims may not be accorded the martyr status, but all martyrs are, in a significant sense, victims. A martyr is a victim to whom his victimhood is not visible. Exalting the victims to the height of martyrdom is perhaps the safest strategy for the perpetuation of victimisation. Therefore, martyrisation of women by Indian patriarchy has to be fought by Indian feminists just as victimisation of women by Western patriarchy is fought by Western feminists. Gerda Lerner says: "It (feminism) is not always a movement, for it can be a level of consciousness, a stance, an attitude, as well as the basis for organised effort." (237) If in the west, the feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimisation by the dominating males of the society which leads to women's subordinate status and their consequent oppression, then in India, it is a consciousness of martyrisation by patriarchy leading to their subalternisation.

Thus, patriarchy and feminism in India vis-à-vis their Euro-American counterpart can be defined from a new perspective. In the west, patriarchy became the culture while in India, the culture has been patriarchal. If the western feminists have had to fight against the victimisation of women by patriarchy, the Indian feminists have to fight against the 'martyrisation' of women by patriarchy. The western woman has resisted patriarchy through verbal violence and the Indian woman, through silence; the former fighting the onslaught and the latter suffering it. The problem of Indian women being Indian, its solution cannot be found in western theory. Interestingly, the solution to the problem of the silencing of women by patriarchy lies in the same grand myths that have been used by patriarchy to create the problem. If these **myths**

have helped patriarchy construct its ideology of male superiority and female fallibility, then a feminist revisiting of the same myths can help deconstruct it. My endeavour to contribute to this indigenising enterprise has been to present the thesis that patriarchal ideology in collusion with mythology has indulged in the politics of martyrism in order to effect women's submission to men.

Elaine Showalter, the noted American feminist critic has termed the three distinct phases in the history of women as the 'feminine' (imitative) conforming to patriarchy, the 'feminist' (revolt) resisting patriarchy and the 'female' (self-discovery) outgrowing patriarchy. In the Indian context, however, the feminist phase has not been a breakaway from but an extension of the feminine phase. The feminist in woman has not been able to come out of the cocoon of the feminine. This is what Vrinda Nabar probably intends to suggest when she opines that feminism has not yet begun in India. This also explains why women in India are still struggling to reach out to the female phase. This is not to suggest that Indian women need to embark upon a feminist movement of the Euro-American kind. The movement is only a means to an end - the evolution of a gender-neutral or non-sexist world. The ideology driving this movement aims at making women female humans shorn of the age-old femininity thrust upon them. In order to launch the journey to attaining this goal, all that the Indian women need is an awareness that they are not born as feminine; they have been 'narcotised', to use Kamla Bhasin's concept, by patriarchy to become feminine. Femininity is the patriarchy-ordained fate inflicted upon women to secure their submission to the constructed male superiority. Shedding femininity, the Indian woman has to evolve as a woman, a female human with the same human rights as her male counterparts.

REFERENCES

Barker, Chris. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, 2003. Print.

Bhasin, Kamla. *What is Patriarchy*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993. Print.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.

[Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review \(AJMRR\)](#)

ISSN 2582 8088

Volume 2 Issue 3 [June - July 2021]

© 2015-2021 All Rights Reserved by [The Law Brigade Publishers](#)

Nabar, Vrinda. *Caste as Woman*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1995. Print.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2002. Print

Uma, Alladi. *Woman and Her Family: Indian and Afro-American: A Literary Perspective*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1989. Print.



[Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review \(AJMRR\)](#)

ISSN 2582 8088

Volume 2 Issue 3 [June - July 2021]

© 2015-2021 All Rights Reserved by [The Law Brigade Publishers](#)