

FEMINIST AND FEMININE: A STUDY OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN SRI AUROBINDO'S PLAYS

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Abstract:

The feminist consciousness in literature is a consciousness of subjugation of women by the dominating patriarchs of the society. The victimized women thus, find themselves in a subaltern status in the society. Consequently, these women harbor strong anti-male attitude. The term feminism conjures up an extremely radical and rebellious attitude in women, who, try to prove sincerely and passionately that either they are superior or they are equal with men in every aspect. Feminism is a protest movement against discrimination and oppression of women whereas, feminine consciousness involves awareness of oneself as object of attention of another. This consciousness is not exactly a battle to prove superiority of status. Neither is it meant to exclude men. Rather realization of feminine consciousness in its true sense can help in accelerating the evolution of humankind to attain wholeness of existence. While the feminist writers think of their movement in terms of equal rights of women with men, Sri Aurobindo, delineates women characters in his plays, embodying unique feminine consciousness who don't clamour for equal rights with men as they don't need such equality. They rather, through their inherent feminine virtues, inspire their men to brave the world. By embodying the grand feminine power, the women in Sri Aurobindo's plays become the source of strength, sustenance, and encouragement for men. And only a being, strong and superior in consciousness, is able to love, protect, save and inspire. This paper tries to bring out this difference in consciousness in the feminist and the feminine.

Keywords: Feminist, Feminine Consciousness, feminine power.

The concept of Feminism took wings in the 19th century as the first wave feminist movement to address the issues of suffrage, working conditions, and educational rights of women. The second wave of the movement was from 1960's to 1980's to attend to issues like inequalities of law, cultural disparities and role of women in the society. And the third wave feminism started in 1991 with the American Feminist, Rebecca Walker's article, 'Becoming the third wave'. The movement focused particularly on 'Gender equality in Education Act, in 1994 and 'The Violence against Women Act' in The US in 1994. Then came the fourth wave feminist movement in 2012 that demanded justice for women, opposed to the sexual harassment and

violence against women. Subsequently, many more such movements followed leaving the door open in suggestion that there is so much left to do to bring justice and equality for the fair sex.

Betty Friedan was a homemaker, writer, and feminist whose influential book, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, helped launch the Women's Rights movement of the 1960s. The book reflects Friedan's claim of diagnosing deep uneasiness that persisted in the females of her time. She understood that the dissonance between their own needs, desires and potential and the feminine roles of wife and mother thrust on them by the society, is the base of their disquiet. Friedan stated that the educated middle-class women were not content with their traditional roles as mothers and house wives that were forced on them by the society. As she wrote in the opening chapter of the book:

The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – “Is this all?” . . .

Women enjoyed equal rights with men in tribal societies where there was no social stratification. Gradually, with the modernization of the societies and the emergence of division of labour, inequality in the status of men and women came into being. Women got confined to domestic works like looking after babies and other household chores and men went to the battle fields as fighters and protectors of women and their territory. Ever since women have been fondly termed as the ‘weaker sex’ throughout history, even in the present time. In ancient India though, women were revered and contributed significantly towards the welfare of the society. The wings of their intellectual and spiritual pursuits were never clipped in this period. In spite of being patriarchal, the early Vedic Society in India, used to hold women in very high esteem. Their participation in and contribution to political councils Samitis were acknowledged. They received education in gurukuls. Some women like *Upala*, *Ghosha*, *Lopamudra* were so educated that they composed hymns of Rig Veda. However, this scenario changed when wars and battles became more frequent. Expansion of territories and conquering kingdoms became important. Man became the protector of women. Thus, women were seen as property, to protect and win over. Hence began the story of subjugation of women. They were compelled to be contented with an inferior status in the society. Their identity became diluted. It seems till the present day, Draupadi's question from the epic *Mahabharata* still echoes, ‘Is woman a thing or a being’. And today's feminist demands an answer.

Though feminism is the promotion of rights of women on the ground of equality of gender, today it includes exclusion of men, to negate everything said and done by men. This attitude of women is pretty understandable as we have seen through the annals of history that its men who

created a patriarchal society in which all the social norms were formed and controlled by men. Women have hardened their stand in this journey of proving themselves equal to men. They have been articulating the issue through various medium. Literature is replete with such issues-suffering of women and their struggle for an identity in a patriarchal set up.

Image of the modern woman is the colour with which the feminist writers paint their protagonist today. Their feminist consciousness of their protagonists does not accept the norms of the society which is partial towards the male gender. For the obvious reason that men are the party and they are also the judge. Further, the rules suggested for the women did not allow them to have a life beyond their husband, children and home. Their education, profession, and passion had to take the back seat whenever they are to chose between the ideal set by the society and their personal desire. The Indian women novelists have taken flight from the traditional portrayal of women and have resorted to the depiction of modern women refusing to succumb to the typical societal norms thrust on them by men just to assert their superiority over the so called 'weaker sex'. Feminist writers like Anita Desai, Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee portray their female protagonists as victims of the patriarchy. Though their feminist consciousness does not succumb to the male dominion, they end up with negative consequences either by killing themselves or by killing their husbands who are selfish and have their ego wrapped with skin of a pachyderm so firmly that they don't bother to feel, know and understand the needs and desires of their wives. The feminist consciousness of the heroines of the feminist writers today are portrayed with amazing courage and confidence so that they refuse to yield to the male sovereignty and try to maintain their own individuality in the family within the patriarchal set up. However, they are unable to effectuate a change either in their husbands or the situation.

While the feminists have been clamoring for equal rights with men or trying to prove their superiority over their male counterparts, Sri Aurobindo in his time had conceived the evolved image of the feminine with a different perspective. Sri Aurobindo believes that a woman is not merely a material being. She is the embodiment of unique consciousness. The physical body of the woman as an object of beauty and pleasure capable of giving pleasure to man is never the prime concern of Sri Aurobindo. The psychic relation between man and woman is more valuable than mere physical relation. Feminine consciousness to Sri Aurobindo is such that as wife woman is the *elan vital* of man. She enlivens and invigorates the life of her husband. She brings to him love, bliss and good fortune. Through her love, care, soothing touch and sweet words she rescues him from despondency, frustration and loneliness. By sharing joy and sorrow woman delves deep into man's heart and brings a change in him.

Sri Aurobindo's play, *The Viziers of Bassora* (1959) portrays the heroine as an agent of transformation of man. The heroine, Anice- Aljalice is a slave girl, and she brings a radical change in the life of her husband and a change in his fate. In spite of the patriarchal set up, the slave girl is not shown in a pitiable image. She is rather portrayed in the image of a modern woman who is confident of building her fate with the young hero Nureddene and not any old King for whom she was bought from the slave market. The hero is an irresponsible vagabond

who flirts with the girls of Bassora. Anice, through sincere love gives him a taste of true love. With the love of Anice he braves through the adversities of life. When Nureddene's life was in danger, due to some political conspiracy in Bassora, Anice, with the power of her intelligence and strength of her personality could compel the Caliph of Bagdad to ensure that justice is granted to her husband. Caliph not only saves Nureddene's life but also makes him the king of Bassora.

Both *Vasavadutta* (1957) and *Eric* (1960) are dramatic romance where the heroines are torn between their heart's desire and their duty for their family and country. *Vasavadutta* has an egoistic self, full of pride and the heroine, Aslaug in *Eric*, has a revengeful heart. However, both get transformed into nobler beings once they fell in love. In fact, their love also transformed the hearts of their men. In the play, *Vasavadutta* the antagonism between the royal houses of Cowsambie and Avunthie forces the king of Avunthie, Chunda Mahasegn to use his daughter *Vasavadutta* as an instrument to tame the king of Cowsambie, Vuthsa Udayan's heart which will enable them to capture Cowsambie. However, a soft corner for Vuthsa develops in the heart of *Vasavadutta* and she gets completely overcome with love for Vuthsa. In a similar situation, Aslaug, the heroine of *Eric* who had come to Norway with an intention to kill Eric, the king of Norway, so as to secure the throne for her brother who happens to have the hereditary right to the throne of Norway. But she comes to realise that she is fighting a losing battle against Eric as she fails to conceal her love for him. The feminine consciousness of both *Vasavadutta* and Aslaug is influential in inspiring them to withdraw their negative acts. While *Vasavadutta* realises the significance of her mother's advise and follows her heart's desire instead of her father's instruction to follow the dictates of her mind, she understands 'love unseats the intellect'. Her union with her man, Vuthsa also brings in the union between the two royal houses bringing an end to the long-standing enmity between them. Aslaug's heart too is liberated from a strong sense of hatred for Eric through the alchemic power of love. Her love makes Eric realise that love, the "golden hoop" is mightier than a warrior's sword. Aslaug's love makes a sense of forgiveness descend into Eric's heart. He forgives her brother, Swegn who is the author of the conspiracy.

In *Perseus the Deliverer*, (1942) the heroine, Andromeda, becomes the rescuer of distressed men whose pitiful sufferings move her heart. These victims are not related to her life. In her protective care, concern, and sympathy for the suffering humanity, the heroine becomes a blazing power of strength fighting against the forces of evil in the society. The basis of this feminine power is woman's love for man, which is a great force in the world.

Sri Aurobindo has depicted his heroines with unique feminine consciousness who, in the era when the society had a patriarchal design, dared to transform not only man as individual, but also society in entirety. From the slave girl, Anice- Aljalice who ventured to alter her destiny by choosing Nureddene as her husband over the old King and transforming his rakish character, to Princess Andromeda who dares to fight the sea monster single handed to rescue her fellow beings even though they are not related to her life; from *Vasavadutta* who doesn't step back from surrendering to her heart's desire against her father's instructions

effecting the union of two enemy kingdoms, to Aslaug who yielded to the love of Eric and helped bridge the ever-widening gulf of differences, the deep rooted hatred between the Eric and Swegn, Sri Aurobindo depicts the elevated image of women within the patriarchal set up. The heroines never clamour for equal rights with men in his plays because they are already portrayed as equal with their unique consciousness which is the fount of love, kindness, compassion and forgiveness, and their equality is not at the mercy of any law to be proved. It is through this consciousness that they become the embodiment of grand feminine power.

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