

Female Condition: Then and Now - As Seen in the Select Novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Ms. T. RESHIKA

Research Scholar, Department of English
Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology

Dr. P. SARANYA

Research Supervisor, Department of English
Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology

Abstract

Taking Beauvoir's claim that 'One becomes a woman' as an example, Judith Butler says, 'like in another ritual, social dramas, the action of gender involves a performance that is repeated.' This reiteration 'reenacts a set of meanings that have already been established in society' (Butler 140). Therefore, she argues that it is fundamentally an influence of social conditioning, the recurrent act of complying with rules that are generally normal and accepted in society. To Beauvoir, 'one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman' since gender is something that is constructed socially. A woman's 'womanhood' is shaped by the unconscious social conditioning she undergoes to conform to gender norms. Pre-independence Indian literature has portrayed the condition of Indian women in new dimensions.

Key words : Feminism, Postcolonialism, Female Conditioning, Partition.

Introduction

One of the most traumatic episodes in the subcontinent's history was the 1947 'Partition,' which split the region into independent nations of India and Pakistan. Millions of people were displaced, and over a million lives were lost, by some accounts. Books written by authors on both borders are categorized as 'Partition Literature.' It covers both factual and fictitious stories. Until the 1990s, the vast majority of authors working in the field of partition literature were men. Before that time, even fictional works that discussed women's experiences were from a male perspective. It is essential to teach the children the history and importance of India's Independence to induce Patriotism in the young generation. Since men have historically been the majority in public areas, the existing historical records focus mainly on the experiences of men. Women whose lives and work are primarily contained within private spheres have had their histories ignored mainly outside of a few isolated initiatives.

The patriarchal system is the primary impediment to the progression and development of women. While there are varying degrees of male dominance, the overarching

fundamentals remain the same: males are in charge. This control may take a different form. Therefore, to work for women's advancement in a methodical manner, it is vital to understand the system that maintains women in a position of subservience and dominance and to deconstruct how it operates. There are several ways in which a patriarchal system keeps women down. Subordination manifests itself in aggression, exploitation, control, and other undesirable behaviors in the home, the workplace, and society. It does not discriminate based on social class. The idea that women contribute to their subjection argues that social conditioning is a process that occurs below the level of conscious awareness. This essay examines several texts to better understand the degree to which women bear responsibility for their passivity. In their respective works, Beauvoir and Ginzburg criticise the conventional expectation that women should marry and have children.

Place of Women in Ancient India

Manu Dharma Shastra, the Hindu scriptures dating back to the Vedic era, are widely respected in Indian culture behavior, which determines how people spend their time at

home, with friends, and in their faith communities. Many traditionalists today still adhere to the teachings of the Manu Dharma Shastra, which was composed by Manu during the Vedic period (c. 1500–600 B.C.). They follow the rules of Manusmriti and despise modern society. Some Indian feminists who believe that Manu shows respect for women make up the pro-Manusmriti camp (Kurundkar 1993).

The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman by Ambedkar portrays the religious background of Hinduism that has contributed most to the subjugation of women. Even during the more enlightened Vedic period, when Brahmanism was at its height, Manusmriti relegated women to second-class status. Manu states that women are not allowed to perform any independent labor either inside or outside the home. Also, Manu has designated a guardian for women at each life stage: during childhood, women must be under the supervision of their father and brothers; after marriage, they must be under the management of their husbands; and finally, they must be under the control of their sons. Since the Hindu religion forms the backbone of India's social and cultural fabric, the laws of Manu are still observed in modern India (Ambedkar 1980).

Indian Women in Myths and Epics

Even in texts like the myths and epics, women remained under the authority of men. Sita, Gandhari, Ahalya, and Arundhati are just a few of the ladies depicted in the great Indian epics who are perceived as subservient and have been considered as role models for Indian women. Sita is depicted as Rama's submissive wife in the Ramayana, an epic based on his life. She is held in high esteem since she never left her husband's side, not even throughout the second fire torture he put her through. She is depicted here as Rama's lovely wife and the epitome of domestic perfection. Not only that, but she must do as her brother-in-law Lakshman tells her to. Stories told from a male perspective in mythologies have a powerful effect on female listeners, who are led to believe that they must submit to male authority or face dire repercussions. The narrative of these types of stereotypes presents patriarchy as the norm rather than the exception.

Post-Colonial Indian Women

Following India's declaration of independence, the country's society expanded in unprecedented ways, bringing in many different types of aftereffects. As materialism became more pervasive, attitudes toward women began to shift. Women's advancements in education and the workforce have made it possible for them to achieve economic autonomy. Writers encouraged women to chronicle the hardships they encountered at every juncture of their lives, from childhood to old age, so that their second-class status might be exposed.

Themes like social consciousness permeated much of the literature of the postcolonial era. Later, postcolonial authors shifted their attention to the interior lives and self-awareness of their characters. The plight of Indian immigrants in the host country, for example, as well as themes such as the quest for identity, poverty, patriarchal oppression, and alienation, surfaced as well. Patriarchal supremacy contributed to the stereotype, and also led to the dismissal of women writers' works as unimportant.

Victory Song

Women participate actively in oral culture but are less likely to have their ideas recorded. When women are socialized to believe that they should behave in ways that are stereotypical of women, such as getting married and having children, this is an example of feminine conditioning. It was first made available in 2002, then taken out of circulation along with the collection in 2005. *The Girls of Many Lands* series consisted of eight novels and associated display dolls, each of which focused on a different historical era from a different country throughout the world. From 2002 through 2005, customers could purchase items from this line. The line was geared at an older market, with a specified minimum age of ten years old; it was frequently shown in catalogues alongside the American Girl Minis line because both lines were aimed at the same older demographic. The ages of the characters reflected the demographic of the audience; for example, whilst the historical and The girls in the series are all nine to ten years old, *The Girls of Many Lands* characters were twelve years old. The story of Neela is told in *The Girls of Many Lands* under the character and book title 'Neela Sen,' which represents the growing desire for

independence in British-occupied India (1939) along with the publication of the book *Neela: Victory Song*.

Each girl character has one book in the collection as a separate story that is broader and more sophisticated in subject matter than the books in the Historical Characters series. Each story is told from the first-person narration and includes a wider range of subjects than Historical Characters, such as controversies around civil or political unrest, war and colonisation, illness and fatalities, and other serious issues. The name of title shows the name of the main character, written in her language. For example, 'Saba's name is written in Amharic, Leyla's in Arabic, Neela's in Bengali, and Spring Pearl's in Cantonese' *The Girls of Many Lands*. The final chapter of each book, titled 'Then and Now: A Girl's Life,' provides a retrospective on the respective era, much like the Historical Central series. It examines the social features of the era for girls approximately of the same class and culture as the main protagonist, as well as how the culture and times have progressed to accommodate modern girls in the region.

The protagonist of the story is Neela, a young girl of twelve years old who is about to be confronted with the most significant choice of her life. This children's narrative is reminiscent of India's struggle for independence from British rule. The novel's action is set in India in 1939 and told from the point of view of Neela. A string of fortuitous happenings piques Neela's interest in the goings-on in her native land, which she considers her second home. But for Neela, the genuine excitement doesn't start until her father takes out for Calcutta to participate in the nonviolent demonstrations led by Gandhi and his followers. After her father does not come home at the expected hour, Neela realises that something dreadful must have occurred and decides to leave their home to find her father. This courageous little Girl finds herself in the middle of India's fight for independence as a result of the process. Then Neela finds out more than she ever could have dreamed about her nation and herself, both of which she calls home. Neela comes to life on the page thanks to the author's use of realistic dialogue and description, which allows young readers to experience what it's like to be a part of Neela's world.

The protagonist, Neela, is an Indian girl living in 1939, and the plot follows her through the challenges and triumphs of her life. The novel *Victory Song* has a significant amount of Indian culture, including a description of a lot of Indian customs as well as a depiction of family life and gender roles. Neela fights numerous battles within herself, but one of those battles is to comprehend these roles and where she fits within them. She challenges herself by wondering aloud to herself. This is evident through the following narration of Neela in the story:

Why does everyone feel they have to control girls even after they're married? Why are women expected to sit quietly and silently, embroidering and making pickles, while men get to make all the important decisions and go to all the exciting places? Why can't a girl be a freedom fighter? (*Victory Song* 40).

Conclusion

In addition to propelling Neela along in the novel, Neela's lively curiosity and stubborn attitude keep the reader captivated, wanting to know the answers to her questions just as much as Neela does. Divakaruni, born in India, has written several other works of literature that have won awards. In the easy-to-read background of India section at the back of the book, titled *Then and Now: A Girl's Life*, a comparison is made between the way Neela led and the way of life that females in India lead now. The author writes in an educational style that is simple for youngsters to understand, yet at the same time, the story is wonderfully engaging and enjoyable to read. Any young reader interested in learning more about Indian culture can benefit from reading *Victory Song*, and they will also get a sense of how close they are to Neela as she struggles to find her voice. That is something that each and every one of us can identify with on some level.

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