

LITERATURE AS A MEANS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

The idea of women's empowerment has been accepted as a legitimate goal of most of the policies concerning women. Empowerment is a wide-ranging concept that covers a wider set of actions beyond the provision of educational, social and economic opportunities. Essentially it is aimed at uncovering the inner strength of women. Literature as a tool of self-expression and self-identification is a powerful tool of empowerment of women internally as well as in other external spheres. This paper makes an analysis of how and why literature should be integrated with the debates concerning women's empowerment. It brings out the benefits of connecting women to literature with the purpose of their individual and collective empowerment.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Gender Justice, Women's Literature

I. Introduction:

Due to several movements for women's equality and rights, as also due to the spread of awareness about issues relating to women among the masses, the themes of gender justice and women's empowerment have assumed salience in all fields of study during the past few decades. The concept of women's empowerment has emerged out of the critiques and debates generated by women's movements in different countries. It is meant to ask for creating such a social environment and providing such opportunities through which women can make independent decisions and choices either individually or collectively. It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Empowerment is now seen as the objective of many of the public policies aimed at social justice and welfare involving women.

II. Concept of Women's Empowerment:

The concept of women's empowerment has assumed a lot of importance during the past few decades in social science literature and policy research. This process of empowerment of women has been made into a foundation of several public practices in social, economic, political spheres. Women's empowerment is a highly complex and much-contested complex. However, despite the complexity and philosophical disputes concerning this theme, it is somewhat universally recognized that the idea of empowerment in the context of women can be considered as such a relationship between women and society that is based on the values of freedom, rights and equality.

Such a relationship can be said to have the following main elements:

- Removal of historical and structural discrimination against women in personal and public domains
- Equal treatment and equal opportunities for women in all spheres of life - economic, political, social, educational etc. - regardless of the differences based on caste, culture, religion, race, nationality etc.
- Equality of rights and equal protection of rights of women
- Pursuit of strategies to bring in egalitarianism and to promote not just formal legal equality but also substantive equality for women

In essence, empowerment is all about treating a woman as fully human. It is about giving a woman the power to assert her humanness.

According to the United National Development Fund for Women, the term women's empowerment involves acquiring of knowledge and understanding of gender relations, development of a sense of self-worth on the part of women, a belief in women's ability to bring about the desired changes and securing a woman's right to control her own life. Empowered women would have greater choices and bargaining power to influence decisions concerning them. The idea and actions concerning women's empowerment aim at the accomplishment of justice not just in the national-level social and economic order but also in the international order.

III. Constraints on Women's Empowerment:

Despite decades of consciousness concerning women's empowerment and efforts of governments and activists, in many of the communities and societies, women are able to contribute little to the decision-making processes. Hence, efforts addressed to gender equality and justice still need to be accelerated. How

can this idea be accomplished? Fundamentally, it requires that a woman is freed from what could be called 'dependency syndrome'. In most spheres of her existence, a woman is structurally dependent upon her father, husband, brother, family, community or the religious group for her survival and advancement. Women's empowerment at its core is the process of freeing women from this condition of structural dependency through the realization of her internal strength. In this sense, women's empowerment is much wider than merely political, social or economic empowerment. The real basis of women's empowerment is internal – that is, emotional, spiritual, psychological empowerment.

IV. Literature and Women's Empowerment:

It is in the above context that the importance of literature and writing lies as a tool of empowerment of women and achievement of gender justice. Literature has been deeply influenced by the churning concerning women's rights and equality that ensured feminist struggles all over the world. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze literature as a domain that reflects and advances concerns of gender justice and women's empowerment. Women's literature is in a way a reflection and continuation of society's quest for women's equality and rights. The 20th-century literary criticism acknowledged women's writings as a powerful site for investigating the patriarchal social structures as also for understanding women's frustrations, dreams and expectations in such patriarchal structures.

As Simone de Beauvoir notes: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." According to her, women are considered secondary in relation to men since ancient times. Her role is conceived as one of bearing and giving birth to a child. Women get confined to the private sphere while men dominate the public sphere. It is not the result of any essential feminine feature but it is the result of education and social tradition which are under the control of men.

Consequently, women have not created as much volume of literature as it is expected from nearly half of the human society. For centuries, human experiences have been synonymous with masculine experiences, making it incomplete and one-sided. The woman was neither defined nor recognized as a subject in her own right. The obvious reason for this, to put in the context of Virginia Woolf's words, was that women did not have the money and room of their own. Women were not recognized as individual and autonomous beings. Women had to face many obstacles in the personal, literary and cultural fields. Restricted access to education also restricted the intellectual exposure of women.

The barriers for women in the creative and cultural spheres are not different from those that are observed in other spheres. Even today, women rarely find convenient spaces that help her to develop her creative and critical abilities. This condition results into the suppression of her inherent creative potential and exercise of the right to self-expression. Even so, due recognition did not come easily for whatever that women could write through the past centuries, which, in turn, led to further diminishing of her self-confidence to write literature and overshadowing of her self-identity. As a result, the powerful currents of feminism that have swept the literary world during the past one and half centuries have caused many women to assert their identity through literature. As a critical tool, women's literature provides us with an awareness of the role and expectations of women in society. How can the study of women's writings and literature help in understanding the process of empowerment of women and advancement of gender justice? Literature can become a site for women's empowerment in the following ways:

1. Expression is at the core of human existence. One always wishes to express and share because it leads to joy, catharsis and clarity. Expression in the form of literary writing is one of the most effective ways of learning about the socio-psychological realm of women and their expectations from society. When women write literature, it acts as an outlet for their subtle liberation from internal and external constraints. Writing helps writers to crystallize their identity. Women's purposive engagement with literature would help enrich and transform the spiritual and intellectual domains of their existence and expand their consciousness.
2. Writing can become a silent but powerful form of activism for women. It could provide them with an opportunity to think critically about issues of gender and sexuality in the context of interpersonal and social relations. Through literature, women can transmit their views, desires and identity to the wider society.
3. Literature helps explore women's experiences in a historical, psychological and societal context. Such exploration would challenge us to uncover the irony and complexity of human emotion and present us with a world that is not the same that we are living in. Literature in this sense will empower women by giving new visions for their progress.

4. Masculine and feminine writings are supposed to have differences in their style and content. Women's literature helps us to understand the social construction of men's and women's traditional and modern roles as also of the responses to these roles and the conflicts generated by them. This understanding can form the basis of the policies and actions meant for women's empowerment in the practical domains.
5. Experiences of women are generally shaped by gendered realities. Their writings emerge from and represent their typical socio-psychological and economic conditions. Literature reflecting these special conditions would be valuable in identifying micro realities and situations that are not reflected in the macro notions relating to women's empowerment.
6. The reading-writing process inherent in literary activity would qualitatively and subtly transform women. Writing literature can be cathartic for them. It would help them to overcome ingrained emotions of fear or debility. The experience of literary reading and writing would also transform and empower women in social and political spheres.

V. Conclusion:

Literature's close connection to a woman's identity and her empowerment makes it a potent instrument for both speaking to and listening to her inner world. Building spaces and institutions where these voices of women are cultivated and heard is a significant step in the direction of women's empowerment. Opening and promoting access, creation, identification, interpretation and transmission of literature for, by and of women would have far-reaching effects on both women's power as well as on the well-being of the society.

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