

A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF WOMEN'S SUBORDINATE POSITION AND EXPLOITATION: A FEMINIST READING

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Man is or should be woman's protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life....The paramount destiny and mission of women...to fulfill [is] the noble and benign office of wife and mother. This is the law of the Creator. And the rules of civil society must be adapted to the general constitution of things, and cannot be based on exceptional cases. (USA Supreme Court, 1873, **upholding an Illinois law which prohibited women from becoming attorneys**)
Housewives! You do not need a ballot to clean out your sink spout. A handful of potash and some boiling water is quicker and cheaper....Control of the temper makes a happier home than control of elections....Good cooking lessens alcoholic craving quicker than a vote on local option. (**Women's Anti-Suffrage Association of Massachusetts**)
Under the operation of this amendment what will become of the family...? You will have a family with two heads--a "house divided against itself." You will no longer have that healthful and necessary subordination of wife to husband, and that unit of relationship which is required by a true and Christian marriage. (**Senator Thomas Bayard, 1874, attacking women's suffrage**)

Abstract: Woman has been the victim of male domination and subjugation throughout history and treated like a beast of burden and an object for pleasure. Almost all the religious scripture classical literary texts and philosophical schools gave women a secondary position in every sphere of life. This article attempts to make a survey of women's subordinate position from a feminist viewpoint.

Introduction

The position of women in any society can be taken as a mark of the progress of civilization or, to use Mitchell and Oakley term, as "the index of human advance". Equality between the sexes as a principle, never as a practice, has been an essential part of the social and political ideologies at least in all democratic societies. Feminists are concerned with all kinds of oppression against women which they trace in patriarchy, and they insist on acceptance of women as equal beings.

Feminism, as Charlotte Bunch says qtd in Lyne Segal, *Is The Future Female?*, is not simply “a laundry list of so-called women’s issues such as child care and equal pay. While these issues are important, Feminism is not a new ghetto where women are confined, to be concerned about only a selected list of topics separated from the overall social and economic context of our lives. Similarly, feminism is not just an ‘add women and stir’ into existing institution, ideologies, or political parties as they are”. It is a transformational politics which virtually touches every aspect of our life. While some feminists stress the social and economic disadvantages of women and seek to change and improve women’s immediate circumstances, and demand, for instance, equal pay, equal education, and job opportunities and also financial and legal independence for women, others seek to abolish the moral and spiritual superiority of one sex over the other. These feminists fight to end the subjection of women, to eradicate the existing gender discrimination and to make women emancipated.

It takes a considerable leap of the imagination for a woman of the 21st century to realize what her life would have been like had she been born 150 years ago. We take for granted nowadays that almost any woman can have a career if she applies herself. We take for granted that women can choose whether or not to marry, and whether or not to have children, and how many. Women of the mid-19th century had no such choices. Most lived in a state little better than slavery. They had to obey men, because in most cases men held all the resources and women had no independent means of subsistence. A wealthy widow or spinster was a lucky exception. A woman who remained single would attract social disapproval and pity. She could not have children or cohabit with a man: the social penalties were simply too high. Nor could she follow a profession, since they were all closed to women (Wojtczak).

Girls received less education than boys, were barred from universities, and could obtain only low-paid jobs. Women's sole purpose was to marry and reproduce. At mid-century women outnumbered men by 360,000 (9.14m and 8.78m) and thirty percent of women over 20 were unmarried. In the colonies men were in the majority, and spinsters were encouraged to emigrate. Most women had little choice but to marry and upon doing so everything they owned, inherited and earned automatically belonged to their husband. This meant that if an offence or felony was committed against her, only her husband could prosecute. Furthermore, rights to the woman personally - that is, access to her body - were his. Not only was this assured by law, but the woman herself agreed to it verbally: written into the marriage ceremony was a vow to obey her husband, which every woman had to swear before God as well as earthly witnesses. Not until the late 20th century did women obtain the right to omit that promise from their wedding vows (Wojtczak).

In 1890, Florence Fenwick Miller (1854-1935), a midwife turned journalist, described woman's position succinctly:

Under exclusively man-made laws women have been reduced to the most abject condition of legal slavery in which it is possible for human beings to be held...under the arbitrary domination of another's will, and dependent for decent treatment exclusively on the goodness of heart of the individual master. (From a speech to the National Liberal Club qtd in Wojtczak)

Every man had the right to force his wife into sex and childbirth. He could take her children without reason and send them to be raised elsewhere. He could spend his wife's inheritance on a mistress or on prostitutes. Sometime, somewhere, all these things - and a great many more - happened. To give but one example, Susannah Palmer escaped from her adulterous husband in 1869 after suffering many years of brutal beatings, and made a new life. She worked,

saved, and created a new home for her children. Her husband found her, stripped her of all her possessions and left her destitute, with the blessing of the law. In a fury she stabbed him, and was immediately prosecuted. If a woman was unhappy with her situation there was, almost without exception, nothing she could do about it. Except in extremely rare cases, a woman could not obtain a divorce and, until 1891, if she ran away from an intolerable marriage the police could capture and return her, and her husband could imprison her. All this was sanctioned by church, law, custom, history, and approved of by society in general. Nor was it the result of ancient, outdated laws: the new (1857) divorce act restated the moral inequality. Mere adultery was not grounds for a woman to divorce a man; however, it was sufficient grounds for a man to divorce his wife (Wojtczak).

Most feminist critics agree that the subordination of women originated in primitive societies in which women served as objects of exchange between father-dominated families that formed alliance through marriage. While such clan relationships had been replaced in contemporary capitalist societies by more fluid forms of sexual alliance, the modern industrial world is still by and large patriarchal in character. Men hold almost all positions of political and economic power, economies work in such way that a women are more likely to be poor and men are more likely to be rich. The assumed norm in many societies is for women to be in charge of domestic labor and childrearing while men engage in more public concerns. Some feminists think that such continued male domination is a consequence of male violence against women. Social structure translates a historically continuous threat of physical force. Rape and other forms of violence such as battery are not marginal departures from a norm of consensual gender relations that just happen to be unequally tilted in favor of men. Rather, they are the central, core constituents of the consent to subordination women have learned to give to men in exchange for not being physically violated.

Throughout history man has always considered woman as the weaker sex, as his property, servile to him. Different regions of the world have given sanction to the female's subjugation to the male members of society, thus perpetuating the myth of female servitude. Documents of all the ancient culture like Greek, Roman, Mosaic, Hebrew, Celtic, Germanic, Assyrian, Christian and Babylonian depict women as already subordinated to men socially and legally. Ancient texts that influenced Western European thought and law for many centuries, and which are still studied and revered today, such as Homer's *The Iliad*, Virgil's *The Aeneid*, *The Old Testament*, the pontifications of Aristotle, Plutarch, Hippocrates, Philo, Cicero, all mention and in some cases 'justify' the subjection of women to men.

In Ancient Greece, Athenian women were given no education and were married at teenage years to grown-up men. They remained forever the property of their fathers, who could have them divorced and make them marry another. They lived in segregation and could not leave the house without a chaperone. If one were raped, her husband had either to divorce her or lose his citizenship. A raped woman was no longer allowed to wear jewellery or take part in public ceremonies. Under Roman law also the power of the husband was absolute; he could chastise his wife even - until the later Roman period - to the point of killing her. In medieval times a woman (feme) who killed her husband (baron) was guilty not of murder, but of petty treason and was condemned to the same punishment as if she had killed the king. This was because such crimes threatened the established patriarchal social order. Her sentence was to be drawn and burnt alive. For all other murders, including a husband killing his wife, the punishment was hanging.

During the Renaissance women lost even more of what little economic power they had, because men increasingly went out of the home to work in all-male professions, thus separating home and work, leaving women behind, working unpaid in the home. Education was venerated by society and the renowned literary salons of the period were centers of intellectual debate and educational lectures. Women were usually barred from them, because merely teaching girls to read and write was considered pointless and even stupidity by most people. Some humanists argued that aristocratic women should be educated, however, a woman who was outstandingly accomplished risked being labeled as 'mannish' or - much worse - accused of being a witch.

Men accused of witchcraft were often practicing sorcery for political reasons, but the victimization of women, allegedly on the grounds of being 'witches', is considered by many historians to have been a reaction to women's leaving their male-allotted domestic orb and increasing their status and knowledge through books and academic education. They were also seen as morally weak, sexually voracious, and more likely to be tempted by the Devil. Wise women, who mixed potions and herbs, midwives, elderly women, who knew the ways of the world, who were eccentric, living independently of the control of a man (widows and spinsters) were the most vulnerable to accusation, and likely to be accused.

In recent times various anthropological studies and archaeological discoveries have revealed that in the West women's status was much advanced in ancient civilizations where a state of matriarchy existed and women equally participated in host of activities like hunting, farming, etc. Marilyn French notes that many anthropologists believe that "hominids and early humans (Homo Sapiens) lived in small groups centered upon the mother; that the millennia fatherhood was unknown" (French, *Beyond Power* xvi). Under different names— Ishtar in Babylon, Astarte in Phoenicia, Cybele in Phrygia, Isis in Egypt — each of the ancient female deities personified the same principle: creation of life, rebirth of nature after the death of winter, hope of resurrection of man. It has also been revealed by the cave paintings and sculpture of these civilizations that certain qualities of great importance like, as French puts it, "fertility, regeneration, and a sense of humans as integrally connected with nature" (French, *Beyond Power* 23) were associated with women. The Earth-Goddess cult, with its belief in the earth as woman, strong and sustaining, began in agricultural societies. Where the Earth-Mother or the Mother-Goddess cult was dominant, maleness was not glorified above femaleness. Women were gradually dislodged from this position of equality by the superior physical strength of men coupled with their desire to ensure that their property was passed on to their rightful heirs.

Greek thinkers and philosophers, who shaped the western mind unanimously considered women as "the second sex". The secondary position of women is evident in the numerical symbolism of Pythagoras who belonged to the sixth century B.C. and whose theory had tremendous impact upon the western culture. As he says, "the number one was the number of godhead and of maleness; the number Two was the number of divisiveness and femaleness. One, God, man, were associated with light, order, good, right, rights, and the right hand. Two, divisiveness or chaos, woman, were associated with darkness, evil, magic, and the sinister, the left hand. To this day, the buttons on men's shirts are on the right, on women's, on the left; to this day, members of a wedding party arrange themselves in a place of worship in accord with these associations: groom's party on the right, bride's party on the left" (French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* 15). Significantly, these symbols accompanied by some other conventions still survive and are obeyed in western culture where almost from the moment of birth, the contrast between male and female, rather than their common humanity is stressed, e.g.

the baby girls are dressed in pink and baby boys in blue; it seems to be a trifle, but such conventions go a long way in fixing the polarities of the sexes.

Plato's attitude to women was ambivalent. In some of his writings, he advocated a fairer deal for women. In his idealized Republic, he foresees an upper-class of 'guardians' among whom the chattel status of women is abolished (i.e. she is no longer owned by her husband) and in which women were to receive equal education to men.

Conversely, he endorsed the inferior status of women clearly to degeneration from perfect human nature. "It is only males who are created directly by the gods and are given souls. Those who live rightly return to the stars, but those who are 'cowards or [lead unrighteous lives] may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation'. This downward progress may continue through successive reincarnations unless reversed. In this situation, obviously it is only men who are complete human beings and can hope for ultimate fulfillment; the best a woman can hope for is to become a man" (Plato 90).

Another influential Greek, Aristotle's main thrust was to explain the nature of things from what they are seen to be. From the subject and low status of women he deduced their inferiority by nature. Aristotle was of the view that the reason for women's inferiority lies in a defect. "Women are defective by nature" because they cannot reproduce semen which contains a full human being. When a man and a woman have intercourse, the man supplies the substance of a human being (the soul, i.e. the form), the woman only the nourishment (the matter). Since it was a fundamental principle for him that, of the two factors or components in every being, "form" is superior to "matter", sexual reproduction was considered beneficial, because it demanded that the one who gives the "form" (the male) be separate from the one who supplies the "matter" (the female). Thus the 'lower' is not mingled with the "higher" in the same individual. The female, since she is deficient in natural heat, is unable to 'cook' her menstrual fluid to the point of refinement, at which it would become semen (i.e. 'seed'). Therefore her only contribution to the embryo is its matter, and a 'field' in which it can grow. Her inability to produce semen is her deficiency: "a woman," Aristotle concludes, "is as it were an infertile male" (Aristotle 36). "A male is male in virtue of a particular ability, and a female in virtue of a particular inability" (Aristotle 82). According to Aristotle, man rightly takes charge over woman, because he commands superior intelligence. This will also profit the women who depend on him. He compares this to the relationship between human beings and tame animals.

Not only the Greek thinkers, philosophers and thinkers of all ages have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. Jean Jacques Rousseau makes quite negative statements about women and charges them with capricious nature: "Women have or ought to have, but little liberty, they are apt to indulge themselves excessively in what is allowed them. Addicted in everything to extremes, they are even more transported at their diversions than boys" (qtd. in Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 179). Regarding the rationale of education of women, Rousseau gives this counsel:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to make life sweet and agreeable to them— these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them from their infancy (qtd. in Millett, *Sexual Politics* 74).

The church was exceptionally powerful and religious fundamentalism dominated every portion of life in Europe to a degree that people of today often find hard to imagine. Girls continued to be indoctrinated from birth that they, who lured men away from God and into sin, were the instruments of the devil. People believed that Adam was created first, and then Eve was created from his body to serve and obey him. Women were inferior to men and this meant strict obedience to fathers and brothers as well as husbands. Anything else was unnatural and against God. Famous thinkers, philosophers and writers repeatedly restated women's natural subjection to men.

The Bible clearly tells the women: “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord” (*Ephesians 5:22*). Woman is regarded subordinate to man because it is believed that she was made out of man (*Genesis 2:13*). The preeminence of man over woman is highlighted at various places of *The Bible*. Adam is shown as the master who gives names to all beasts and animals, (*Genesis 2:20*) and he also gives name to his wife and calls her Eve. In the Biblical myth man has been made master of all and he rules over and controls every object on this earth including woman. St. Paul also gives a secondary position to women:

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man (*1 Corinthians 11:7*).

He further says:

Women should be silent during the church meetings. They are not to take part in the discussion, for they are subordinate to men as the scriptures also declare. If they have any questions to ask, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to express their opinion in church meetings (*1 Corinthians 14:34-35*)

This notion of women prevalent during the early Christianity affected their status for centuries to come, and the concept of the inferiority of women continued to find expression in such sayings as follows: “as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their husbands”⁶ or “the head of every man is Christ, but the head of woman is man.” (Kidwai 20) Throughout *the Bible* men are considered more important, more useful, more valuable, and wiser than women. The woman's role is to remain silent, obey her husband, and to bear and bring up children. She is to support her husband in all of his decisions. Women are not permitted to have any authority over men. The biblical ideal is always the submissive woman. *The Bible* contains plentiful quotations debasing women. The following are some examples:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. (*Genesis 3:16*)

If, however, the charge is not true and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of the town shall stone her to death. (*Deut 22:20-21*)

The Lord said to Moses, "Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man." (*Num. 31:17*)

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (*1 Tim. 2:11-14*)

For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. (I Cor. 11:8-9)

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In ancient India, women’s lot was no better and they were assigned secondary roles in a male-dominated society by religious injunctions and social conventions. The ancient Hindu law-giver, Mann, whose philosophy occupies a significant place in the mainstream of Indian ideology and culture, does express some noble sentiments about women:

Where females are honored, there the deities are pleased; but where they are dishonored, there all religious acts become fruitless. (*Manusmriti*, III, 56, in Manav Dharma Shastra 68)

Yet, he too persistently stresses the inferiority of women to men. Manu starts with the fundamental principle that all through her existence woman must remain dependent on man:

In childhood must a female be dependent on her father; in youth, on her husband; her lord being dead, on her sons; if she has no sons, on the near kinsmen of her husband; if she be left no kinsmen, on those of her father; if she has no paternal kinsmen, on the sovereign; a woman must never seek independence. (V, 148)

Conversely, women during the Vedic period enjoyed a position of equality with men in all spheres. They were given equal opportunities to get education. The goddess of learning is

Saraswati. Women were eligible for Upanayana or initiation and Brahminacharya or study of source of knowledge (Swami and Majumdar 68). The Mahanivana Tantra says: “A girl also should be brought up and educated with great effort and care.” (8, 47) According to Saravanukrainanika, there were more than twenty women seers or brahminvadinis who composed the hymns of Rig Veda, although there is no record of their works. Some writers believe that some of the hymns of Atharva Veda were also composed by some women seers. Gargi, Ghosha, Godha, Vishwavara, Apala, Maitreyi, Arundhati and Lilavati were illustrious Vedic women. The Kaushitaki Brahmanas (7, 6) mentions a learned lady, Pathyaswasti, who travelled all the way to the north to study and obtain the title of “Vach” or the goddess of learning for her scholarship. There is an interesting passage in the Sapta shati where Durga, who is virgin, tells the Asuras who aspired to marry her: “He who conquers me in battle, he who humbles my pride, he who is my equal in this world, he shall be my husband.” Marriage was not compulsory for girls but an unmarried person was not eligible to participate in Vedic sacrifices. Remarriage of widows was allowed. Women were free to choose their husbands and Gandharva Vivah was not uncommon. The freedom of women is evident from the account of the popular festival called Sainanas, where men and women met and mixed freely. The Vedas think of the wife not only as a joint ruler but also as a queen exercising her sovereignty over all the members of the household, including her husband’s parents. ‘The wife, verily, is the home,’ says the Veda, (Rig Veda, III, 53.4) Her intellectual personality is recognized and she is invited soon after her marriage to “address the Vidatha” (religious assembly) (Rig Veda, X, 85, 26,27) ‘The Veda distinguishes itself from all other Indian literature by the high regard in which it holds women.’ (Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas* 12)

The Vedic age, however, remains an exception in giving equality to women. Yet there too the prayer was always for a boy. The Atharva Veda says:

The birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere,
here grant a boy. (VI, 23)

“Rig Veda” says that a woman should beget sons. For begetting a son, “Vedas” prescribe a special ritual called 'Punsawan sanskar' (a ceremony performed during third month of pregnancy). During the ceremony it is prayed:

Almighty God, you have created this womb. Women may be born somewhere else but sons should be born from this womb. (Atharva Veda 6/11/3)
"O Husband, protect the son to be born. Do not make him a woman." (Atharva Veda 2/3/23)

Judaism also did not grant equal standing to woman in ancient times. She was discriminated against and never had a franchise — religious, social or political. She was unclean from a religious point of view, and she was nonentity from a political point of view. Beyond ordinary household duties, which she did as a slave or a servant, she was not allowed to share man’s work in any walk of life.” (Kidwai 14) A Jew made his morning prayer in the following manner:

Blessed be God...that He did not make me a woman. (Quoted in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 22)

Buddhism also does not have much to say in support of women. According to Buddhists, the company of a woman was considered to be an obstacle in the development of higher powers in man. The Buddha tells his disciple:

Women are soon angered, Ananda,
Women are full of passion, Ananda,

Women are envious, Ananda, Women are stupid.
That is the reason, Ananda, that is the cause,
Why women have no place in public assemblies, do not carry on
business, and do not earn their living by any profession. (Quoted in Tara Ali Baig,
India's Woman Power 57)

Women were provided three types of roles during this period: housewife, courtesan and nun. Certainly, the Buddha made no distinction between a man and a woman regarding the attainment of spiritual ends, and there are many instances of female nuns (bhikshunis) attaining perfection, nuns like Mahapajapati Gotami, Kshema, Patachara, Bhadda Kundalakesha, Ambapali, and Vishakha. Yet in the monastic order, the place given to the nuns was lower than that occupied by the monks. There were several restrictions on nuns: “a bhikshuni, though of a long standing, must bow before a bhikshu ordained much later than her. (Dutt 254)

All over the world men have been speaking about women in a disparaging style. An old Italian saying is: “as a horse, whether good or bad, requires spurs, so a woman whether good or bad, requires thrashing.” The wise men of China also advise husbands in these words: “Listen to the counsel of your wife, but act against it,” The old men of Russia say “There is only one soul among ten women.” The Spaniards say: “We shall save ourselves from wicked women and should never be captivated by any that have good looks.’ (Kidwai 8)

However, Islam addresses women in a totally different way than any religion or dogma of the world. Today people think that women are liberated in the West and that the women's liberation movement began in the 20th century. Actually, the women's liberation movement was not begun by women but was revealed by God in the seventh century to a man by the name of Muhammad (sm), who is known as the last Rasul of Islam. *The Quran* and the Traditions of the Rasul (sm) (Hadith or Sunnah) are the sources from which every Muslim woman derives her rights and duties. Islam, fourteen centuries ago, made women equally accountable to God in glorifying and worshipping Him - setting no limits on her moral progress. Also, Islam established a woman's equality in her humanity with men. Since men and women both came from the same essence, they are equal in their humanity. Women cannot be by nature evil (as some religions believe) or then men would be evil also. Similarly, neither gender can be superior because it would be a contradiction of equality. The Muslim woman was given a role, duties and rights 1400 years ago that most women do not enjoy today, even in the West. These are from God and are designed to keep balance in society; what may seem unjust or missing in one place is compensated for or explained in another place.

According to the Qur'an, men and women have the same spiritual human nature:

O mankind: Reverence your Guardian Lord Who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; reverence Allah, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you (Qur'an 4:1).

It is He who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love). When they are united she bears a light burden and carries it about (unnoticed). When she grows heavy, they both pray to Allah their Lord, (saying): “If You give us a goodly child we vow we shall (ever) be grateful (Qur'an 7:189).

Both genders are recipients of the “divine breath” since they are created with the same human and spiritual nature:

But He fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you (the faculties of) hearing and sight and feeling (and understanding): little thanks do you give (Qur'an 32:09).

Both genders are dignified and are trustees of Allah on earth:

We have honored the children of Adam, provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors above a great part of Our Creation (Qur'an 17:70).

According to the Qur'an, woman is not blamed for the "fall of man." Pregnancy and childbirth are not seen as punishments for "eating from the forbidden tree." On the contrary, the Qur'an considers them to be grounds for love and respect due to mothers. In narrating the story of Adam and Eve, the Qur'an frequently refers to both of them, never singling out Eve for the blame:

O Adam! Dwell you and your wife in the garden and enjoy (its good things) as you [both] wish: but approach not this tree or you [both] run into harm and transgression. Then began Satan to whisper suggestions to them bringing openly before their minds all their shame that was hidden from them (before): he said 'Your Lord only forbade you this tree lest you [both] should become angels or such beings as live forever.' And he swore to them both that he was their sincere adviser. So by deceit he brought about their fall: when they tasted of the tree their shame became manifest to them and they began to sew together the leaves of the garden over their bodies. And their Lord called unto them: "Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you that Satan was an avowed enemy unto you?" They said: "Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: if you forgive us not and bestow not upon us Your mercy we shall certainly be lost" (Allah) said: "Get you [both] down with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling place and your means of livelihood for a time." He said: "Therein shall you [both] live and therein shall you [both] die; and from it shall you [both] be taken out (at last)." O you children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame as well as to be an adornment to you but the raiment of righteousness that is the best. Such are among the signs of Allah that they may receive admonition! O you children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you in the same manner as he got your parents out of the garden stripping them of their raiment to expose their shame: for he and his tribe watch you from a position where you cannot see them: We made the evil ones friends (only) to those without faith (Qur'an 7:19-27).

Nowhere does the Qur'an state that one gender is superior to the other. The Qur'an makes it clear that the sole basis for superiority of any person over another is piety and righteousness not gender, color, or nationality:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (one who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (Qur'an 49:13).

In Indian classical literature, a woman is always shown in relationship to man; the husband-wife relationship is given more importance than the daughter-father, sister-brother, or daughter-mother relationship. Traditionally, a ‘good woman’ is always synonymous with good wife and a good wife must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like Sita or Savitri. ‘For both men and women in Hindu society the ideal woman has been traditionally personified by Sita who is portrayed in the Ramayana, as the quintessence of wifely devotion.’ (Chakravarti 70) In Ramayana, Sita’s identity is solely seen or estimated in relation to her husband, Rama. Her sole purpose in life is to follow in the footsteps of her husband. Sita’s image as mother is glorified and she is repeatedly referred to as Mata Sita, but as a wife she is subject to the whims of her husband, who abandons her only because of the derogatory remarks of a commoner. However, one finds that Sita shows some sign of awareness of being wronged and refuses to go back to Rama and finally takes refuge in the lap of mother earth.

Conclusion:

In scriptures (with the exception of the glorious Quran) and myths woman is depicted either as a goddess or a sub-human creator, never as a complete human being. Where on one hand, she has been described as an object of reverence or worship, on the other hand, she is treated like an object of sexual gratification and considered to be man’s property. In every age, the recurrent symbol of seed and earth further degrades her position. “Man provides the seed, the essence for the creation of the offspring, the seed determines the kind; the child’s identity is derived from the father for the group placement. The role of the mother is just to receive the seed and through her own blood provide warmth and nourishment and help it to grow.”²⁷ A growing awareness of discrimination done to them slowly made women raise their voice against inequality and oppression in the twentieth century. This female consciousness against male domination led to the birth of Women’s Liberation Movement.

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