

TARABAI SHINDE'S 'A COMPARISON OF MEN AND WOMEN': A MILESTONE IN INDIAN FEMINISM

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Abstract

The Feminist activist and the member of '*Satyashodhak Samaj*' ("Truth Finding Community") Tarabai Shinde was rebel against Patriarchy and Caste system in 19th century India. In her debut and controversial book, "A Comparison of Men and Women," she criticizes the system of oppression in Hindu culture. The present article seeks to analyze the role of Tarabai in Indian feminism, who fights for the unfair treatment for women and equal rights for men and women. In Indian society, where women are not only treated as subordinate to men but are also subject to discriminations, humiliations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence. She defined feminine image and raises questions about the standard set by patriarchy for women, which were unfair, and cause of their secondary and marginal position in society. She used her persuasive language and passionate writing to convince society that the issue at hand has a simple solution and that is equality between men and women. The article aims to find out the impact and significance of Tarabai's role in history and in the present.

Keywords: Indian Feminism, Patriarchy, Caste system, Satyashodhak Samaj, Manusmriti.

In spite of a century's long struggle for emancipating women, the Indian woman's image is entangled in the ancient ideal of Sita and Savitri. Everyday there are different examples of men's hypocrisy and terrible violence against women in India but every time women is blamed by society, hollow conventions of society and religion supports men and not the women. Victim never becomes the cause of crime. And in India, Feminism, a self conscious and systematic approach is not a uniquely twentieth century phenomenon. The nineteenth and twentieth century's has witnessed women in the Indian subcontinent have resisted forced widowhood, the denial of education, forced marriage, sexual violence within and outside the family, and moralistic definitions of the private and public which disabled possibilities for building solidarity and fragmented common concerns. "At her pleasure, let her (i.e. widow) enunciate her body by living voluntarily on pure flowers, roots, and fruits, but let her not, when her lord is deceased, even pronounce the name of another man' (Manu V. 157). Indian women's

life was controlled by such rules and regulations where she is not even free to do anything. Books are cultural artifacts that are "important vehicles for ideas" and Tarabai Shinde's a short forty pages essay "*A Comparison of Men and Women*" is unique in them.

In the essay '*A Comparison of Men and Women*', Tarabai Shinde, writing in fury over the conviction to death of a young widow for the murder of her infant, in 1882 and it strikes one of the earliest notes of revolt, a defining moment in the paradigm of feminist insurgency. Born in well to do Maratha family, studied Marathi, Sanskrit, English and well read in classical and modern literature, Tarabai is the first Indian feminist who minutely points out male hypocrisy and women's secondary status in Indian society. Her essay was written in response to the article published in 'Pune Vaibhav' which was based on the immorality of widows. Essay published in 1882 in the second issue of 'Satsar', the journal of Satyashodhak Mandal, 'A Comparison of Men and Women' remain unknown till 1975. Malshe S. G. found this essay and he republished it in 1975.

The word 'Feminism' refers to an intense awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. According to Janet Richards, "The essence of Feminism has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that woman suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex, the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism". (Richard: 1981: 3). Feminism in its literary sense is the physical and psychic emancipation of women from the cruel traditional clutches of man. A man is right, being a man. The woman is in the wrong. It amounts to this, just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with man and woman. The subjugation of woman is a central fact of history and it is the main cause of all psychological disorders in society. Feminism is a more concerned for woman and wants to establish a new identity for woman to understand the female predicament. Since time immemorial in the world, particularly in Asian countries and in India the social custom and creeds have overall control of man. Gender is decided by cultural, social, political and economic forces, which influence social behavior of men and women. Gender differs from sex, as sex is assigned based on anatomy of a person, while gender is assigned according to the sexuality of a person. Gender is a historical force also because we find gender bias pre-existent in the society. Indian feminism is influenced by Tarabai's work. Tarabai differentiate born a woman and becoming a woman and gender bias in Indian society, even today Indian woman not dare to write in such language where she wrote in nineteenth century. In the introduction of her essay she clarify the purpose of writing, "God brought this amazing universe into being, and he it was also who created men and women both. So is it true that only women's bodies are home to all kinds of wicked vices? Or have men got just the same faults as we find in women? I wanted this to be shown absolutely clearly, and that is the reason I've written this small book, to defend the honour of my entire sister countrywomen. I'm not looking at particular castes or families here. It's a comparison just between women and men". (Shinde 1994/1882). Tarabai Shinde did not focus simply of the oppression of Indian women; she believed that women everywhere oppressed similarly. *A Comparison between Women and Men* is a classic example of women's efforts to reveal the demonstration of gender discrimination recorded during the nineteenth century.

In the beginning of the essay, she directly address to the god that you created man and woman and you are omnipotent and impartial but not impartial with women, you grant happiness to men only and for women agony only. It is belief in Indian society that women are greedy liars, unvirtuous and they always seduce men. Woman is considered and labeled as the symbol of all bad qualities, she asked, "theft, incest, murder, robbery, deception, truth to falsehood and

falsehood to truth- do men not do any of these?” (Shinde 1991/1882: 223). She agreed that a woman also has vices but everywhere and every time she judged on the basis of vices and not on the virtues. She said, “Granted, women are as stupid as buffaloes in the cow pen! They are ignorant and do not grant them even an iota of intelligence? Thoughtless and rash they may sometimes be, but even then they are for preferable to you. Yes! To you who are the bastions of erudition and wisdom! Why, one has only to visit a prison to get proof of this!” (Shinde 1991/1882: 224). She asked in very fiery language that if only women have vices then why the all prison is full of men criminals. She used very persuasive language to describe the condition of women in India. Apart from doing good woman considered as vicious. In case of men they are always ideal for society, Tarabai said, “Everyone there has a wise head on his shoulders, and a ‘wise’ deed to his credit!” (Shinde 1991/1882: 224). The ambiguity in defining women's position in the nineteenth century is also revealed in the contemporary literature. Both Bankiln Chandhra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore were not able to provide a respectable life to the widow's in their fiction. When they transgressed the established norms of widows' life style, their accommodation in the society appeared impossible.

Throughout her essay, Tarabai Shinde argued for women's equal share with men. She refused to accept the superiority of men in gender relation. She said, “What's good for a man ought to be good for woman as well”. Tarabai Shinde found the privileges enjoyed by men to be cause of the degradation of women. “This is, of course, not to say that all the women in the world are as luminous as the sun and as pure as the waters of the Holy Ganga. But even if one takes into account the entire female community in the world, it would be difficult to come across more than ten percent of them who, like you, are caught in the whirlwind of such insidious perfidies, though not a single one of you is free of them” (Shinde 1991/1882: 224). There are prejudices about women and they are treated like vultures, facts remain invisible. ‘We need to ask, what is the greatest crime that women commit? Adultery. That is the highest peak of their criminal ventures, they behave recklessly only because of such inclinations’ (Shinde 1991/1882: 225). Adultery is not the crime for men and for women it is considered as greatest crime. Society judge men and women through different parameters and unfair treatment is given for women. ‘Can adultery really be considered as act of the most heinous nature? Our studies/shastras certainly do not seem to think that such things did not happen in the past’. (Shinde 1991/1882: 225). Tarabai gives the examples of widows in past and how the shastras permit them to have a relation with other man for augment of family. She has presented many points in her book in support of argument how a woman's life has become meaningless in the male dominated system of patriarchy. The time has now come to change all this. Tarabai suggest that remarriage is better than having illicit relation with other man. One law for man and as per the benefits for patriarchy other for woman, and there is no equality and justice for the half population in society. She demanded in the book that the British government should pass a law allowing widows to remarry. Puranas and manusmruti restricted and controlled woman's life through orthodox norms and conventions like, a woman must always maintain her virtue and surrender her body to her husband only, even if she is married off to an ugly person or even a leper. Tarabai shows male hypocrisy and diplomacy, if women follow patriarchal conventions then she labeled as ‘goddesses’ and if not then as ‘whore’. There is no place for women as a human being in Indian society. Either she is worshiped or cursed in society.

Eighteenth century had witnessed the steady expansion of British trade followed by political power in India. It also facilitated the British to know more closely about the Indian society. Though expressed sarcastically, Tarabai Shinde too favoured British for the cause of

women's emancipation. From her point of view, in 'the British government women had got the gift of education, and their mind as made strong enough to face all sorts of mental and practical circumstances with courage. Tarabai Shinde must have reached this conclusion after having observed the hue and cry over women's emancipation and its effect on the condition of women. She understood that it is difficult and almost impossible for male reformers to work for women's emancipation because orthodox rules and regulation controls not only the life but also the psyche of women. Vidyut Bhagwat points out that 'appeared almost a century before Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Tarabai's forthright polemical style stands in sharp contrast to de Beauvoirs'. (Tharu-1991/1882: 222).

In Nineteenth century Indian feminists discussed on the oppression of the female as a obstacle for social and domestic reforms. Tarabai very minutely point out on this issue to know the facts about women in society. Tarabai's fight was not only against the customs which deprived women of her independence but also against the dominant male who dictated the laws and norms of society based on the benefits for patriarchy. The puranas and epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata are always used to control women. She explained through an anecdote from Ramayana, how the concept of *pativrata* was utilized for the advantage of men. She passionately fights to end oppression, evil practices imposed on women and to gain privilege and equal rights for women. First time she created awareness among women to raise the question against double standards of women and men, and the status of women in society and what really she deserved to be.

Woman's emancipation in the nineteenth century did not bestow on women an independent stance in the society. It is true that she was rescued from the anomalous practices like *sati*, widowhood and early marriage as a result of the unprecedented preoccupation of the nineteenth century with women's emancipation. Tharu and Lalita state that, '*Stri Purush Tulna* is probably the first full-fledged and extant feminist argument after the poetry of bhakti period. Tarabai Shinde, apparently working in isolation, was able to broaden the scope of the analysis to include the ideological fabric of patriarchal society' (Tahru 1991/1882: 222). Tarabai focused on the miserable condition of women is nothing but the output of men's attitude towards women, they consider her as 'object'. 'Those royal women, whose feet were never soiled with earth, were as beautiful as goddesses; but your insatiable lust reduced them to nothing but beggars in exile'. (Shinde 1991/1882: 226)

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