

GENDER, SACRIFICE AND PATRIARCHY IN GOWARDHANRAM TRIPATHI'S *LILAWATI: A LIFE*

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Abstract

Lilawati: A Life by Gowardhanram Tripathi is a story about child marriage, widowhood and the self-sacrificing female characters in the Indian literature. The character of Lilawati, who is the daughter of Gowardhanram Tripathi follows the Yajamandharma and Manojnamdharma, where she follows the duty of a householder who is sacrificial towards her family and the society and has an ethical obligation to be grateful for the feelings and desires of the others, even when they are not reciprocated. This was the social and domestic conditions of the women of India in the colonial era that the society burdened them with. Lilawati's short life till the age of twenty-one was full of rigorous discipline, early marriage and the laborious toil around her in-laws which led to her untimely early death because of tuberculosis. Her story reveals how the self-sacrifice is often celebrated as a virtue in our society but it actually is the patriarchal control over the freedom of women in the disguise of morality. This article is a feminist reading of gendered hierarchies and physical suffering. It brings to light the violent patterns that lie beneath the surface of ethical idealism and moral obligations that women in the Indian society are meant to serve through the tragic fate of Lilawati. This study tries to understand gender, national ethics and reform during the times of colonial India, especially in the literature of late 19th century Gujarati literature.

Keywords: Gender, Sacrifice, Ethical Idealism, Yajnamdharma, Manojnamdharma, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Lilawati: A Life by Govardhanram Tripathi traces the conditions of women in the Indian, especially the Gujarati society of the late nineteenth century, in the colonial India, where the women were burdened with their domestic chores and also an obligation to be ethically ideal in all their social and familial obligations. They have the responsibility to be self-sacrificial in their relationships with their family and the society. Tripathi writes that,

“Whatever makes a man feed on the flesh of the world, is ordinarily vice.

Whatever is his consumption in order to feed the world, is a virtue.” (Tripathi 5)

This is the biography by Govardhanram Tripathi about the life of his eldest daughter, Lilavati (Tripathi 1). Through this work, Tripathi does not glorify the memory of his daughter but tries to present the real narrative of the life of his daughter in the 19th century Gujarat where she faced the hardship from the society and her in-laws resulting into her death at the age of twenty-one years due to Tuberculosis. It is shown by Tripathi through his writings that Lilawati tried to be an ideal woman for her family and society, because she tried to be an ideal woman as the virtues of a woman are rewarded in our patriarchal society which tries to suppress the female gender by burdening them with the tasks of being obligated to serve the society and family by being virtuous to them even if those ideal virtues are not rewarded or reciprocated by the family or the society. Patriarchy is defined in Cambridge dictionary as,

“a society in which the oldest male is the leader of the family, or a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage¹.”

(Cambridge Dictionary)

Through the character of Lilawati, the author tries to highlight the richness in the character of Lilawati even through her poor living conditions. She is the embodiment of a virtuous Indian woman. She is seen to be practicing Yajamandharma and Manojnadharm. Yajamandharma is the duty of an individual to be a good host to other people and Manojnadharm is to understand the feelings and emotions of other people and be obligated to serve the family and the society before oneself, even if your own feelings are not reciprocated. Lilawati’s sense of duty is seen through,

"When her mother criticised her mother-in-law, she wept like a child and, on another instance, on hearing criticism of her husband, she roared like a lioness from her sick bed." (Tripathi, 50)

This shows the sense of feelings and emotions in the heart of Lilawati for her in-laws and her husband for whom, even though she was severely ill, she couldn’t hear a negative word.

Social Conditions of women in 19th Century in India

The social conditions of women in the 19th century would justify the condition of Lilawati in the book written by Govardhanram Tripathi. Ramesh Patil in his research titled *The Social Status of Indian Women of Different Periods in the Patriarchal Society* gives an overview of the conditions of Indian women in the different eras of Indian society which was patriarchal in nature. He writes right from the ancient period to the Vedic period till the post-independence period. He says in his research that the ancient period consisted of three sub-periods which were Matriarchal period, Vedic period and post-Vedic period. In the Matriarchal period the attitude of the society, especially the masculine gender towards women was quite indifferent in the sense that there was no sense of inequality between the two genders at that point of time and it was widely believed that there is a potential in both the genders and the female gender was given much importance because,

“Everyone felt that there is a potential for innovation between earth and women and that there must be some divine basis for it. Apart from this, women also

¹ “Patriarchy.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/patriarchy. Accessed 30 Aug. 2025.

invented agriculture. Due to this very important achievement of women, the nomadic society became stable to some extent.” (Patil)

Women were looked upon in the ancient society as divine beings, who also invented agriculture, solving the problem of water. It is through this achievement of women in our society that the matriarchal system came into existence. Here, the male and female, both the genders were considered to be equal where women were at the front in many studies as well. Patil points out the text of P. Ahire *Samajshastriy Pariprekshyatun Streech Aatmakathane* that,

“Anarya culture was feminist. And Aryan culture was patriarchal. References to Shurpanakha, Tratika and other non-Aryan women Ganadhipatis appear in the Ramayana. These women were the head of the family. He was treated with respect in the society and family. Anarya women had freedom of decision².” (Ahire 24)

Patil writes in his research that the Aryans came to Indian between 3,000 BC and 2500 BC by defeating the matriarchal Anarya. Ahire’s statement points out that patriarchy takes its roots in the Aryan culture. The women from the Anarya culture, also known as non-Aryan culture, were the head of their families and were treated with equal respect in the society like the masculine gender. The status of women in the matriarchal society was very high where they carried out all the works like performing Yajna and also laborious works of laying bricks. They were considered important for the invention of geometry, building technology for agriculture, using equipment of farming and using animals in agriculture. Women laid the foundation of agriculture which uplifted mankind. But later this changed. The role of male in the childbirth was considered more important and the place of women in the society deteriorated in the society, thus giving rise to patriarchal ideas.

The advent of the Aryan culture gave rise to the discrimination towards women in the society. They also brought with themselves the caste system, which furthermore aggravated the problems in the Indian society. But women still had the right to education in the Vedic period, along with which the Aryans came in India. There were no rigid systems like child marriage or sati in this period yet but women had lost the right to property during the Vedic period in India. Now, the society had begun to consider the feminine gender as the inferior gender. While Anaryas gave equal status to both male and female, worked in the field for agriculture, used to get her share in the property and the money received in property was shared equally between sons and daughters. There was a constant state of contradictions between the Aryans and the Anaryas.

The post Vedic period, according to Patil from 1500 BC to 500 AD, was the period of deteriorating status of women in the society. Now the participation of women in the daily chores outside the house became less. The rigid caste systems came into existence, child marriages took place, women were now banned from religious activities outside home and many restrictions were seen on the women to keep up with the rising status of patriarchy in the society. This was the period when the masculine gender started to think of women as the inferior gender.

“During this period, scriptures were composed to add religion to the inferior and secondary status of women. “Manusmriti” was also composed during this period. Due to the addition of religion to the secondary status of women, the status of women was degraded. Overall, the system of women was degraded due to the

² Ahire, P., *Samajshastriy Pariprekshyatun Streech Aatmakathane*, Kailash Publication, Aurangabad, (2011) Pg-24.

influence of “Manusmriti” and other similar scriptures. The age of marriage of women decreased. Child marriage system came into existence. She was expected to give birth to male offspring. And the child was determined as the field of work.” (Patil)

In the mediaeval, Modern, pre-independence and the post-independence period, the Indian life was dominated by the inequality of the both genders, injustice, ignorance and patriarchy was at its prime. Now, the women were considered to be the epitome of purity of one’s religion. It was during this time that the widow remarriage was banned in Indian society and female gender did not have any rights of their own. Now the women were only supposed to be “ideal”. They were supposed to be ideal mothers, ideal daughters, ideal wives. This sense of being idea at all times created a sense of oppression on women of a certain kind where they were burdened with expectations. With the rise in Islamic rule in India, this furthermore aggravated where the already deteriorating status of the women, lowered even more. Now, not only the women were oppressed they were also supposed to wear certain clothing that covered them completely.

“In the nineteenth century, women had a secondary place in society and at home. No scope was given to her activism. From the beginning of the British rule in India in the early nineteenth century, a new system of colonialism and capitalism came to the Indians. During this period, the British tried to prove their moral supremacy by assuming that there was an oppressed group called Indian women.” (Patil)

It is stated by Patil in this research that even in the 19th century, the women did not have any rights of their own. It was the time in the society where the British colonialism was at its epitome. Women did not have any opportunities in this period. It is in this period of time the reformers like Raja ram Mohan Roy first enacted the Prohibition of Sati Act in 1829 with the help of Lord betting, Savitribai Phule started the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, thus reforming the lives of many Indian girls going to school and acquiring education, the widow remarriage act was introduced in the year 1856 but was not instantly appreciated by the Indian society. It should be notes that female education was enacted by the British colonialism in the initial days but the patriarchal society did not let it rise to a much larger degree.

Lilawati’s Married Life

"Lilavati's wedding to Himmatbhai took place in 1891, when she was twelve years old. Her marriage at this tender age irked Govardhanram. But he finally decided to go ahead with it. He reasoned that her happiness had to be sought within the existing social structure and this marriage was necessary to achieve that."

In India, the society plays a huge role in deciding the marriage age and other such social decisions, especially for a woman. Govardhanram, despite being an author himself, questioned his decision of getting Lilawati married to Himmatbhai at first, but then sought to get her married anyway because they had to comply to the rules of the society. This rigid social structure is still prevalent in today’s time in the 21st century, where women and men both have to comply to the rules laid by the society. Lilawati was not married into a rich household but her marriage was in a house that was poor and they had a lot of debt on their hands. She lived in Junagadh with her in-laws in their house and since Junagadh was infiltrated with many prevalent diseases at that time and there was a burst of epidemics, Lilawati is seen to be serving and nursing them with dedication and without any complaints (Tripathi 17). Tripathi writes that,

“When her mother asked about her saree, Lilavati explained she had given it to her mother-in-law: “Ba, I was told that in our caste there is no custom of giving gifts to the mother-in-law. That must be your custom, but am I to seek your consent if I wish to give her something that is mine? She did not ask for it. But I am happy that she has it. I can do without it.” (Tripathi 50)

She takes the life of her in-laws at all costs. Lilawati is seen to be following the customs of her in-laws instead of her own household. When her mother gave her a saree, she happily gifted it to her mother in-law instead of keeping it for her own self.

Social Conditions of Women in India in 21st Century

Lilawati: A Life was written by Gowardanram Tripathi in the late 19th century. It showed the conditions of women at that period of time. But it is important to understand if the condition of women in India is still the same in the 21st century. In a survey conducted in March 2022, Pew Research Centre has found that around 23% of the women in India face “discrimination” towards themselves in all the strata of the society, be it their own family, their workplace, their husband or father, women face inequality and injustice everywhere. The further data also gives facts that 16% of women in India specifically face discrimination in the society only because of their gender, which is considered to be the “inferior gender” in many societies around the world, especially in India. It is not only the discrimination but even the violence and cases of aggression towards women have increased and are termed to be “a very big problem” in the Indian society. Steps have been taken by various NGO’s and many institutions and government schemes to eradicate such problems faced by the women in our society where they try to “teach the boys to respect all women” (pewresearch) and to behave appropriately but only some people take the steps and it is seen in many cases that even the women themselves are seen to be exploiting and harassing other women in the society.

“On the whole, however, Indians seem to share an egalitarian vision of women’s place in society. Eight-in-ten people surveyed – including 81% of Hindus and 76% of Muslims – say it is very important for women to have the same rights as men. Indians also broadly accept women as political leaders, with a majority saying that women and men make equally good political leaders (55%) or that women generally make *better* leaders than men do (14%)³.” (pewresearch)

It should not be forgotten that women hold a very big position in the Vedas and Puranas which are the texts that hold epitomal vale in the Indian scriptures and many religions, not only Hinduism accept the fact of respect for women. But while many Indian, belonging from the different religious backgrounds do believe that women should be given equal rights, in places where there are only a few positions in jobs, it is always thought in 80% of the cases where the male candidates are given more priority than the female candidates in such cases.

Ramesh Patil in his research titled *The Social Status of Indian Women of Different Periods in the Patriarchal Society* writes that it is in the 21st century that the masculine gender

³ Evans, Jonathan. “1. Views on Women’s Place in Society.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 2 Mar. 2022, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/03/02/views-on-womens-place-in-society/.

could term itself to be modern because of their changed outlook towards women but till this date many men only look at women from a traditional point of view and as inferior being who need protection from the masculine gender. He writes that,

“Biological and physical characteristics of men and women are different. Society also determines some of the different characteristics of men and women at the social and cultural level. It is mainly about women being cowardly, men being brave, women being weak, men being strong, women being tolerant, men being aggressive, women being emotional, men being capable, women being submissive, men being dominant and ambitious. Societies are not created by nature. This gives rise to the term gender. Society expects men and women to behave differently. In general, the society has stated certain things about what a woman should do, how she should behave, mainly housework, cooking, child rearing are related to women, while men are expected to do hard work outside the family⁴.” (Patil)

Lilawati's death was a cause of profound grief for Govardhanram Tripathi and he considered himself responsible for the death of his daughter when he saw the corpse of his daughter. It is thus concluded that the condition of women in the 19th century was on the verge to reform, but these formations were not highly appreciated by the society at that point of time. The sense of burdening the women through the oppressive means was always prevalent in the society which might have also been the cause why Lilawati, Govardhanram Tripathi's eldest daughter had to suffer so much in her married life.

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⁴ Dr. Ramesh H. Patil. “Social Status of Indian women of different periods in the patriarchal society.” *Research Ambition: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal*, vol. 5, no. IV, 5 Aug. 2021, pp. 23–31, <https://doi.org/10.53724/ambition/v5n4.06>.