

AN IMAGE CHANGE FOR THE WOMAN FROM THE SECOND SEX TO THE SELFISH SEX: RAND’S WOMEN- A CLASS APART

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Abstract

Gender roles have been the main target of attack and its very existence challenged by various feminist movements. The angst against these gender roles is mainly because of how these roles have portrayed women as the “other” relegating her to a secondary role. It has been observed that society boosted by a strong patriarchal mentality has been a key agent in controlling the role of women. Traditional roles have loaded women with expectations right from the way they dress to the type of sports they should practice. Many women writers, down through history, have used the medium of literature to free women of the stigma of being the “Other”. Each of these writers had used different techniques to achieve their purpose but one that stands out is the approach practiced by Ayn Rand. Using egoism as her tool Rand through her novels have proved that women no longer need to surrender to the rules set by society. Their individualism is their key to freedom.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Egoism, Individualism

“One is not born but rather becomes a woman”

- Simone De Beauvoir

Feminism in literature has been an ongoing process to understand gender inequality. Tracing the history of literature one comes across different writers who have been addressing women’s rights issues, gender identity, and in general the oppression of women. A study of feminism reveals the attempt on the part of the feminists to differentiate the two terms- sex and gender. While sex can be termed as a biological category gender is purely a social and cultural development. As Kate Millet puts it “many of the generally understood distinctions between the sexes in the more significant areas of role and temperament, not to mention status, have in fact, essentially cultural, rather than biological bases”. Sex is genetically determined whereas gender roles are acquired as one grows up and these roles differ from society to society.

The confusion between the two terms has been conveniently used to the disadvantage of women. While the biological make of a woman might restrict her, yet it would not have come in the way of her breaking free of the image of the “other”. But the male dominated society’s

intervention in interpreting biological differences have proved detrimental to women in general. Marriage and motherhood relegated her to the four walls of the household.

Realizing the impact that society and culture had on the present status of women, Simone De Beauvoir's treatise *The Second Sex* tried to figure out ways to solve the problems of society. Rather than embarking on a mission of liberating women she tried to address the root cause of the problem. She saw the patriarchal society as the main cause of the oppression of women. The long standing image of woman as being man's other was her main target and comprises a major portion of her book. Her exploration of the history and myths, attacks the way society has used the biological nature of women to confine them to the domestic sphere. The only way to free women and make her independent was to help her take up a job. This direct attack on the patriarchal constructs raised doubts on the misogynistic culture that has led to the present status of women in society and has inspired many writers especially women to take up feminist consciousness to newer heights. Feminism did not aim at freeing women from men but from a society dominated by men.

Simone De Beauvoir had inspired many writers especially women who have supported the feminist movement and have aimed at reforming many feminist issues yet, Ayn Rand, the mind behind the objectivist philosophy, stands out with her unusual approach to feminism. It is ironical that a self-professed male chauvinist, Rand has made for herself a place in the feminist movement that surpasses any other. Camille Paglia in her essay *Reflections on Ayn Rand* observes "Women's studies have been oriented toward rediscovering the mediocre thinker, or the writer who talks about her victimization, rather than someone who preaches individualism and independence as Ayn Rand does". The difference between Rand and other writers is that while other "feminists are questioning the logic of duality" they "sometimes reproduce the polarities they seek to transcend". (Valerie Loiret- Prunet). Rand, on the other hand, do not acknowledge the existence of any such dualism or polarity.

Rand's works do not dwell on issues of feminism yet her works can be considered the greatest tribute to womanhood. While writers before her and after her have been struggling to explore the root cause of gender discrimination, Rand has freed her women from the clutches of gender and has celebrated the concept of equality. By projecting her women as individuals Rand has separated them from the society which has been instrumental in developing the concept of gender. Rand's stories cannot be classified as being told from a feminine or masculine point of view nor can her characters be termed as portraying masculine or feminine traits. They are individuals and what stands out prominent in the individual is the ego or the self and ego does not confine itself to any gender.

It has been observed that in their attempt to give women equal rights many a times writers have dressed their women characters in male attires and have given them masculine characteristics. This instead of furthering the cause of feminism has weakened it as this only suggests that women as they are can never equal men. This is where Rand's theory of Individualism has provided a major breakthrough. It is worth mentioning that while developing her theory of Individualism Rand does not strip her women of the essence of femininity.

Rand has placed her women along with men in every field and these women are more capable than many of the men around them. Dagny Taggart, the "hard and cold and unfeeling" leading lady of *Taggart Transcontinental* and Rand's masterpiece *Atlas Shrugged*, is said to possess the ability to run *Taggart Transcontinental* single handedly. She is projected as a woman who seldom bothered about her looks yet Rand's description of Dagny at Lillian and Rearden's Anniversary party "wearing an evening gown.....and the diamond band on the wrist of her

naked arm gave her the most feminine of all aspects: the look of being chained” (Rand,1997). Not negating the biological sex of women, Rand succeeds in making her equal to man. This feminine aspect of being chained might not appeal to many feminine senses yet as Joy Bushnell says others “would hold that statement as a symbol of pride” (Younkins, 2012)

Rand’s women characters are not born into a utopian society where women find life to be a bed of roses. They are set against all possible odds but what helps them emerge as a winner against these odds is according to Dagny “the knowledge that her life is the highest of values, too high to give up without a fight”. (Rand,1997).The spirit of individualism is so strong in them that they rebel against every clichéd social practice and it gives them a deeper sense of satisfaction to go against the group.Dagny has had her own share of “terrible beatings” both at her workplace and also in society at large but what held her through it was her belief in the values that she held high.

“Dagny Taggart was nine years old when she decided that she would run the Taggart Transcontinental Railroad one day.....She was twelve years old when she told Eddie Willers that she would run the railroad when they grew up. She was fifteen when it occurred to her for the first time that women did not run railroads and that people might object. To hell with that, she thought- and never worried about it again”.

What gave her the strength to fight against society and bypass the prejudices set by it is her rational thought.

The story of Kira in *We The Living* is set against the backdrop of a male dominated Russia. The expectation of the society from a woman is to see her settle down in a traditional marriage. Going against these stereotypes is Kira, who aspires to be a builder, who dreams of a future, where she would build skyscrapers and bridges. Her choice of profession comes as a shock to her family who feel that her “attitude is slightly anti social”.Rand uses Victor as the mouth piece for the society when he voices out that “ as a woman, you would be much more useful to society in a more feminine capacity”. But Kira equates society to a line of zeroes and declares that she does not owe any duty to people or things that hold no value for her.

When the whole country is under the clutches of a worse kind of collectivism, Kira’s individualism remains intact because of her deeply embedded egoism. Though, like others, she undergoes all the deprivations and the severe blows inflicted by the government, her spirit remains untouched. Her virtue lies in the strength of her spirit which undauntedly faces the evil society. Kira’s purely selfish nature and its positive influence on her is what fuel her undying spirit.

It has been criticized that Rand by just highlighting only a single female protagonist in each of her novels, ignores the majority of women who fall a prey to the expectations of the collective group. It may be true that Rand does not dwell longer on women who have succumbed to the pressures of society but she does not ignore them completely. The advice given to Cheryl by Dagny in *Atlas Shrugged* when she says “You don’t have to see through the eyes of others, hold on to yours, stand on your own judgement.....and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise” is an advice given by Rand to every woman who wishes to break free of the expectations of society. One’s “own mind” is the key to one’s freedom and liberty and by projecting women who have followed their mind Rand asserts that it is not a difficult task to achieve a status equal to man.

Conclusion

Rand's female protagonists are true rebels whose self is so overpowering that the rest of the world completely disappears. Her portrayal of women may not seem plausible but it seems to be the only way to bring about a radical change in a society obsessed with gender differences. Women's liberation could be achieved only if women relentlessly break through the barriers that tradition and society has set before us.

Workcited

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