



Women-Through the Ages: A Literary Study

DR. HIREN H. TRIVEDI

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
C. & S. H. Desai Arts & L. K. L. Doshi Commerce College,
Balasinor 388255 (Kheda),
Gujarat (India)

Abstract:

Each age brings with it specific cultural, social, commercial and educational upheaval which mould the society and its temperament. Hence, with the change of time, nothing remains static and unaffected. It is interesting to examine the changing image of the women because they have faced challenges at every step and corner. Women, their roles and their images in literature have frequently changed down the ages. Since the time of Vedas and Upnishad, they have been assigned different roles to accomplish men's dreams and desires. The-world-of-women has performed different parts timidly and has also faced many challenges bravely during the eras of the Ramayana, Jainism, Buddhism and from Medieval period to the Modern age. The root cause, of course, lies in myths and religions which have constrained their lives severely. However, the movement started for women's liberation in the second half of the 20th century has succeeded to a large extent to improve the position of the better half.

Keywords: *Image, Literature, Women*

Each age brings with it specific cultural, social, commercial and educational upheaval which mould the society and its temperament. Hence, with the change of time, nothing remains static and unaffected. History is the record of the dreams and deeds of men and so quite apparently we can see how far the development of men has gone through the ages, but the more interesting is to examine the changing role and image of the women because they have faced challenges at every step and stage. The Indian sub-continent with its diversities has a long cultural and social history of women's position in society. The voice of the people is echoed in arts and particularly more loudly and more clearly in literature than anywhere else.

Women, their roles and their images in literature have frequently changed down the ages. The woman of the Vedic age enjoyed a status equal to that of man. She could participate in religious, educational, military and social activities. During this age, she attained a very high standard of learning; the proof of this is in the *Rigveda*. Her contribution in the intellectual discussions shows the height she had reached to. The best known examples are those of Gargi and Maitreyi. Some of the women had the right to choose their husbands on their own without any interference by the family authority. In the marriage ceremony, bride and groom were respected equally. Groom would pledge, "The gods gave thee to man to rule over our house together.... May there be happiness in our home for both humans and animals."¹ Women had also privilege to remarry after the death of their husbands. In spite of having a dignified place in the society, it is interesting to note that very few people desired to have a female child. They wanted to have a brave knight rather than a daughter. In *Athurvaveda*, one can come across such wishes as, 'Grant me a son and daughter elsewhere'. It reveals the controversial ideas regarding the place of women in those days. In the age of Upanishad, women have demoted from her early image of

Vedic age. For instance, in '*Maitrayani Sanhita*', she is considering as vice along with wine and gambling.

The succeeding era shifted the pendulum in the opposite direction. It was the age of *Manusmriti* or *Manusamhita* written by Manu, the law giver of Hinduism. His social and moral codes are responsible for relegating the low status to Hindu women in later periods. Now no longer, women enjoyed the dignity that they had during the earlier period. Their status in life was defined in terms of their relation to others – father, husband and son. Manu preached that a woman must be protected by her father in her childhood, her husband protects her in youth and sons protect her in her old age and she should never be independent. *Manusmriti* thus, in general, curbed the growth of women.

An Indian woman's self-perception and also the society's expectations from her have for long been largely determined by the complex of ideas and values and beliefs codified in the *Manusmriti*. It is so deep-rooted in Indian psyche that even today dominant feminine prototype still is the dutiful, virtuous, benevolent, long suffering mythical wife like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. As Susan Wadley quotes from *Manusmriti*, "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife."² Undoubtedly, this was the view that led women to subjugation and subordination.

The age of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* also followed the footsteps of the earlier Sanskrit literature in terms of the representation of woman. The *Mahabharata* teaches, "A man with a hundred tongues would not be able to describe completely the vices and defects of women." Hence, we can assume that women had no better image in the society. Valmiki, Vyas and Bhavbhuti adored the wifely qualities. Woman, in those days, considered her husband a deity. Service and obedience to the husband was believed to be the highest ideal of woman's life. She was respected as the mother in the society. She had also ample opportunities to study and to take her decision on her own to some extent. However, one cannot claim that the woman in those days was free from the fetters of the long Indian tradition. In fact, the women characters of those two great epics made an ever lasting impression on the Indian sub-conscious. Women are advised even today to follow the footsteps of Sita and Draupadi. It was surprising to note that Sita and Draupadi, who are regarded as ideal women, were so badly treated. Sita in the *Ramayana* had to pass through 'Agni Pariksha' to prove her fidelity and Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* was no better than a commodity.

The portals of religion were once again opened to women during the age of Jainism and Buddhism. Though the followers of Jainism respected woman in the form of mother, they consider her as an obstacle in getting salvation. She was considered an obstacle in the way of religious practices. On the other hand, Buddhist faith recognized equality of sexes and did not fetter women. Whosoever is capable of fostering Buddhist attributes, whether man or woman can have access to 'Nirvana'. Several women embraced this faith which assigned them a right of equal participation in religious pursuits. Though they participated in philosophical discussions, they were subsidiary to the male religious practitioners.

In the Mauryan period too, women could not get an independent identity and her existence was still depended on male chauvinistic society. They were treated as property. Kalidas emerged in the classic age and wrote poems like *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, *Kumar Sambhavam*, *Meghdootam* etc. These poems evidently mark deterioration in the condition of women. Largely, women were

depicted in these books as feeble, helpless creatures leading a life without purpose and power. In *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, one can find Shakuntala as a helpless woman who becomes a victim of grave injustice in her life and waits a long time to be favoured by the fortune. The female protagonists of the rest of those classic works fall under the same category. There is a substantial difference between male and female characteristics as shown and preached by the preceding centuries. As M.H. Abrams notes, "...the masculine in our culture has come to be identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional."³

The Medieval period was worse for the women. They were seen merely as an object of physical pleasure. The 'harems' were their prison houses. She was considered then as a possession of the man and her life was restricted in four walls. There were kings whose only ambition was to have thousands of women as concubines. Even arts such as poetry and paintings, dancing and music took erotic dimensions and women were represented as an 'object to be looked at'. Feudal system which followed the medieval ages was the chief reason for the degeneration of women's position in society. It influenced the Indian culture of that period and also the culture of future India. Women were made to live under total subjugation. She was banned to cross the threshold of their houses. Physical tortures were also endless.

Throughout the ages, women tolerated all tortures and humiliations silently. But it is not that they did not feel the pain. A flame of wide discontent and resentment, which was burning in their hearts through the ages, finally has had its outburst. In the present age, the feminine movements opened up the doors in every field for a new woman. The emergence of the new woman in India is perhaps a direct outcome of the education given to her. This little freedom has brought her out of the cloistered, claustrophobic environment, to become useful citizen serving the larger interests of society. The exposure to diverse fields of knowledge, contact with the Western world brought awareness in women about their skills and talents. The women's liberation movement of the West has given courage to the Indian woman to question her circumscribed, 'Angel in the Home' image.

In fact, the seeds for women's rights were sown during nineteenth century when attempts were made to improve the position of women in society. Certain practices such as early marriage, enforced widowhood, widow burning etc. drew attention of some social reformers and political activists. Other social evils, such as *pardah* system, women – illiteracy and some legal problems such as defective law of inheritance also compelled the reformers to do something to eradicate them. With the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Gandhiji and others, women began to breathe freely under open sky.

After the middle of the twentieth century, women emerged as working class and gained financial independence. With the changing time, the attitude of the society also started changing. Earning money is not the sole right of men now. A new woman has begun to carve her own path. She no longer believes in adhering to the traditional values and social mores. They are shaking off their image as shy and submissive creature. She is bold enough to raise her voice against wrong doings by male authority and dominance. She wants that the age-old mentality of viewing her as second rate citizen should change. However, it is also wrong to say that woman's struggle for her rights is over and she has acquired equal status in the present society. Today, theoretically, women are recognized as socially equal with men. But in fact, the old institutions such as caste, patriarchal family, religious dogmas and dominant value system still prevail. Mukta Atrey and

Vinay Kirpal observe, “Even in modern times, when women have achieved economic independence and high educational standards, they are still regarded as inferior to man. Despite holding a responsible professional position and contributing substantially to the household income, a woman’s work is not valued.”⁴

For the existing image and role of women in society and literature, one can find several reasons responsible for it. Firstly, society still maintains a status quo in respect to male-dominance. The male mentality has not yet changed. Secondly, mass media play a vital role in constructing the image of women. They represent women in subordinate roles serving and nurturing male dreams and desires. Physically too, women are held weak and inferior. They are abused, tortured and molested very often. A girl’s birth is still not welcomed by the family and hence she is killed in her mother’s womb. Thus, woman’s position in the society and her representation in literature has always remained in controversy. The reason could be that woman has been seen only from the male point of view. She is the direct product of the basic assumptions of male-generated and dominated social values. She is moulded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for the man. Traditionally, woman has been seen whether in the real life or in literature either as the ‘angel in the home’ or a ‘witch’. What Margaret Atwood comments in this regard is quite appropriate; “If you be not an angel, you are worse than human – you are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful scary monster.”⁵ At the turn of the 20th centenary, some regional and Indian English writers have attempted to delineate women on equal foot, but such writers and works can be counted on the finger tips. Thus, women’s search for space and identity has not come to an end. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is not a distant dream when woman would place herself on equal footing with the man in every field.

References

1. Abrams, M. H. (1993). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Bangalore: Prism Books Pvt. Ltd.
2. Atrey, Mukta & Kirpal, Vinay. (1998). “Women in Indian Society”, Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study of Her Fiction. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
3. Atwood, Margaret (1978). “The Curse of Eve – or What I Learned in School”, *Women on Women*, (ed.) Ann B. Shteir. New York: York University Press.
4. Das, Frieda Mathilda. (1979). *Purdah: The Status of Indian Woman*. New Delhi: Ess.
5. Wadley, Susan. (1988). “Women and the Hindu Tradition”, *Women in Indian Society*, (ed.) Rehana Ghadially. New Delhi: Sage Publications.