

Revisioning the Empowerment of Women

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THE TERM '*empowerment*' implies the investiture of authority pertaining to possession, position, system or relationship in an individual and/or a group within a given hierarchial context. However, the term does not confine itself to this seemingly innocuous idea. It also holds the unsavoury notion that such an authority does not come about spontaneously or vest with a given individual / group naturally, in the finess of things. It rather implies that authority or power if we so prefer to call it *has got to be generated* in a person / group from "within" or endowed from "outside" through some extraneous source of empowerment or agent of authority.

In other words, the well-known phrase "*empowerment of women*" is a concept that carries with it, if not the shameful stigma, at least the distressful reminder that women as a species, as a group or as individuals are *either devoid of or non-privileged* to exercise power as naturally and as "freely" as their male counterparts do. This is certainly a matter of grave concern for our "civilized" world on the threshold of the new millennium. As such, it is necessary at this juncture to review the position of women vis-a-vis empowerment and analyze the various attempts made by the world to tackle the problem of *empowerment of women*.

Fortunately for humankind, the candid contemporary acceptance of this problem as a universal phenomenon came with the United Nations declaration of the 90s as the decade of the girl-child. This was a clear indication that despite the constitutional equality granted to women in the post-revolution

socialist countries in the 20s, in post-colonial democracies including India in 50s, and in the 'first world' in the 60s, women across the world are still a neglected, undercared and de-powered community. Further, this is a tacit admission that notwithstanding the culmination of the radical feminist movement of the 70s in the UN declaration of the decade for women (1975-85), not much has been achieved globally for women. Indeed, it is a sad reminder that despite the annual token commemorations of the women's day across the world, the lot of women has in essence improved but little and empowered even less!

Yet, this latest United Nations Declaration holds a promise of the continued commitment of the concluding century into the coming millennium to the long-neglected cause of women and should be welcomed as such. Moreover, the recent attempts by the world forum to link the issue of *empowerment of women* to the exigent issues faced by the world community have given it not only a wider context but also a much desirable perspectivity. This is a positive sign for feminist cause. Further, the extension of the scope of *empowerment of women* to all spheres of human activity and the engagement of all major disciplines including sciences and humanities to women-related issues is an indication of humanity's new-found intent to create a woman-friendly epistemology. This augurs well as the future basis for *empowerment*.

However, this contemporary concern need not be exaggerated to seem unique or to pressure that hitherto the civilized world had never thought about woman-related issues such as, the male-female power equation, the gender disparity prevalent in the society or the relative sexual bias that fans such disparity. If one is to believe Timothy J. Reiss, "By 1792, when Mary Wallstonecraft published what has been called the manifesto of modern feminism, **A Vindication of the Right of Woman**, most of its principal arguments had been aired for a good three centuries or more. Christine de Pizan may have been an isolated early voice, but Agrippa, Marguerite de Navarre, Thomas Elyot, Marie de Gournay, and others were precursors of a considerable literature asserting woman's rights to education, to positions of political and religious power, to all material and spiritual benefits of civil society, and to freedom from men's domination."¹

The dawn of enlightenment in the West and the spread of education in India² spearheaded the issues, first of women's education and then, of their rights and privileges. Interestingly, this early pro-woman thought, rightly considered education as the stepping stone to the elevation of the lot of women. However, there was a hitch in this early woman-oriented thought that later became the bane of woman-friendly discourse. Ironical as it may sound today, the idea of enlightened reason, inspite of being in favour of educational opportunity for women, excluded "what is claimed as 'female' with increasing aggression relegating it to its 'own' domain of sensibility, instinctual receptivity, nurturing protectiveness and childlike fancy."³ True, the characteristics so mentioned were among the ideas considered by the Judeo-Christian tradition as *feminine* but "they had not been *until then always seen* as positive, or indeed even as descriptive of women's entire nature. From the late seventeenth century onwards, however, they received an increasingly positive and exclusive valuation."⁴ (*italics mine*).

Thus, this early voice of feminism, being itself the prisoner of the limited perception of that age, could hardly place the women-related issues squarely on the foundation of reason or give it the enduring basis of gender parity. It preferred to see the rights of women in the context of women as a deprived class of females *not necessarily* as an equal gender to the male. Perhaps it was an indirect fallout of this definition of *feminine* that western women took almost the better part of a century to demand equality and gender parity, inspite of having vigorously agitated for decades to win suffrage in 1800s (in England in 1920s).⁵ Another major issue of women's movement in the late 1800s was the right to birth control. Yet, the contemporary world probably saw this agitation as mainly a *feminine* issue.

Still this pro-feminine concern did pave the way for more perceptive, more egalitarian, even more militant movement of our own time. This radical modern movement took off vociferously in the 60s - Incidentally also the decade of civil rights agitation and students protests - when women in the post-War West had joined the work force in large numbers and found that they were being discriminated against with regard to working conditions, promotions and the like. Further, the women also realized to

their chagrin that they were sought to be stereotyped in middle-class value-based roles, thereby discouraging, even disqualifying them from contesting for equitable challenges and roles of authority in industrialized societies.

Thus this feminist protest vied initially for a grossly superficial equality per se, within the social structure of polities founded on capitalist economy. Interestingly, many of "the countries that underwent Communist revolutions or takeovers granted women equal rights in Western societies."⁶ It is thus that the predominant pro-feminist argument of the cold war era was that "in order to change the conditions of women's oppression we must change the logic of capital..." subsuming "feminist struggle into the larger struggle against capital."⁷ It created in its wake a generation of radical females who, under the illusion of equality, struggled to become *counter-males* losing out on their womanly essence in the bargain. The thawing of the cold war in the 70s helped much in realizing this counter-achievement.

Soon feminist visionaries were to see such economy-bound independence as a limited, material and *objective equality*. They saw that it failed to touch the core issues of feminist concern, such as the repositioning of the female from the status of object to subject, the projection of a woman-friendly view of existence, the subversion of the purely andro-centric concept of divinity, protecting the feminine ethos, defining women's gender priorities with regard to margins of race-nationality-class and so on. These issues were sidelined or suppressed not only in a cross-section of social interactions but also in the primarily male-biased literary tradition. Since this tradition conditioned, even controlled, most politico-cultural thought, the feminists aspiring for comprehensive revolution in social thinking viewed such *male-subjective authority* of literary tradition as a major threat to the women's cause.

Considering the substantial literary mileage covered by feminist writers, this was reason enough for concern. This concern is succinctly voiced in the feminist admission that "...we have witnessed the flourishing of feminist publications, the recuperation of lost texts by women, the re-conceptualization of canon and history and the development of interdisciplinary methods of teaching and research. Yet some of the most prominent critics feel that the force of feminism has been consistently blunted."⁸

Thus the need not only to retrieve the intrinsically woman-oriented oral literature but also to create woman-friendly epistemology⁹ became inevitable and literature as well as literary criticism was seen to have a major role in the offing.

Carolyn Heilbrun moots the very idea in her address to the administrators of English departments while expressing resentment that "among all the changes of 'the life and the thought', only the feminist approach has been scorned, ignored, fled from, at best reluctantly embraced... Deconstruction, semiology, Derrida, Foucault may question the very meaning of meaning as we have learned it, but feminists may not do so."¹⁰ In other words, the feminists had realized that, "what is at issue here is not only the immediate practical problem of women achieving power within existing cultural institutions, but also the equally immediate and practical problem of refabricating those institutions."¹¹ This was a major conceptual leap in the empowerment of women for which the feminists in the late 80s deserve credit. Consequently, the *objective thinking on isolated* women-related issues hitherto constructing the feminist discourse was replaced by greater *perspectivity* and wider *contexture*. As a fallout of this, a new and comprehensive debate on feministic concerns in the widest of contexts emerged in the eighties.

Coincidentally, when the feminists were trying to locate the issues of primacy to women centrally, the world was also compelled by circumstances to review its own priorities from a new perspective. By the early 70s, ecological issues had begun to pre-occupy the thoughts and actions of the world community and its decision-makers particularly in the rich developed countries. The United Nations Conference on Human Environment (UNCHE) which became functional in 1972 was one of the early manifestations of this preoccupation. Although it achieved little globally, it served as "a catalyst for future environmental negotiations... and... injected a new impetus to the considerations of the ecological dimensions of international relations."¹² From here to the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio with its Climate Convention, Bio-Diversity Convention and Agenda 21 (the extended blueprint for common international action) the international community has come a long way in pursuance of common agenda concerning economy, ecology, and human resource. Strangely enough, this

has greatly benefitted - albeit indirectly - the cause of women.

Several seemingly unconnected issues such as lopsided industrialization, exhaustion of natural resources, depletion of the ozone layer, population explosion, collapsing economies, environmental threats and information boom colluded in the 90s into one huge bang of common global threat and put on anvil the possibilities of an emergent world order. In this new order, constructs like *centre and periphery* which reveal the tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle, naturally became an anathema. The lifting of the iron curtain further facilitated the change. In fact, with the collapse of Marxist polities, the sweeping changes necessitated in the existing global scenario made an extremely liberal and accommodative interpretation of the world order imperative.

As a result, the early 90s witnessed more integrated, more accommodative thinking on the ensuing globalization with economic liberalization in toe and set the world agog with the blueprint of the New World Order that made room for variety, multiplicity, complexity and growth - incidentally also the feminist priorities. To suit the extant power-equations it was necessary to posit this emerging world order at least theoretically, outside the periphery of the bi-polar power-politics as it was imperative to keep it well away from the centre of uni-polar hegemony, on a platform of common priority acceptable to all. It is thus that the 90s proclaimed an ecology-based world order - comprehensive, consensual and universally relevant. This also suited the feminist interests to the letter.

In this emergent order, the unifying thrust of ecological oneness sought to replace the economy-linked interpretation of sustainable development of the erstwhile economy-centred order. A hallmark of this change was an eco-centric sensibility which "seeks to optimize those qualities that enhance interdependency and mutual constraint in ecological order... When priorities must be set... to protect nature... the priorities that must prevail are the intrinsic qualities of ecological order in support of nature's sustaining *telos* - integrity, stability, diversity."¹³ In this "Green politics" of global environment among other things the traditional idea of cultural theory and practice also required new thinking because it questions the "predominant view of 'culture' and

'nature' (that) presupposes that there is a barrier or filter between ourselves and the natural world..."¹⁴

To ensure the viability of this newly ushered in world order, it had to be interpreted in terms of a tenable relationship among economy, environment and humanity. The environmentalist vision of a global ecosystem made it all the easier for nature to become categorized as a factor of global economic production and for the human resource to be seen in its dual capacity as the beneficiary as well as the sustaining link of this ecosystem. It was now necessary to secure this rediscovered link in terms of a lasting bond (that is the woman). That eventually led to the re-establishment of the age-old bonding of femininity with ecology in the form of "Eco-feminism", "*a new term for an ancient wisdom*", (which itself grew out of various social movements - the feminists, peace and ecology movements in the late 1970s and the early 1980s"¹⁵ (*italics mine*)).

It is thus that the comprehensive security and welfare of the woman through education, employment, health and mental well-being became the top-priority of this decade. Moreover, *empowerment of the woman* became the watchword of this era and has gradually evolved into a mature interpretation of womanhood as being vital to creativity and of feminine ethos as being a fundamental aspect of human culture. Thus eco-feminism has recovered for humanity, the bonding which the post-industrialization civilized world in its blind proclamation of material progress and an equally dumb adherence to *economic dynamics* had come to sever.

This has greatly helped posit the woman at the centre of vital discourse on global matters. On a more concrete level this has created the much-needed global awareness that woman as an individual or as a species has to have her rightful space in the hierarchies of power including politics. In countries like India this has encouraged the long-due extension of reservation to women in the grassroot level of political institutions and legislation for similar reservation in regional and central legislative bodies is pending in the absence of political consensus / will in the male-dominated political structure of the country. While this is reason enough for despair, it is by no means something exclusive to India. Sadly, it is symptomatic of the measured pace of this concluding

century towards the *empowerment of women* and prognostic of the future impediments that the new millennium must needs address!

Notes and References:

1. Timothy Reiss, "Revolution in Bounds: Wallstonecraft, Women and Reason", **Gender and Theory** (Oxford, New York, Basil Blackwell) 1989, p.11.
2. See Ranade, Pratibha, 1991. **Stree Prasnachi Charchaa: Ekonisave Shatak**. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2nd edn. 1992.
3. Poovey, Mary 1984. **The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer**. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 3-113.
4. Reiss, **Gender and Theory**, p.12.
5. In 1918, English Parliament granted a vote to women over 30. Only as late as in 1928, this right was extended to women of 21 in UK.
6. **World Book Encyclopaedia**, vol. 21, London, Chicago, Sidney, Toronto: World Book Inc., p. 297.
7. Gerald M. MacLean, "Citing the Subject:", **Gender and Theory**, p.144.
8. Linda Kauffman, "Representing Philosophy", **Gender and Theory**, p. 12.
9. See, Ellen Messer Davidow, "Knowers, knowing, knowledge", feminist theory and education", **Journal of Thought**, 20, 3 (Fall), 1985, pp. 8-24.
10. Heilbrun Carolyn, "Feminist Criticism: bringing the spirit back to English Studies", **The State of the Discipline: 1970s-1980s. Special issue of ADE Bulletin**, 62 (Winter) 1979, pp. 35-8.
11. MacLean, p. 145.
12. Arun Kuman Singh, "Global Environment Politics" A Canadian Perspective", **Ind. J. Canadian Studies**, Vol. VI, 1997, p. 53.
13. Peter Harries-Jones, Abraha Rotstein, Peter Timmerman, "A signal Failure: Economy and Ecology after Rio", **Ind. J. Canadian Studies**, Vol. VI, 1997, p.28.
14. *Ibid.*, p.24
15. Ranjana Harish, "Maria Campbell's **Half Breed**: An Eco-feminist Reading", **Ind. J. Canadian Studies**, Vol. VI, 1997, p.46.