

Women in Folk Society: Gender Discourse

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Abstract : Throughout the world women's issues have become a central concern in almost every sphere of life. Around the globe, the study of gender has been developing, in various ways. Now days, the issue of gender has also been integrated with the academic study of folklore in a range of countries of the world. Women in folk society have always had a very important linkage between their life and its life, love, marriage, domestic life and struggle after even married life. They are not only considered the hubs for ensuring that tradition but also are designed with the role of passing them on to the next generation.

The present paper explores how to gender ideologies work in the gendered construction of women and men in society in general, and particularly in the space of folk society and through various elements of folk elements such as oral literature including rhymes, proverbs, fairytales and familial festivals. Besides, this paper also expressed that some specific areas in folk society where gender issues may have been taken on broad.

Key Words - Folk Society, Gender Identities, Feminism, Women's Status, Myth of Matriarchy

Introduction

The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenniums. In early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigved & Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitrey. Later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders. The real change came after independence. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). There are other

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articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [article 15 (1)] equality of opportunity (Article 16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later 1970's. Later on many groups and NGO's have been working for the Empowerment of women. We are proud that in Indian Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

Feminism as a concept has developed from the sense of inequality. Women's oppression and subordination help to develop "feminism". Women's international year 1975 and the international decades 1975-1985 are hall marks for creating awareness throughout the world in a new dimension. The status of women is changing and women are playing different roles for their survival. Often different issues related to role conflict may be the subject of an important academic and intellectual discourse for the modern elite.

Evans (1994) in this regard said:

Women, constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours, receive one tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property.

By nature male are aggressive, female are not like that. Whereas men have more physical strength and little emotional attachment, females are mentally soft and passive. The biological difference between male and female is universal. The social construction of 'male' and 'female' is developed through culture. Actually the debate starts between the 'naturalist' and 'nurturalist' out of the statement defined by S. Freud: 'Biology is destiny'.

Since the 1950's different development policies for women came into the international spotlight and a number of approaches from traditional (welfare, anti-poverty and efficiency approach) to feminist equity and empowerment approaches were formulated for women as gender planning (Manna: 2010).

Though the status of women in India, both historically and socially has been one of the respect and reverence, but the hard truth is that even today, they are struggling for their own identity, shouting for diffusion of their voices and fighting for their own esteem. So throughout the world women's issues have become a central concern in almost every sphere of life. Around the globe, the study of gender has been developing, in various ways. Gender studies have also been incorporated in the academic as an individual discipline. Now days, the issue of

gender has also been integrated with the academic study of folklore in a range of countries of the world. Women in folk society have always had a very important linkage between their life and folk's life, love, marriage, domestic life and struggle after even married life. They are not only considered the hubs for ensuring that tradition but also are designed with the role of passing them on to the next generation. The root of feminist epistemology is the ideas that sex and gender are not the same phenomena. Sex denotes the natural and biological characteristics of male and female. On the other hand gender, is a socio historical phenomenon, which is constructed by various epochs of society and culture. Actually the fact is, gender is an aspect of our everyday live, as well as a social, economic and cultural category that subsumes and re writes the meaning of human sex, the fact of being masculine and feminine (Geetha, 2002:136).

In our society the gendered identities of male and female are generally constructed by a variety of social, cultural and religious value expected and approved by the dominant structures in a society. With a few exceptions of indigenous and matriarchal societies, the underlying ideology of the gender construction considers women as the subordinated sex in societies around the world. Thus the relationship between men and women in society being melded by the patriarchy creates such a social atmosphere which leads men to play the dominant roles and makes women become objects to be controlled by men. Women are oppressed throughout the society due to this kind of gendered ideologies (Chakraborty, 2011)

The recent conceptualization in this regard by Jeylan W. Husein, an educationist of Ethiopia deserves a close attention: Gender ideology is a systematic set of cultural beliefs through which a society constructs and wields its gender relations and practices. Gender ideology contains legends, narratives and myths about what it means to be a woman and suggests how each should behave in their society (Hussein, 2005).

Women's Status and the Myth of Matriarchy

It is quite easy to find examples of women's eternally subordinated and inferior status from the folklore which rationalizes this status, as well as from that which contests it. An interesting body of material, and one which is contradictory in terms of interpretive possibilities, is the legend of ancient female power, the myth of the matriarchy. Myths which tell of ancient societies governed by women can

be found from different parts of the world. The nearest example is Pohjola, or Land of the North, dealt with in Kalevala metre poetry. The rise of the matriarchy was bound up with marriage and thus the birth of a more 'pure' sex life. In the matriarchy, however, there still prevailed "mother right", founded, of course, on 'natural law'. 'Mother right' included not only the reckoning of kinship and descent according to the mother, but also the inheritance of property by the daughter and the fact that women were not only the heads of families but also the heads of government. Myths can also be interpreted in other ways as well. The dominant interpretive approach in anthropology after Malinowski has been a functionalist one: myths justify and reinforce the organization of society and its cultural institutions (Bachofen, 1967). The fact that women tell this myth is an example of how women's folklore also reflects male values; it is also an example of how, through folklore, women are instructed to accept their own position in life and consider it to be natural.

It is true that when the women's festivals are over, everything returns to normal and daily life continues. Relations between the sexes, in sexual behaviour as in other areas, are refurbishing. The position of women remains unchanged: married women toil, and are beaten if they do not obey. But during the women's festival they have expressed and demonstrated that they belong to a women's group, and through their songs and speech they have let their own views of the dominant order be heard. The tradition of women's festivals is not a feminist tradition; its goal is not emancipation or revolution. But in a male-centred culture based on patriarchy, it surely offers an image of a feminine counterculture.

Women in Folk Society: Gender Perspectives

Today we live in a globalised world. Technology, today, has not only changed our life style but has also continually been redefining the reality around us. McLuhan (cited in Atal: 2008) has observed

...a world community of interaction and communication as a consequence of Industrial Revolution which led to the technology of transportation, colonization of countries of the Third World, and introduced a process of homogenization - through westernization of the way of life and deliberate

destruction of several elements of traditional cultures.

It is really confusing when these contrasting and paradoxical experiences are surfaced. The first question comes to our mind: Is it really not possible to unveil the true chemistry of male-female relations? If we cannot reach at a favourable sex-ratio, it would directly or indirectly, soon or later, affect our civilization. We should remember that despite male domination and male centeredness in various spheres of life, men are dependent on the women. This kind of interdependence is the basis of society as well as nature. Both are indispensable for the creation and continuation of the world - social and natural. So a gender-just society is inevitable. Bengali poet Kazi Najrul Islam (1971) once wrote:

Biswe ja kichu mahan sristi chiro kalyankar,
Ardhek tar koriache nari ardhek tar nor. (In Bengali)

[All great and auspicious creations of the world are produced by the equal labour of both men and women.]

Folklorist Alan Dundes explained in his article 'The Creating Hen and the Easter Bunny' how male bias keeps itself alive in society through various genres of folklore like nursery rhymes, beliefs, superstition, autograph texts, plays and proverbs (Dundes, 1980:160).

In our families, children are introduced to gender roles through festivals, events, rituals, customs and attitudes. An ordinary girl can sense the gender politics of various familial and social rituals only if she carefully observes and analyses them a long time. There is a customs in Hindu families called "Bhai-Phonta" that has been observed on a fixed date each year in every Hindu society. On that day, sisters put small round paint on the foreheads of their brothers for their wellbeing. This social custom has been maintained for the brothers, not the sisters, because only the brothers are the legal descendant of the family properties. They are the first inheritors in Hindu law. Again in our Muslim communities, when a boy is born the birth is announced by a special 'Azan' by a male members of the family. But when a girl is born there is no such custom.

The stereotyped ideas of patriarchy construct a man stronger than a women and this image of men and women is noticed in every patriarchal society in the world. We can illustrate the case with some examples from around the world, some proverbs are

"First comes love, then comes marriage
Then comes name with a baby carriage
I wish you love, I wish you joy
I wish you first a baby boy
And when his hair begins to curl
I wish you then a baby girl".

Another proverb in our country where boys are compared to gold "A golden ring is better even if it is warped" (Sonar Aungty Banka Holeo Valo, in Bengali)
Another proverb is -

"A handicapped boy is better than a bright skilled girl".

The gender discrimination between boys and girls has been clearly expressed in these proverbs.

On the opposite side of the male bias, the patriarchal society and culture regularly portray women as weak, soft, dependent, deprived, jealous, evil and untrustworthy. The patriarchal society never portrays women as free or something to be proud of. The highest dignity of women on the patriarchal platform is to become a mother and her sacred most tasks is to serve others like a nurse. With the coming of age of girl children, a small girl dreams of her future marriage and the consequence of her separation from the parents' family and their care and affection. Such rhymes mainly centre round the character and life of the little unmarried girl of the family.

"Jamunavati Saraswati, tomorrow Jamuna marries
Jamuna will go to father-in-laws's house by Kazitala".

(Jamunabati Saraswati kal jamunar biye / Jamuna jaben Sasurbari Kajitala diee, in Bengali)

Sometimes the painful feeling of Bidai (farewell) to a daughter after her marriage is also expressed through this type of song

"Today is Durga's adivas
And tomorrow is her wedding.
Durga will proceed to her father-in-law's house,
Leaving her parents in tears".

(Aj Durgar adhivas, kal durgar biye / Durga jaben sasurbari sanssar kandiye, in Bengali)

On the other hand, a little married girl is complaining through the song that she was not invited by her parents on the occasion of last festival.

'O my mother, cruel mother,
You kept me in my husband's place,
On the occasion of the harvest festival.'

(o amar maa nisthur ma / eto boro poush porobe, rakli amai porer ghore, in Bengali)

This dominant ideology structures women as a social category. They are dominated by the males. They are just sex objects to be shown off, attractive and decorative. Women in folklore present broader perspectives of women and its significant role in, maintaining family relationship and social linkage.

Jennifer Livesay, in one of her articles on 'Gender Issues in Folklore Fieldwork', raises some important aspects of women's folklore. She explains that folklorists in general perform research on folklore with a patriarchal point of view in mind. Livesay argued that our culture's dominant ways of viewing the world represent an overall male perspective which is called 'male centered ideology'. Women have lift up their independent voices of their own even though they live in patriarchal surrounding. Nabaneeta Deb Sen (1998) observed a variety of the Ramayana sung by women in village of India and concluded that these performances are conventional among women only. Being performed in strict isolation from men, the songs of these Womens' Ramayanas are critically different from the dominant perception of the classical epic. As narrated by the Sita constructed by women themselves, these female singers actually weep their own sufferings and pains in a society arranged after the injustice and indignity of Sita, the female suggested by Rama, the male God himself.

Nature has created sex distinction. In course of time it gave rise to gender division of labour. Women are socialized to perform a role, quite different from that of the men. Both are important to build up the whole social order. There is no reason to de-glorify the role of the mothers as homemakers. No society can move without such an important role performance. Many of our goddess is worshipped

as mothers, as homemakers (for example goddess Lakshmi of the Hindus). Many women even today dream of to be a Lakshmi in their real life.

As it is women who have been oppressed around the world due to the patriarchal gender ideologies, so women as a subject matter gets a very special attention in the discussion of gender. Therefore in the study of folklore or women's folklore or in folklore relating to women for that matter this paper emphasize mainly two aspects. First, how the patriarchal society constructs women as such, secondly, identify and evaluate how women perform their own folklore in their own context. Regarding this matter when Rabindranath Tagore wrote an article on children's rhymes of Bengal, he identified them as boys' amusement rhymes, not as child amusement rhymes or girls amusement rhymes (Chakraborty, 2011).

These stereotype ideas of patriarchy construct a man stronger than a woman and this image of man and woman is noticed in every patriarchal society in the world. In order to incorporate gender issue in the study of folk society the relationship between gender ideologies and male bias has been explained from a social view point and from gender perspectives.

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