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Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' and Teachings on Patriarchy

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A vibrant, fair looking lady is my Maam with sharp eyes through the glass frames and greyish curly hair usually half let loose; the first feminist, from my understanding who have influenced the research scholars' ideologies. A resilient lady is she, who hates to see the feeble 'women selves' resigning everyday life to 'fate.' Her understanding of woman is not as mere victims, but as agents of change; the change makers defeating the so called deprived fates. 'Man is the creator of their destiny,' 'Make yourself strong' are her ideologies.

She is an associate professor in Centre for Manipur Studies of Manipur University. The experience shared from this centre bear lasting impressions in the personal epitaphs. Sharp expression conveying multiple questions at a time was the scariest item that each of us, her scholars would try to avoid every day through skipping possible direct eye contact with her. At the corridor in front of her room, we all would queue, pinching and pushing, urging hard each other to take lead in entering her room, which was utilised as classroom.

Loud, clear and dominating is her voice. She would talk for hours on gender, patriarchy, cultural constructs, social structures, and social reality. Never did she insisted humanity as wrong, however the humankind and its perception over the women; as unfavourable. She was of the view that the history of humankind within its hegemony, women have suffered enough. Her inspiring teachings convinced our intrinsic entirety. Hours long were the topics on different taste of gender. Wrapping up day's class was an informal discussion, refreshing ourselves with a cup of tea which helped ideas gained evolved into discourse of academic insights.

Analysing patriarchal society through Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex,' as lady live members of a traditional society bear breakthrough in personal anecdotes. Conceptual contestations with the social perception on 'woman' against personal understanding about 'who we are' ignited. Contextualising the book's theoretical perspectives in contemporary life world for a comparative analysis, by fixing ourselves on one end with frame of queries, while pointing against the social perception of women on the other hand, evolved as the crux. Decoding narratives of personal experiences to examine social milieu of gender constructs induced thereby through the analysis of Beauvoir's book.

Subsequently, counter stand against gender stereotype of women 'to be submissive' developed, leading towards dire attempt to revisit and redefine the traditional understanding of women. The degeneration of woman as 'other' not the 'self' served as the urgent clarion for dedication in gender studies. If it is not the female self who describes who she is, or how she should be, entwined by social perceptions through the internalisation dictating its expectations, then the refuting claim stood up in opposition 'who decides?' The traditional code of dignified 'ideal woman,' architected by socio-cultural construct is put to question;

“Hail to this patriarchal world who defines who and how we should be! Hail to those defining constructs of the society! Who decides? Tell me who decides? Let us define ourselves and develop a stratum of value; how we expect of ourselves! Why Second?? Why Second Sex?? Come out yourselves from all those worn out values of believing yourselves as second standard human beings, you all have the rights to live all your lives to the fullest. Come on...Come on dear! At least we can hope for a change, we should believe in ourselves to hope for a changed world ahead”

Influenced by the virtue of being a woman born and brought up in a society administered by strict traditional/customary laws, latent influence unplugged with the teachings percolating into self-introspection. Feminist standpoints unpacked questioning the ‘ideal woman’ which uphold the ‘gendered woman’. Manipur has a glorified history of separate women’s movements, they are even entitled as human rights defenders for their relentless endeavour to defend cases of human rights violations in the state. The ‘*Ima keithel*,’ mother’s market in the heart of Imphal city as the biggest business hub owned and run by women shows economic status of women. The description of the state could never be completed if mentions are not being made about the socio-economic and cultural contributions made by women. In fact women take frontal role in all facets of social life. Cognizing the significance, outsiders frequently confused Manipur whether as a matriarchal society. Nevertheless, the unravelled truth behind is, despite all such formidable roles, women’s participation in politics and decision making process is negligible. Therefore, the logical parallel negation of women’s involvement in decision making process against the pragmatic recognition and eulogised social participation, depicts presence of thresholds.

The discourse leads to an overwhelming enthusiasm to foster alive curiosity of inspiring the inner ‘selves’ for studies on lives of women. Self-transformation into resilient spirits dedicating for the better cause of women anticipated. Rejection of women’s self-devaluation by understanding themselves as victims; waiting and looking for humanitarian assistance emerged. Aspired by the influential circumstances, research scholars strategized to become the agents for change, the change makers. Time have revealed instances that women can be the healers. They have to stop trolling around in wilderness and should wipe tears of the many thousands, creating their own destiny and transforming the world a better place to live in. The Beijing Platform for Action, 2005 stressed over the women’s active involvement in conflict resolution of all levels disowning the stereotype of women as victims seeking humanitarian assistance. The patriarchal world cherished a tradition internalising social norms glorifying its hegemony. The binding social factor through the myths ‘*touhei* and *touheides*’ (do and don’ts), were/are the causative factors for many unfavourable situations for the women. So far, unfruitful attempts in finding ways out from these confusions induced women striving with plight of vulnerability.

The predominance of son preference culture as the guiding principle is yet another undeniable reality cutting across the essence of all societies. The country’s declining sex ratio testifies the validity. It is a direct co-variable indicating the country’s apathetic attitude and negligence of women. It raises concern over the discussions of empowerment, equality, gender streamlining, ‘*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*’ packages etc.

Picking one such worth sharing instance, is the bizarre media report picked up by ‘*The Hindu*’ newspaper on 20th September 2018 put the nation into shock. A woman from *Madurai*, *R. Ramuthai*, who was pregnant by 7 months, went for a medical treatment in a private clinic at *Usilampatti*. It was her fourth expecting baby, already survived by three daughters. After approaching a nurse named *P. Jothilakshmi*, she assured *Ramuthai* of carrying another female foetus. The nurse convinced the expecting mother to undergo abortion secretly without informing the hospital where she was working. The family was asked to pay Rs 15000 as fee. As per the statement of the deceased’s husband, his upset wife insisted on going through the abortion; grounded on the false information that he was compelled to give his consent and arrange the amount. Had it not been of the insistence, safety first was his concern and preferred of having the child safely irrespective of gender.

During procedure of the abortion, the expecting lady passed away. One FIR was lodged against the nurse by *Usilampatti Taluk Police*, she was sent to judicial custody and has been booked under Section 314 of the IPC (death caused by an act done with an intent to cause miscarriage), and Section 5(2) of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 and Section 15 (3) of the Indian Medical Council Act, 1956. Justice has proven effective in this case.

However, the most heart wrenching revelation of this case is the post mortem report. The Government Rajaji Hospital, where the post mortem of the lady took place disclosed that the lady had been carrying a male foetus. This incident is a clear indication that the height of son preference crossed its limit; women put their lives into risk for the bargain of having a son. Questions on amplitude of comparative son preference over the daughters in our society ring loud with this incident. Unfold riddle holds its grip of mankind on how it inclined itself towards the patriarchal system. Womenfolk themselves feel dignified in glorifying the hegemony, bound by the blind faith of the so called 'ideal woman'. The pending understanding remains as 'who decides?'

Seeking Inspiration for life

When intellectual chemistry grows acts and reacts vigorously; sleepless nights torture through wild curiosity to understand the essence and the beauty of our land's culture. Seeking a tranquilising agent, one such night, *Mangka Maynglambam's* Folk song '*Nongthang Leima*' in a unique folk rhythm was being played to mellow down the yearning drives. Simmering the curiosity, the folk song started tuning, '*Thang-Thang Thangnaro.*' Out of the blank headedness a sketchy idea of status, role and cultural significance of women in the society sprinkled. Unable to digest the correlation between reality and sentiment, later opted to evaluate the gender constructs engrossed in tradition and the life's reality as a 'woman'. The folk song is an artistic abstract from Meitei Mythology.

It is believed says that Atiya Guru Shidaba (Guardian God) advised Ashiba to create the universe. Accordingly, Ashiba started creating the universe, a task so admired by his younger brother '*Harapa,*' and so insisted on taking part in the creation. However, the brother's involvements proved more unintentional destructions. Bound by the situation, *Atiya Guru Shidaba,* Guardians God created *Nongthang Leima,* a charming angel assigning the task of distracting *Harapa's* attention. *Nongthang Leima* lured him away into the den of desire. Meanwhile, the creation and evolution process by *Ashiba*¹, was hence completed. The folk song '*Thang-Thang Thangnaro,*' of *Nongthang Leima* is the lyrics of subtle luring and courting. Had *Nongthang Leima* been not there, the creation process may not have been completed too. Her presence is acknowledged as crucial in the evolutionary myth of the community, also a pragmatic depiction of women's role in broader sense.

The charm of the women is symbolically portrayed with softness, delicacy, and submissiveness. Her gracefulness seems to lies in the soothing and nurturing the human relationships. The dichotomy of understanding a 'woman' starts deciphering form this standpoint. Whether a failure to inherit these so called 'feministic qualities' puts under question to the quality of being a woman? Beauvoir's the concept of 'woman' not being born but 'made' validates with striking note of how the idea of submissiveness portrays the quality of a woman.

Clifford Geertz's cultural analysis of 'thick description' and 'thin description, where two boys 'winking' at a same time and the people must be the vivid observer of two similar acts, and to classify which one is fake conveying conspiracy signals and which one is original. The basics lie in the fact of revisiting the gender prism for its socio-cultural refraction, to split its basic components.

Maam's teaching of Beauvoir's 'Second Sex' and patriarchy was the Greetz's 'thick description' to our young minds, strengthening the symbolic understanding of how we are expected and how we should be, as a 'woman.' However the social structure expects women as actors. The Thick Description is to be analysed by patriarchal social world. The phenomenological interpretation of the symbolic message is significant. The stance from where women themselves are actors and at the same time the observer, as agents of change is the message. But to initiate as observer differentiating the acts may eventually portray someone as radical. But the emerging social trends seem seeking responsible volunteer raising concerns.

Change.org, a global e-platform seeking solidarity of petitioners attempting to raise voice of issues which needs concern usually carried out series campaigns on numerous grounds. Out of the many petitions, gender sensitive two most remarkable issues are the petition asking to stop using stereotypic representational image

¹ Ngagom Ekashini, Meitei Mythologyda Nongthang Leima, in Macha Leima, a quarterly journal, Imphal, Vol.-17, June 2002, p.83.

of sexual abuse with a big hand stretching out to capture while an image of a girl, hair dishevelled sit crying bending over the shoulder helplessly. A predatory graphic invoking the message of victim's helplessness suits as representational image of sexual abuses. Why no image of women fighting back of perpetrators on attempted abuse is ever used? After the infamous Delhi Nirbhaya rape case, such representational images seem more appropriate, validating the gender stereotypes of women as weak and submissive. The petition started by Ankita Anand, Delhi, urged Network 18 to set an example by using gender-sensitive images to restore women's dignity.

Another petition is over the classification of 'Kinder Joy Eggs' into 'pink' and 'blue' for girls and boys respectively. Pink eggs are filled with toys which girls are supposed to like while the blue eggs with items supposed to be liked by boys. Colour classification of 'pink' and 'blue' itself is a reflection of gender stereotype. This petition was started by Suryan Isaac, Bangalore, India calling 'Stop gender stereotyping on Kinder Joy Eggs' urging the Kinder Joy manufacturing Company, Ferrero, to bring back gender neutral packaging.

Gender conceptualisation fermenting gender stereotypes is the phenomenal root behind all gender concerns. Backed by grounded principles of life by women, however classified may be a man's claim on height of gender consciousness level, will be doubtful and unacceptable. Internalised in the cultural constructs of the society are trends assigning ascribed status to women as a subordinate entity, devoid of independent identity.

R.K. Merton's functionalist theoretical paradigm of functional indispensability advocates that parts of society are seen to work together for the maintenance and integration of society as a whole. A discontinuity between culture and structure will exhibit dysfunctional aspect which eventually will leads to deviance in the society. Backed by theory, the validity of a man's claim for maintaining personal neutral outlook towards women is questionable as the social structure denied it. Socially non-conforming behaviour is unappreciated and unacceptable. And so, a man's claim of unbiased treatment become questionable enquiring when a whole system is corrupt, how can a unit of the system be expected for smooth functioning?

Nevertheless, the sovereignty of the country has its own mechanisms to measure the level of it. The demand for capital punishment and hang to death punishment of rapist is underway. The infamous Delhi Nirbhaya Rape Case, the demand for hang of the rapist is still on the stay. Another dichotomy of unsafeness and insecurity of women in the country is the story of a 27 years old woman veterinarian was brutally gang-raped by four men and burnt her body in Shamshabad on 28th November 2019. However, in the process to measure the graveness of the crime, all the four accused were shot death in an encounter with the police troop, as mentioned in the reports. The country celebrated the act while human rights organisations including Amnesty International expressed extrajudicial killings as not the solution to prevent rape. So, determining the graveness of mistakes also relies on specified mechanisms.

Being Weak and Pushed Aside

The individual characterisation as 'weak,' sometimes can be a strategic humiliation, overemphasising the points of incapability. To explicate as an instance, I would ponder upon a self-experience of being pushed aside from my dedication; without any warning. The explanation provided was for 'being weak.' Intrinsic meaning behind weak poised as an inexcusable deed. The stereotype of perceiving one as an imposition; a burden rather than a resource; is the explanation of being weak. However, the world failed to understand that everyone is known to be possessed with both sides of unique capabilities and weaknesses, in certainty. Criticising weakness as pick-up points of failure exhibits unfavourable attitude. Attitudinal grimace afflicts other's self-esteem and self-dignity. The parameter used to measure the graveness of the mistakes matters.

Responding to summons, once Maam served of me while I have been striving within myself; mustering courage from the wrecking self, I stood in front of her. The very instant she saw me, she inquired about my welfare. I tried my best to convince her as everything going alright, but it seems she read my expression and persisted on her queries. Unsatisfied with my answer;

“(with an exaggerated, restless expression in her loud dominating voice, with her right hands raising forward in a fist)What exactly has happened to you? Come on Dear! Just Come on! thousands time when I convince you, you are strong, you won’t believe me, and just ‘one time’ when someone tell you, ‘you are weak’ you just stick your faith on it.... Just go to hell if you believe yourself as ‘weak,’ I am just sick of such defeating, frustrating expressions. (Stressing again...) You never believe in my words, OK! Fine! Just belief yourself as weak and live a feeble life, Such rubbish....If you wish to cry, you can lean on my shoulder...but only when you believe yourself as strong...”

Besides the reality of weakness, the way how Maam indirectly pulled me up to become stronger, melted and mellowed me down to neutrality, rejuvenating the lost zeal of life and start convincing the inner self to become ‘strong’. I could understand why she reacted sharply. Observing life experiences explored her understandings on social conditionings. My ups and downs, thick and thins, she knew.

Decades long, it took to convince positively people around me to win their confidence. As a member of a traditional society, through hard work, sincerity and dedication, much later granted me the ‘liberty’ to learn flapping wings to soar up to horizons. Succeeding after fair attempts, painted the nails as a mark of ‘living,’ with colour crush, and reminding the self as a woman, mustering the courage, I decided to come out seeking for guidance to the wild curiosity to understand my land the ways of people’s lives.

Unfortunately, many strangers whom I meet, on my path to find a guide for my yearning aspirations, seem to misinterpret me. The challenges faced, the struggles that gone through, the sacrifices being made and the constrains met against determination for the set priority, would never be possible for them to recreate even in their dreams those situations. Later. painted nails mark the colour of determination, through which I resolved not be a ‘weak self’ but a ‘strong’ being. Maam finally remarked;

“If you are to survive in this stormy world, sway against the rhythm of strong current, otherwise if you just stand straight and upright, straight trees cut first, so “Sway” and foster alive your passion to learn more and grow better...”

Finally, arrived at a resolve that someday in the future if I could establish a stand of my own, and if could stand up again from the fallen step, would stand head held high, as a strong woman. Determined to work hard, if could succeed, will convey the message to the striving ladies that surviving with a challenge adds colours to the meaning of life. September 5th of 2018, Teacher’s Day, I thought of giving Maam, a surprise. Dire attempt is made to start recollecting the worthwhile thought provoking moments we shared. Summarising the days, crafting started to make the memories timeless. An effort is being put over the chunk of life experience, to become a part of woman’s narratives. The shift from modernism towards post-modernism acknowledge the importance of shift from macrocosms to microcosms. Digging down deeper to the particular life aspects, is a synonymous study of social structure; from particularism towards universalism. Life accounts and oral narratives as essence for women’s study must be set forth as lives of women and their experiences are undocumented. Claims and counter claims of existential explanation of the women’s life through social expectation as ‘gendered woman’ need be recorded. Traversing the years, Maam’s remark to ‘sway’ kept ringing whenever the lowered tune Mangka’s folk song is being played;

“Re-Re-Re Ra Re-Hei, Re-Re-Re Ra Re-Hei Re”

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