

# STATUS OF WOMEN IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

In the past women in India were dependent on men. Their religious practices and traditions ascribed for their subordination to men in all matters. They were denied education, access to social justice and equality. They were also unaware of their basic rights due to their ignorance. With the arrival of the British, the Christian missionaries were shocked to see the dependant state of women and wanted to build schools to educate them about their rights, along with their true intention of spreading their religion. More alarming at that time were the practices of Sati, child marriage, female infanticide, Devadasi system, pardha system and others which they wanted to free women from and also create a political platform for them. Independent India saw more liberated women who have created a literature of their own, placing women in the context of the changing social scenario. But increasing education, better job opportunities and awareness of rights and privileges of women have forced her to ponder and define her role in society. The objective of the study is to analyze the portrayal of women in today's world in comparison to the past. An attempt to understand whether the modern women is truly liberated of her ignorance or has she entered a new arena that has more shackles to offer.

**Key words:** Patriarchy, Subordination, traditions, women empowerment, Exploitation, Education, Modernity, Western influence.

## Introduction:

The Indian women surrendered meekly to the supremacy of the patriarchal system and accepted the roles assigned by traditions and allowed themselves themselves to be dominated in the past. Indian women today have greater exposure with education and economic independence that has put them in a conflicting state where though they desire independence they also dread their traditional role and are hesitant to courageously walk out of the situation. Women now was faced with the challenging task of redefining her status which is not an easy endeavor. Women writers have caught the Indian women in this flux and have portrayed them realistically both psychologically as well as physically in their novels. Such literature has certainly contributed to a fresh exploration of the role and status of women in the Indian society.[1]

## Findings

Women in prehistoric India were held in high admiration. The woman according to the Vedas and the Upanishads was considered as a mother or goddess and in the Manusmriti, a woman was in the protection of her father and her brother and then in the care of husband and finally her son. In the early Vedic age, girls were considered precious and were given the facilities of education. Remarriage of widows was permitted.

As time went by, the status of woman was further lowered as Muscle power and money power conquered the societies. While men fought the wars and ran the enterprises of industrial production, they considered themselves superior to woman. Added to this in the later Vedic period, daughters were considered as a source of misery and the practice of polygamy further deteriorated the status of woman.

In the later civilizations women were not permitted to go to schools. In the Gupta period, they were tolerable to listen to the scriptures. During the medieval period, the practices of parda system, dowry and sati came into being. Sati and Polygamy were glorified. It is thought that the right place for woman is the home. Her main duty is to cook and do all other tedious jobs. They are considered fit for producing and bringing up children. Thus, women have been deprived of their rightful place in society and exploitation has been going on for centuries.[2]

The struggle for equality, justice and liberty is prevalent since ages only the nature of women's movements has been changing over time. Women have been subjected to implicit as well as explicit forms of discrimination. However, the pre-independence issues were quite different from the post independent ones because of the different level of growth and development of the society. Hence, the form of struggle was also different from each other. The struggle in the colonial period consisted mainly against the rights of women from the inhuman practice of sati, where the wife was supposed to burn herself alive in the funeral pyre of her husband. Adding to this was the ill-treatment of widows. Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought against this evil practice and it was finally abolished by Lord William Bentinck in 1829. [3]

Dowry has become common. The more educated and well employed a groom, the higher is the dowry demand. The birth of a girl child is, therefore, considered inauspicious. In many parts of India, women are viewed as an economic liability despite contribution in several ways to our society and economy. The scenario is not very different in modern times where even educated and earning girls find it difficult to find a suitable match that doesn't demand dowry. Especially in case of arranged marriages. The parents of certain communities offer dowry in the form of cash and kind as a mark of their prestige. They contribute in keeping this evil alive even in a time where love marriages and live-in relationships are common. In the past, Early marriages lead to teenage pregnancies which often prove risky to both the mother and the child.

On a positive note women in the past worked almost equally to men be it agricultural fields or other jobs but, the difference is, they had less stress. They enjoyed taking care of children,

elders and husband along with other responsibilities of the house. They earned their respect in society and were able to handle any situation well because they were emotionally well balanced.

In the colonial period women were dominated by men but, only to the extent of satisfying their male ego. The women understood their place and created prominence for themselves in domestic and home front. Their emotional intelligence was so balanced that though, they appeared submissive to the men of their homes and were safer in the protection of their fathers, brothers and husbands. There were also exceptional cases of women who stepped beyond the comforts of the house and worked in various fields including fighting for independence and making a mark in history. In spite of the prevalence of many social evils the colonial women were strong and had the capability to manage their lives.

The post colonial women were given more importance. The constitution that was drafted after independence made many provisions for the safety of women and for their betterment, through education, reservations and equality. Women too began to strive hard and excelled in all fields that were once dominated by men. We have seen remarkable leadership of women as politicians, as entrepreneurs, as astronauts, as sportspersons who bring glory to the nation. The prominent line of difference between man and women began to become thin till the beginning of modern times that saw women getting greatly influenced to the western culture and fashion. They failed to strike a balance between the Indian and the Western cultures. They got carried away with their education and modern lifestyle and made themselves vulnerable to the men who considered women as objects of pleasure. Rape, sexual harassment, molestation, eve-teasing, forced prostitution, etc are a common affair today. The crime graph against women is increasing at an alarming rate today. The condition of an Indian widow is quite deplorable. At home, the woman's contribution towards home as a housewife is not recognized.

The women of today play a major role not only nation building but also in supporting the family financially. The cost of living in cities is so high that it demands both men and women to work to earn and manage their expenses. A majority of people work in private or corporate sectors as government sector jobs are hardly prevalent. The work pressure is so high that every day is a struggle. The employees are constantly kept in fear of losing their jobs which adds to their stress. Today's job market has fewer jobs but many aspirants which lead to underemployment. Thereby women are forced to bear the exploitation of men in workplace due to their desperate need to sustain in their jobs. Sexual harassment at work places is also a common affair. It is a shame that even after over sixty years of independence women are still exploited. Women have now started demanding their rights. They want to work side by side with men and contribute towards the social, economic and political development of the society.

[2]

women in the colonial period depended on others to voice their problems however, post colonial women being educated, hidebound and aware were ready to speak and stand up for

themselves. For instance Sabarimala Shrine entry movement. The post colonial period has seen a rise in incidents of sexual abuses against women in the form of rapes- pre-marriage or marital. News of voice against Triple talaq shows how women are empowering against draconian traditional rules. Government of India initiated to make National Commission for Women and established it in 1992, and 73rd, 74th Constitutional Amendments gave reservation to women not less than 33% in local bodies. This shows “Equality” towards women. The evolution of India as a society since the last two centuries or more has focused on the issues and movements concerning women. However, it’s high time that women of our society feel safe and secure and the issues despite of evolving in nature are solved sooner.[3]

Literature is considered as the best tool for the stressing on any issue or to reiterate any position. In Post-independent India specially though constructive contribution of women in the past two or three decades has been great and continuously increasing, which the male-dominated Indian literature consciously ignored their supporting role. The more recent women may not be as prolific as their predecessors yet they also deal with themes related to women and society or more specifically the man-women relationship in their novels. Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* visualizes the whole cultural scenario from a locus of isolation, oppression, depression, frustration and amalgamation.[1]

In *Woman and Indian Modernity: Readings of Colonial and Postcolonial Novels*, Nalini Natarajan, through readings of 20th century novels and (in some cases) their film versions, explores how ‘gender is reconstructed in the literary representations of modernity’ Natarajan’s study is a useful and timely contribution to the field of social ‘modernity’ and reform in India as well as to larger discourses on colonial, cultural, and feminist studies that continuously engage with, debate, and examine the intersections of gender, nationalism and modernity. Natarajan’s book presents exciting ideas and is a welcome addition to ongoing academic discussions of the ways in which policies and cultural practices affect and shape notions of women and modernity in colonial and postcolonial contexts.[5]

In the novel of the 1960s women in Indian fiction were depicted as ideal creatures having various virtues, with no concept of revolt while the later novels portray. Women as educated and conscious of their right and privileges demanding their proper place in society. Undeniably, recent years have witnessed the impact of western feminist theories put forward by writers like Simone de Beauvoir [*The Second Sex*, 1952], Betty Friedan [*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963] and Kate Millet [*Sexual Politics*, 1970]. Under these influences the Indian women writers have successfully attempted to break the literary and social norm of the past. They delve deep into the psyche of their characters and also herald a new concept of morality. At the outset writers like kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha de, Bharati Mukherjee and some others have denied any sort of feminist bias in their writings but an in depth analysis proves a strong feminist intent, for women's issue pertains to be the chief concern of their plot.[1]

## Conclusion

In comparison to the colonial women, today's women are educated, employed, earning very well, have made a mark in every field and most importantly are multitaskers, taking care of family and career. But with the increase in the rate of crime against women and innocent children, gives us an alarming contradiction on the status of women in our country. On the one hand we boast of women empowerment and on the other we have to confront the reality of women abuse like rape, dowry, female infanticide, child abuse, murder and cyber bullying. The modern time has only seen increase in crime against women when compared to the past. This makes us retrospect whether modernization worked for the betterment and upliftment of women or has our Democracy failed to make provision in law to safeguard the dignity of women. The process of investigating and punishing the accused for crime against women in India is very slow. The corrupt system is one of prime reasons for delayed judgment and no strict punishments. Only quick prosecution and severe punishments can restore the safety of women in the country. The best way is to educate our sons to respect women. It is not the fault of an innocent child who is abused sexually; it is the improper upbringing of the boys that is pivotal to crime against women. A progressive society is one that respects women and understands her role in nation building.

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