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SEEING LIKE A FEMINIST

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Abstract: The present article is a book review on the famous book “Seeing like a Feminist” by Nivedita Menon. The book is published by Zubaan and Penguin Books India. The complex feminist thoughts have been highlighted in the book regarding different issues. Written in a lucid manner this book made the readers to think about different hidden violence that women face in their daily life. With lot more pros than the cons this ‘little red book’ will always consider to a one of the pillars of feminist literature of India.

Keywords: Women, Feminist, Patriarchy.

“*Narivad, behna, dheere dheere aayi!*” that is ‘Feminism, sister, comes slowly, slowly’ (Menon, 2012, p.221). Feminism comes to challenge the systemic inequalities that women face on a daily basis. Various literatures come along with it. *Seeing Like a Feminist* is one of the recent work on feminist literature. Nivedita Menon, an eminent feminist scholar and a Professor of Political Thought in Jawaharlal Nehru University penned down a vivid picture of complex feminist thought in her book “*Seeing Like A Feminist*”. For Menon feminism is “not about a movement of final triumph over patriarchy but about the gradual transformation of the social field so decisively that the old markers shift forever” (Menon, 2012, p.222). The title of the book is inspired by James Scott’s *Seeing like a State* but there is an essential difference between the two way of ‘seeing’ operate. Menon writes “when one sees the world like a feminist though, with the gaze of a feminist it’s rather like activating the Reveal Formatting function of Microsoft word. It reveals the strenuous, complex formatting that goes on below the surface of what looked smooth and complete”(Menon,2012,p.vii).

The book starts with an analogy of the concept of nude makeup which makes one’s look as natural as if no makeup has been put, to that of social order which also requires the maintenance and performance of the age-old prescribed rules and rituals over and again just to move towards the natural order of things. Patriarchy is one of the naturalized elements of the society which creates hierarchy of men at the top and women at the bottom. Menon clarifies that a feminist perspective recognizes that hierarchical organizing of the world around gender which accorded different rules and regulations. The book is divided into six inter related chapters: Family, Body, Desire, Sexual Violence, Feminists and ‘Women’, and Victims or Agents. Each chapter highlights the firm hold of patriarchy and its effect on women not only in India but also elsewhere.

In the very first chapter that is Family, Menon describes the prevailing understanding of family as one which is highly patriarchal and it consists of a man, his wife and ‘his’ children. Menon highlights the institution of family to be based on inequality as it perpetuate particular forms of private property ownership and lineages that is, patrilineal forms of property and descent, where property and the family ‘name’ flow from father to sons (Menon,2012). Because of this women have unequal access to the financial resources and when sometimes through some reform laws State want to give equal property rights to the women there emerged a conflict between the imperatives of the State and the family. Family also perpetuates widespread physical and structural violence against women. ‘Honour killing’ is a good example of such types of violence. Sexual division of labour is a key feature of this institution but this is not natural and it has nothing to do with biology. Women are forced to confine to some socially assigned works and professions and it was assumed that they cannot rise above that socially assigned ‘glass ceiling’. But

it is not true in reality which Menon describes in her book by examples that expect pregnancy no work is related to biology as all other works like harvesting, cooking etc can be done by both men and women and therefore wages of both must same. The only purpose of sex based work segregation is to maintain not only the family but also the economy because, in the words of Menon “the economy would collapse like a house of cards if this unpaid domestic labour had to be paid by somebody, either by the husband or the employer”(Menon,2012,p.15). The issues of dowry, collapse of marriage etc. are also narrated in the very first chapter. The chapter ends with the description of new reproductive technologies that pose a challenge to patriarchy.

The second chapter talks about hegemonic understanding of body. Body is regarded as the last citadel of sex difference which is visible not only through nature but also by different kinds of discourses. Body differences are seen through the ideas of masculinity and femininity but understanding of these two are different across time and space and also they are not biologically stable features at all times. Menon talks about heterosexual matrix(a term used by Judith Butler) which says that human bodies possess one of two fixed sexual identities, with each experiencing sexual desire only for the ‘opposite sex’ (Menon,2012,p.70). It does not take into consideration the multiplicity of bodies such as eunuch. In trying to have a heterosexual matrix, Menon is giving the example of gender verification tests in sports just to assign every human being in one of the two sex categories.

Desire is the third chapter of the book that takes forward the earlier arguments on sexuality. Menon used the term ‘heteronormativity’ to denote the normalizing and naturalizing tendency towards the concept of Indian society. Though not traditionally but in 1861 through the introduction of section 377 of Indian Panel Code same sex was criminalized as it is assumed that ‘normal’ sexual behavior springs from nature, and it has nothing to do with culture or history or human choices (Menon,2012,p.93). During the decade of 1990s with the awareness towards HIV/AIDS and safe sex, a counter politics of marginalized section emerged towards the statuesque of society in the form of ‘queer’ politics that connects its agenda with the left wing politics and make it possible to talk about sex outside the purview of law and it is able to bring some positive changes too. On September 6, 2018 the apex court of India gave the verdict that section 377 is unconstitutional and decriminalized the same.

The fourth chapter of the book deals with the issue of sexual violence. The presence of this type of violence can be seen in workplace to universities in many forms, of which rape is the extreme one which is many a time used as a political weapon. While talking about rape, Menon give two standpoints – Patriarchal and Feminist. According to the former it is crime against the honour of the family and for the latter it is against the autonomy and bodily integrity of a woman (Menon, 2012, p.113). In the typical Indian society rape is always seen from the patriarchal view point therefore incidents of getting the rapist to marry the raped woman to restore ‘social order’ are found. Menon narrates that only ‘good’ women which do not include prostitute, widow etc deserve protection and that the cry of the women outside the purview of ‘good’ women go unheard. Menon gives one example of how the sexual exploitation of the widows by their own family members go unpunished. Against such scenario Menon showcases the feminist standpoint by highlighting some feminist campaigns like ‘pink chaddis’, ‘slut walk’ etc. Feminists demand for equal access to public space not for safety and protection but for ‘equality of risk’ (Menon, 2012, p.143).

Fifth chapter of the book is named as “Feminists and Women”. Here the author points out that feminism is not only about gender but also how gender has been made complicated by different issues like religion, caste, class, queer politics , etc. Menon draws the example of Shah Bano case to highlight how religious identity complicates gender. Shah Bano case depicts the conflict between personal law and uniform civil code. Amidst such contradiction it is always the women who suffer. In another section she brings two disparate dress codes together – the veil and the miniskirt, the one so “imprisoning” and the other so “liberating”- within a common critique of the pressure to dress in certain ways, and the need to think afresh as to what would empower women in a particular context(Mary E John,2013,p.25). This chapter also sheds light upon the issue of women and peace. Women have a common bond which helps them to play a special role in the process of achieving peace. In many conflicting areas like North East India, Kashmir, Sri Lanka etc, women have been playing the role of peace activist.

In the last chapter of the book that is “Victims or Agents?” Menon talks about plurality of interpretations among the feminists in regard to operation of power relation in specific context. Through the issues of women’s commodification, sex work, bar dance, human trafficking, commercial surrogacy, pornography, etc. Menon tries to showcase ‘when are women to be considered as victims needing protection and when as active agents engaging with power and carving out their own spaces?’(Menon, 2012, p.175). In all these issues the question of choice come and Menon very wisely highlights that many a times though it seems to be a choice of women to be in a profession like bar dancer or sex worker but there exist some sorts of constraints which lead the women to make such choices. In the words of Menon “often, women choose options that go counter to normative feminist values. What we face here is the contradiction between two core beliefs of feminism. One, the belief in the autonomy of women and their ability to act as willing agents; two, the simultaneous belief in the hegemony of dominant power-laden values that constrain the ‘freedom to choose’ ”(Menon,2012,p.212). Menon concludes the book with a brief glimpse to the concepts of women’s empowerment, women’s Movements in India and also on the South Asian feminism.

The book is written in a very lucid manner and it is able to make the readers understand about how the world appears to a feminist. Menon is successful to a large extend to highlights the parameters of patriarchy. Discrimination against women is not a new thing. Women are not getting prior dignity in their life and in such a junction Menon beautifully portrayed the position of

women through the six chapters of the book. What make the book more interesting are the different case studies and examples from social realities that the author cited which helps the readers to know the background of the concept and it also help to maintain the connection of the readers to the book. One of the strength points of the book is that it helps in realizing the hidden violence against women which they go through just because being in the patriarchal system. This book is able to generate questions in the minds of its readers and to think beyond traditional understandings of the existing interpretations of different issues. While going through the book one may finds some shortcomings too. Some themes that have been covered seem to give more explanations while some found to be very brief. Moreover, Menon clarifies in the very beginning that this book is not about India but it has global relevance but in many instances one may feel that the author's personal background of being an Indian is highly reflected as most of examples in the book is drawn from Indian Society and as a reader it was expected to have some more global considerations over gender issues in the book. However *Seeing Like A Feminist* can be considered as one of the pillars of the literature of feminist writings. The book will be of great help in gaining an in-depth understanding on gender issues through the feminist perspective.

References:

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