

Women Empowerment as Reflected in Indian Literature with special reference to Ancient Epic, Contemporary Writing and Bollywood Lyric

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Abstract:

Indian cultural, religious, and traditional values have always been cherished for women centric ideologies, be it worshipping a Devi or calling one's land of birth as Mother land. Women have always played a pivotal role in determining the societal direction. There has been ups and downs in the importance of the role she played. But it is an undeniable fact that women of India have always displayed powerful character and presence. This paper focuses on the reflection of women's empowerment in Indian writings. It explores mainly three characters: first Draupadi in "Mahabharata" by Ved Vyasa, second the narrator of the short story "The Intrusion" by Shashi Deshpande and third the girl singing one of the Bollywood songs from the movie "Ae Dil Hai Mushkil." These three examples have been picked from ancient epic to writings of recent times and fall in the categories ranging from classic to modest. But these have been chosen deliberately to encompass the enormous spectrum of Indian history, society, and culture where women have always been successful in making a mark for herself.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Draupadi, Epic, Mahabharata, Intrusion, Bollywood.

Indian literature has played a crucial role in portraying the struggles and triumphs of women, shedding light on their aspirations for dignity, autonomy, equality, and liberation. Although many literary works have portrayed female characters as submissive, but at the same time many works have showcased assertive and self-reliant figures as well. Representation of women empowerment in literature has a huge contribution to social change. Women possess power, though sometimes they fail to realize it due to external factors like patriarchy, societal pressure etc. It can be said that sometimes women are like 'kasturi mrig' or the 'musk deer' which is unaware of its strong and charming essence that it possesses. This paper is an endeavour to cruise through literature and celebrate the empowered women of India and the world.

The first case which is taken into consideration is the 'Cheerharan' episode of the great epic "Mahabharata" by Ved Vyasa. In this episode Draupadi had been pulled by hair, brought in front of the Kuru clan, tortured, battered and above all humiliated in front of the entire Rajsabha. Though she forgave her husbands, she demanded justice. She stood by her husband's side not just to fulfil her duty as a wife but to make sure that she asserts her rights and never loses sight of her goal. A beaten and battered body, when recovers, forgets the physical pain. But the pain of Humiliation only increases with time. Here we can sense the tremendous power and resilience shown by Draupadi who never gave up, instead she stood firm with dignity and waited for justice.

In the second case the narrator of the short story "The Intrusion" voices her discomfort when she was left alone with her husband in a room. Although it was her honeymoon but she hinted at the fact that psychological bonding is central to any relationship and physical intimacy requires consent of both the partners even if a couple is married. At the end when her husband forces himself on her, she calls that an act of 'Intrusion.' Shashi Deshpande describes the agony of the narrator in the short story "The Intrusion" and writes, "And the cry I gave was not for the physical pain, but for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself." (41) She feels that her private space has been intruded by her husband which belongs solely to her. The story conveys the message that a woman is the owner of her body, mind, and soul. If anyone intends to come close to her then he must submit himself to her

and it is she who should have the power to give permission. Although the protagonist in the short story could not take that decision for herself but her strong inner voice clearly conveyed the message. Astha Srivastava writes in her article “Marital Rape in India: A Legal and Social Analysis,” “India’s legal system does not recognize marital rape as a criminal offence. Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) specifically exempts non-consensual intercourse by a man with his wife from the definition of rape, provided the wife is not below 15 years of age.” (Srivastava) She further opines, “Laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, address physical abuse but remain silent on sexual violence within marriage.” She also writes, “Women’s organization and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have long demanded the removal of the marital rape exemption in Section 375.” (Srivastava) This short story raised strong concerns for marital rape. It was published in 1993 but after almost 40 years marital rape remains exempted from criminal prosecution under Indian law. Here it must be noted that countries like Australia, Canada, South Africa, the USA, and many others have enacted laws that criminalise marital rape.

The third case deals with the struggles and ultimate triumph of the girl who is battling with the pain of break up. “Mere Saiyan Ji Se Aaj Maine Breakup Kar Liya” is a popular Bollywood song from the movie “Ae Dil Hai Mushkil,” written by Amitabh Bhattacharya. The lyrics of the song portrays a bold woman who refuses to break down due to an adulterous relationship. Instead, she liberates herself by taking charge of the situation and breaks up with her boyfriend. This shows that she is mentally and emotionally a very strong character. The song continues to convey bold expressions and the girl confesses, “Oh dil pe patthar rakh ke/ Muh pe makeup kar liya.” (Bhattacharya) She says that she did feel sad about the failed relationship but rather than wasting time in crying, she walked to a parlour and got herself ready for future encounters. She even rekindled her friendship with old friends. The song touches on the themes of heart break, liberation, self-discovery, and empowerment. It must be noted that there was a time when divorce was a taboo, but the song points out at the changed times and in a way encourages women to navigate new realms of relationships rather than getting suffocated in an unhealthy relationship. The song also challenges patriarchal norms where women are often expected to prioritize their relationships over their own desires and well-being. Through the lens of feminism we can see that the song celebrates the independence and power of a woman. It reflects the picture of young Indian women who are seeking to break free from traditional patriarchal norms. The patriarchal society keeps on creating hurdles on the way of women and sometimes it seems as if they are successful in their endeavours to defeat her, but women as always, bounce back with double force and assert their presence.

At last, it can be said that literature is like a magnifying glass. As a magnifying glass converges the sun’s power, and then by giving it a direction at a certain angle, can create fire. Similarly, literature too has the power to ignite the fire of passion and sensibility by converging powerful ideas and thoughts in the right direction, which could empower not only women but also benefit the society.

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