

Equalizing Inequalities of Gender through Education

Analysis of Kamala Bhasin's poem 'BECAUSE I AM A GIRL, I MUST STUDY'

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Abstract

Women's education has always been a tool for social, political and economic changes in any country. A stepping stone to one's success, education creates confidence and readiness in the people for varied professions. Many women are educated formally right from primary education to doctoral level. But one should beware that life itself is a great dictionary for humans to receive education from experiences of life. 'Life is our Dictionary' said Emerson in The American Scholar. True to this, the experiences of a person become a life dictionary where one can find meaning and answers to all the queries. So this paper attempts to explore how women desire and strive to obtain education formally to carve a niche for themselves and accomplish gender equality amidst inequalities thrust on them in the society and respond to real-life situations, consequently changing their lifestyles.

Keywords: Women, Education, Confidence, Readiness, Gender Equality, Identity, Real life.

Introduction

Indian literature in English evolved after a long struggle of efforts put by indigenous people of India. The creative writers in India added color to their literary writings by expressing their life experiences. Indian literature has been shaped by its history and culture. Indian writers have been described as creative writers because of their skill and talent in depicting the ethos in a foreign language- English. In all genres of literature, beginning from poetry to the novel as an art form, Indian writers have excelled. They are earning an immense amount of critical fame. Meenakshi Mukherji is of the view:

there are a lot of accomplished women authors in India, today.

Writing is a serious profession in India now, and it is something

we should be proud of. Women are more expressive and want

to publish books and articles about everyday life, and also about topics that are taboo in Indian women's writing (99).

Writing as 'Discourse' for Proclamation of Equality

Over the years women's writing in India has advanced to express universal themes such as female experiences which deal with repeated hegemonies of patriarchy. In the process they have selected the problems and issues encountered by women as the central topics of their books. They have painted the realm of women candidly with vigor. Writing by women has imparted a new outlook to Indian literature. It has been a robust platform for feminist statements. A.N. Prasad expresses in his book titled Indian Women Novelists in English

Woman....in the modern times have shown
their mettle in every field and in some respects,
far better than the male. If we dive deep into the
history of women in English, we come to the
conclusion that Indian women have shown their
worth both qualitatively and quantitatively and are
showing even today without any full stop(4).

In India women writers are making strong strides in tune with the pace and energy of male writers. They have displayed their authenticity, versatility and honesty in portraying the native ethos of their motherland India. Not only are women novelists from India becoming reputed in their homeland but extending their horizons globally. Their artistic talents are relished by all the readers of the world. Akin to African women authors, Indian women writers too reveal the connectivity; inter dependence and vitality of women in the environment and society. For writers of both countries, writing becomes an instrument of discourse, self analysis and to put forth their perspectives on the wrong assumptions and judgments passed on women. Writing becomes a medium to voice out their opinions against traditional, patriarchal and societal mores and customs attributed on women blindly. Hence discourse analysis, women poets and novelists choose to give a trumpet call to men and society that they are human beings created by supreme god with a unique self- identity.

Buddhism paved the way for the origins of poetry writing by women in India. As a religion, Buddhism offered freedom and equality for women and permitted them to declare their views openly for the first time. Women were given the privilege to refrain themselves from the confines of domestic life and this turned out to become a principal element in the emergence of literary writings by women. So the credit for the rise of anthology of women's literature in India goes to nuns of Therigatha, who were referred as contemporary writers of Buddha. One of these, poem goes like this,

So free am I, so gloriously free,
free from three petty things - from mortar,
from pestle and from my twisted lord.

(Tharu and Lalita, 68).

Women's Poetic Prowess

India has been flourishing as an abode of literary haven since 18th century and is home to various women who have penned mind-blowing poems that have enticed the readers. Kamala Surayya known by her pseudonyms of Madhavi Das and Kamala Das was an English poetess and Malayalam author. She is audacious in presenting things from women's point of view. Sarojini Naidu, the first woman governor of India was an acclaimed poetess. Her poems are remarkable for the melodic style. Another interesting and esteemed writer known as 'poetess of motherhood' is Balamani Amma from Kerala. Like Shakespeare, she was illiterate, but the inspiration to become a poet was drawn from her uncle. The 16th century Hindu poetess Mira Bai, acknowledged as one of the most key figures of the Bhakti movement in India was noted for her outright and fearless disregard for social customs and repressions. Sashi Deshpande provided a tool of focusing women's issues through her novels. The protagonist in the novel *That Long Silence* determines to emerge as a new woman by breaking a long silence of subjugation and suffering through writing. In *Binding Vines* Deshpande states:

For women, poetry is not a luxury.
It is a vital necessity of our existence.
It forms the quality of the light within
which we predicate our hopes and dreams
toward survival and change, first made
into language, then into idea, then into
more tangible action(56).

Even great men like Dr. Ambedkar advocated and believed in women's education for society to prosper. He exclaimed:

Be educated, be organized and be agitated. We shall see
better days soon and our progress will be accelerated if
male education is persuaded side by side with female education

(Dr. Ambedkar's address in a meeting 18th July, 1927).

Mahatma Gandhi championed the cause of women's education. He expressed that women's empowerment can be attained through education, the only instrument for women to confront

problems like gender inequality, male domination, depriving of rights and freedom and the desire to live life in the society. On one occasion, Gandhiji spoke the following words about the importance of women as equal to man in the society:

To call women the weaker section is a libel
It is man's injustice to women....
If by strength is meant moral power, then
women is immeasurably superior to man
has she not greater intuition, is she not more
self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers
of endurance, and has she not greater courage?
Without her, man could not be. If non-violence
is the law of our being, the future is with women
(Young India, 30th April, 1930).

Kamala Bhasin's Literary Achievement

India's most prestigious feminist-activist, social scientist, poet and author Kamla Bhasin has labored 48 long years in the spheres of women's rights, human development, peace and democracy. Right now she is with Sangat, a network of South Asian feminists and also the Coordinator for South Asian One Billion Rising campaign. Bhasin's writings revolve around issues of gender, and girls and women's education. She believes in advocating feminist ideas in her works. She believed that in ushering effective change, sloganeering and community mobilization should be accompanied by each other. Bhasin was bittered that woman in South Asian countries were imprisoned by a multitude of traditional rites and beliefs. The concept of feminism oscillates from time to time and place to place. The investigations pertaining to the position and role of women scrutinized the way in which male writers have treated and portrayed images of women in their works. This paved the way for other women writers began to demolish concepts related to gender inequalities by creating education opportunities. For instance Bhasin's own life experiences gave her the sources for her writings on women's issues and concerns. For her, feminism is a conflict between two ideologies. One that elevated men and gives them power, and the other, that advocated equality. In a conversation with Lilinaz Evans, the Co-founder of the Twitter Youth Feminist Army, Bhasin expressed her views on feminism in the following memorable words:

.....I have known men
who have worked for women's rights their whole life.
Feminism is not biological: feminism is an ideology.

(Article in New Internationalist July-August 2014).

Women's Education for Equalizing Inequalities

Education has always been a tool for social, political and economic changes in any country. A stepping stone to one's success, education creates confidence and readiness in the people for varied professions. Many women are educated formally right from primary education to doctoral level. Nonetheless, life itself is a great dictionary for humans to receive education from experiences of life. 'Life is our Dictionary' said Emerson in *The American Scholar*. True to this, the experiences of a person become a life dictionary where one can find meaning and answers to all the queries. Women desire to obtain education formally to carve a niche for themselves and accomplish gender equality amidst inequalities thrust on them in the society and respond to real-life situations, consequently changing their lifestyles. The works of women writers in English reflects the realistic picture of contemporary society. Indian women authors are lauded globally for this trait of writing in their works. The pinnacle of success culminates so loftily that women writers are gaining ground by breaking into the field of literary works of enduring value and make the Indian readers proud and elated.

Literature has always been a handy weapon in exploring gender relations. A re-reading of literature assumes a critical aspect of re-constituting the idea of female subjectivity. Thanks to the British rule in India as it became a welcome shower which opened up avenues for women to obtain formal and innovative education. The effort of Raja Ram Mohan Roy inspired by English education plan to revolutionize the change in the portrayal of women in India is noteworthy. Firoz Alam wrote;

Ram Mohan Roy was a man of intellect and foresight.

He was aware that the English language was key to progress. (301)

So Mohan Roy's contribution should be applauded because he believed that society will be respected only if women were respected.

The "empowering" effect of education matters a lot for women. The role of education is not just to acquire some degrees, but to make women think and work things for themselves. Kamala Bhasin's poem "Because I Am a Girl, I Must Study" is a fine illustration to display her views on compulsory education for girls and women. In an Open Letter to Kamla Bhasin 'For Transforming Me into a Contemplative Feminist' Paribha Vashist writes:

Girls need to be educated not to meet the 'educated' criteria in the marriage match-making process, but to find their strength of purpose in life and to be financially strong and independent (Staff Picks, 2nd September, 2020).

Education of women helps them to march forward courageously. It becomes a medium to abolish gender inequality and injustice. Education guarantees economic independence, creates employment and gives shelter. It assists them to lead revered life with self-identity in the society and acknowledge their rights. Hence education is essential for women to obtain their identity and equality. Gandhiji advocated appropriate education for women as he believed that women's status will change.

Kamala Bhasin like Gandhiji supported and favored girl's and women's education. In her remarkable poem titled 'Because I Am a Girl, I Must Study', Kamala Bhasin expresses her feministic attitudes of the need for education. Bhasin believed that the only instrument through which girls and women can overcome and loudly declare and eliminate gender inequalities is through education. She believed that education is an armor and shield for women to protect themselves from all forms of discrimination.

Appreciation of the Poem

Bhasin's poem is typical feminist one. The central themes of the poem are education of girls and women, education for empowerment of women, education for equalizing inequalities of gender, education the path to attain self-identity and freedom of mind. The poem is written with a wealth of meaning to propagate inequalities faced by girls and women in the society. The composition of the whole poem is structured around just 22 lines and evokes a powerful feeling and emotion on the mind of the readers. Though it is pithy and brief, the poem contains wealth of meaning and has captured the attention of the subsequent generation of girls and women to follow the path of education. The poem also reminds us of the central duty of education for girls and women. It is similar to poems of other writers like Ankita Shah and Priya Malik who have also emphasized on the dire need for women's education in their verses. Ankita Shah's Poem, 'If Girls Are Educated', expresses the truth that education can become the means to encounter gender inequalities. Priya Malik, a poet and gender equality activist focuses on the essence of girls going to school to receive education. The very title of her poem 'Right to Learn' describes the speaker's desire to go to school and become independent.

My mother, on one hand, tried to make ends meet /
On the other hand, she taught me how to stand on
my own two feet.

Thus Priya Malik believed that poetry is an effective catalyst for progress and it made girls feel great and the need for change." Another thought provoking writer who proclaimed the importance of girls education to abolish gender inequality is Aranya Johar. Her poem 'The Language of Equality' expresses that girls should not be deprived of the right to education. "How many more fatalities will it take / for the glass ceiling to crumble and break / to disintegrate." She too like Ankita and Priya believed in the education of girls as it is a challenge for them to become the future landmarks of the nation.

Written with grace of prose, candidness, wit, and jovial spirit, the present poem made women and girls all over the globe to gravitate towards Kamala Bhasin. The poem laid a mesmerizing effect on all people as it fostered women empowerment for a better world. Bhasin's poem instilled courage to girls to raise their voice and have a strong stamping in the patriarchal society. The poem is thus an inspiring call, an eye opener for millions of young students to expose them to harsh realities.

The poem 'Because I Am a Girl, I Must Study' is a conversation between father and daughter. The conversational style with which the poem is written expresses the dialogue element and reads like a simple talk between father and his daughter. The opening of the poem begins with the father questioning his daughter as to why she should study.

A father asks his daughter:

Study? Why should you study?

I have sons aplenty who can study

Girl, why should you study?

In a series of mind-blowing and appalling manner, the daughter answers her father by giving justified reasons as to why she should study and be educated.

Because I am a girl, I must study.

Long denied this right, I must study.

For my dreams to take flight, I must

study. Knowledge brings new light

so I must study.

The explanation given by the daughter is very affirmative and displays the potential and the caliber with which the girl possesses. It also shows the stubborn nature and the firmness of mind of the daughter to be educated. She says that she should not be deprived of her rights anymore and to ensure that her aspirations are fulfilled and knowledge to be expanded, she needs to study. The girl further continues to substantiate her points to her father the need to study. She states that -to win the battles between men and women, to avoid poverty and squalor to girls, to attain economic independence and freedom from the clutches of men and society, to overcome frustration and find inspiration,-she should study.

Through simple style, language and diction, Bhasin sustains the theme of feminism throughout the poem. The daughter continues to courageously narrate why she should study:

To fight men's violence, I must study.

To end my silence, I must study.

To challenge patriarchy, I must study.

To demolish all hierarchy, I must study.

So in the opinion of the daughter in the poem, we can understand that her intention is to give a clarion call to all girls and women to be educated. She proclaims that women should come out of their cocoons and cross the Lakshman Rekha by breaking the silence. This reminds us of the two outstanding women of Indian English Novel of the post-independence era namely Sashi Deshpande and Anees Jung, who have broken the silent sufferings meted out to them by their family members. The words 'to end my silence'(in the poem), reminds us of Sashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* where, Jaya, heroine of the novel breaks silence by beginning to write a novel and be educated, while Anees Jung's *Breaking the Silence* displays Jung's determination to cross the boundaries that has been created to her by educating herself.

The repetition of the words in the poem, 'I must study', from the beginning to the end of the poem heightens the effect and reinforces the theme. The lines also remind us of the mighty words of Dr. Martin Luther King the 'dream' oration 'I have a Dream' is hailed as a masterpiece of rhetoric. The King's speech invokes key message of 'equality':

I have a dreamwith the heat of injustice,
sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be
transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.
I have a dreama nation will not be judged by the
color of their skin but by the content of their character.
I have a dream today.
I have a dream that one day,....black boys and black
girls will be able to join hands with little white
boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.
I have a dream today.
I have a dream that one daythe glory of the
Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall
see it together.

(From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Aug. 28, 1963).

The message driven home by Kamala Bhasin in the poem is to create awareness in girls and women of the need for education to empower and enhance their identity and claim their rights equally.

Conclusion

Through their poems women poets have spread the message of what actually feminism is. They have opened the eyes for women and girls to boldly air out their opinions and protest against all forms of inequalities exerted by men and society on Women. In poetry women maybe shrugged off as some straight-jacketed representations, but they choose to live on their own because they swerve off the conventional path of inequalities in all aspects. Whatever the social consequences, both men and women are complimentary to each other and essential parts of creation. Both are like two sides of the coin and two wheels of a cart. Even if one wheel is missing, the cart cannot move. It becomes handicapped. Plato in his Republic observes:

The only difference between man and woman
is one of physical function – one begets,
the other bears children. Apart from that,
both can and both should follow the same
range of occupation and perform the same functions;
they should receive the same education to enable
them to do so. In this way society will get the best value from both (5).

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