
GENDER EQUALITY, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract :

Gender equality has not yet been reached by any nation. Gender issues differ from place to place. They need to be tackled differently every where. By the time one reaches its solution, different challenges come up. They could be in its implementation, acceptance and recognition. Some gender issues prevail for the society but are tradition or religious customs for the community. We have to make efforts on different fronts differently. Let us view these discrepancies in the various novels of women writers.

Keywords: *acceptance, community, implementation, prevail, recognition.*

Introduction:

Equality is the soul of liberty, says Frances Wright. This is very true. All should get equal opportunity and be treated equally then be it by tradition, family or law. If there is inequality anywhere, then it shall nurture jealousy, revenge, vengeance, violence and slavery, in there. Then be it in a family, in a society or in a nation. So to ensure, that all prosper economically and are equally empowered, the emotions which arise due to inequality should be curbed. They devalue human values, genders and races. They obstruct nations progress, demolish races and individual personalities. Moreover deconstruct a person's identity, on basic level. This is exactly what has happened with the subordinate sections of the society. The subdued, weaker half of the human race- the women, have always been at the losing end. They have the same intelligence, the same valour and they work equally hard as their male counterparts, still their work is not recognized by their family, nor valued by their society, everywhere.

Importance of the subject:

Women make fifty percent of the total population, hence their contribution towards nation building and family progress can be very valuable. Yet, they are subjugated at all levels and suffer at the hands of the power group. They need to be empowered to stop their exploitation, to stop domestic violence against them and they need to be given a better chance to live.

Objective :

To spread awareness that unless girls are given equal rights, provided with equal conditions and opportunities and strength to shape their own lives gender equality cannot be achieved. Women need to be brought to the forefront for the progress of our nation.



Methodology :

The study is descriptive in nature. It tries to explore the inequalities in the gender issues. The data used for it has been obtained from books, secondary sources like published articles, journals published online or offline on websites, in newspapers and books.

Patriarchy and social practices issues :

The main hurdle in achieving gender equality is the uneven distribution of household work. This household work is monotonous, unpaid and unrecognized. Due to it the opportunities available to women have become limited. Girls are not able to take education and participate in society on the same terms as their counterparts – the male.

The age old social practices and norms have become a hurdle in our achievement of gender equality. These social norms have permitted sanction to violence and inequality against women. Men for the field and woman for the hearth they say. Also society believes that for the smooth running of a family women should be kept uneducated. This avoids power struggle, as she can easily and continuously be kept subdued and subjugated. Due to these customs, men lending a helping hand in the household chores like cooking, washing and cleaning are jeered in the society. These customs are so strong that men feel ashamed to contribute in such chores of kitchen and washrooms. Men think its their right, not to contribute in such work and even take pride in the fact that the women folk of their family are well subdued under their rule. Due to these practices, the scene that we come across in most of the household is that the relation of husband and wife is more of a master and slave.

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai the protagonist is educated and foreign based. When in England, Adit selects Sarah, a foreigner as his wife. But, Adit is a typical Indian male chauvinist who takes pleasure in ill-treating Sarah. He says, "...these English women are quiet manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look very quiet and hard working as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week." (Desai, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* 29)

The attitude of educated males is also very traditional. They also exploit women for their benefit. They imitate what they have seen their father's and grandfather's did. Changing this attitude is a challenge.

Girl child status issue in today's society:

The traditional customs are such that only the male child are revered from birth. The male child are the carrier of the family name hence more preferred. While the birth of a girl child is not even celebrated. They are thought of as unnecessary expenses and a burden on family. Hence, we hear about their being killed when in the womb or through special religious rituals after birth. Rajasthan and Haryana are in the forefront in this matter. The health issues of women are also neglected to such an extent that they do not live up to adulthood.

In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, Jasmine is the fifth daughter whom her grandmother wishes to strangle to death for being a girl child. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* of Shashi Deshpande, recalls how she was treated second to her brother Dhruva. There



was always a Puja on his birthday but none on her birthdays.

Child marriage and exploitation issue :

The girl child is exposed to child marriage, teenage pregnancy, domestic work, exploitation, sexual abuse and brutal violence. They have to live under the protection of their father, husband or son throughout their life. Here, being girls, they are not treated well by their own family. Independent existence is not thought fit for her as she is looked upon as a commodity by society. A commodity to be used and not maintained or taken care of. Women are not given a space of their own. They are revered as goddess after death, but not even respected or treated as human beings in their lifetime.

In adulthood women face domestic violence and are looked upon as dowry harbingers. Unsatisfied with the dowry she brings families prefer to burn them alive, they are easily replaced. Such is the sad state of women in Indian society.

We have Ila Das in Anita Desai's novel *Fire On The Mountain*, who is brutally raped and murdered by the villagers of Kasauli. Ila Das is a social worker who tries to bring reform in the society by stopping the child marriage of a girl. Society reacts violently. Changing these age old traditions like child marriage, is a herculean task.

Government had to intervene to eradicate these evils of society. Laws have been made and child marriage is a punishable offence. Yet they are still prevailing. They cannot be easily done away with.

Patriarchal women issues:

Girls brought up in such an atmosphere, where they are not valued by family or society develop similar ideas about themselves. They also devalue themselves. They too feel cooking food, giving birth to an heir, nurturing children and looking after the house, are their only worthwhile duties. Their independence, intelligence, strength, talent, self respect and individuality are all curbed inside the four walls of their home. Woman herself has forgotten her individuality in the endless household battle of dirt and dust, which can never be won.

As Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

Identity is mistaken, self is not known. A woman is not what she wants to be. She is what others want her to be. The self is lost in the traditional customs of religion, family and society. Today a woman does not know what she is capable of. She has forgotten that she is not only the carrier and preserver of culture and the creator of future generations, but also the developer of her own individuality. Her ancestors were the Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi- who fiercely protected her kingdom, the Savitribai Phule- who brought education to the women folk, the great warrior Ahilyabai Holkar, who promoted industrialization; all these have been forgotten.

Jasmine of Bharti Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*, also wants to be like the traditional woman. She wants to get married and bear the family heir. This is the sole purpose of a life of every woman.



“As a traditional woman she wants to get pregnant immediately to prove her worth and to validate her identity. Indeed, in this society, pregnancy is the only available identity.” (Ruppel, 1995: 184)

Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*, runs away to marry a man of other caste. Her education is considered as an unnecessary expense by her retired Pappachi and so is stopped. She has nothing else to do but wait for her marriage. She does not get any proposals as her father cannot raise an appropriate dowry. She is tired of waiting for her marriage and feels any person would be better than her nagging parents.

Parents raise their girl child without any enthusiasm and set no goals in their life. These girls live aimlessly and can not have great wisdom without good guidance or education. No wonder marriage – the social custom becomes their only target.

Difficulties and challenges involved:

Parents need to guide their children properly. Treat their boys and girls equally. But this can only happen when they themselves believe in this equality. Changing their attitudes shall bring opportunities to their girl child. It shall eradicate gender inequality in society to a greater extent.

Again, religion promotes social inequality and gives rise to social conflicts. Religion is an agent of social control. It guides people regarding how to live their lives. Thus it strengthens social order. Religion teaches people moral behavior and thus helps them learn how to be good members of society. But we should see to it that the codes of conduct do not change with gender. If it promotes monogamy and fidelity in women it should do so in men as well.

Religion deprives women of their rights in many ways. It disapproves of their right to abortion. It considers women as impure during their mensuration- which is a natural process of their body. This religion promotes ideas like the dead go to heaven when their pyre is lighted by their son. This type of thinking should be done away with.

The religious act of Sati, in which widows were burnt alive on their husband's pyre, took many years to be actually abolished even after the Sati Abolition Act, which was passed in 1829 by the British Government. This act turned into a battle between religious and cultural orthodoxy on the one hand, and the assertion of women's rights on the other. But today after a century we can certainly say that women's rights have won.

If some religious customs are inhumane then they shall also go away some day. Only women need to recognize its cruelty and men need to come forward to support women's cause. Then the attitude of society and social customs shall undergo a change.

Observations:

Society treats men as human beings but when women wish to be treated similarly, they are belittled. Society mocks them saying that to enjoy these facilities they ought to have been born as men. All types of oppressions, unequal standards, unjust treatments, tend to create a state of war.



To bring about some balance in the society, the rights of women need to be protected. Parents should take the first step for the well being of their girl child and her safety. They should educate their girl child not to get a better husband for her, but to make her capable of earning for herself. Thus by educating her, they shall expand her knowledge, make her self independent and confident. She could become so confident as to choose where she wants to be and how she should be treated.

When the girl child gains her confidence, parents should help her gain economic independence and help her become self integrated. The girl child should be given proper food and medical assistance. If parents give proper nutrition to their girl child then the future generations from her womb shall have more survival tendencies. Thus parents should be persuaded to take good care of their girl child and value her existence as important as their boy child.

When the girls are valued more, then and then only the domestic violence against them and their exploitation can be stopped. The girl child should be made so capable as to take decision for herself. They should invest in them and empower them with life skills, education, sports and much more.

Conclusion :

Thus to achieve gender equality, we should begin our work at the root level. That is families, as they form a society. Social behavior has the capacity to change religious values as well. We should empower the mother's. When mothers shall get educated and empowered, they shall make choices in their lives, they shall fill their daughters life with dreams. They shall choose to educate their girl child. Girls should be encouraged to take up non traditional jobs as well. This shall change the monotony of male legacy and open the eyes of society for better. Thus if women can balance both job and household duties then so can men. Men should also support their homes by lending a helping hand in the household everyday chores. For gender equality requires involvement of men, women, girls and boys, all of them who form a part of society. It is everybody's responsibility. As **Gloria Steinem puts it**, "We've begun to raise daughters more like sons...but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters."

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