

JANABAI: AN IGNORED FEMINIST WRITER

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Abstract:

Up to the present time, we have read and discussed a lot on the Western feminism in the light of the texts such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) or Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949); but consciously the feminist critics have ignored the contribution of Indian feminist writers and critics. With the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1985), many feminists started rereading of literature from the feminist perspective. The present paper attempts to focus on Janabai's feminism through her revolt against the tradition, society and culture which is present in her works. Janabai makes the God to become woman and thereby asserting her superiority over the men and when she considers Him as her friend and supporter or she abuses Him, she talks of equality of both the sexes.

Keywords: *Varkari*, equality, feminism, marginalization

Saint Janabai belongs to the tradition of *Varkari* saint poets, the most influential bhakti sect among the Marathi-speaking people, in the way that T. S. Eliot expects in his essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' (1919) that the writer to adhere to the tradition and contribute to the tradition with the help of one's talent. Being born in a poor family, she was handed over to Dama Shetty, the father of Saint Namdev, in whose house she was supposed to work as domestic servant. The *Varkari* sect believes in equality of all religions, castes, sects and sexes; but being a servant or *dasi*, she had to do never ending household work at home and she had to undergo the hard experiences of being a woman in the sense Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari defined in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* the term 'becoming woman' as 'becoming minor.' According to them, in the patriarchal society, man gets all the rights and the woman continuously undergoes the torture, exploitation and marginalization. The hardships of being a woman and the work burden at home finds fine expression in Janabai's writing whereby she rises as one of the leading Indian feminist writer who revolt the traditional views and assert the plight of women.

Like Saint Meera, Saint Janabai considers the God Vithoba as her friend, lover, supporter and a constant helpmate in her regular domestic work. She is very naïve that she considers that it is God Vithhal who helps her in carrying and heating the bath water, sweeping the courtyard and scratching her head when the lice bite her. Her belief was in work like Saint Savata Mali who used to find the God in all the living and non-living objects around him. Her poetry is sensitive which describes the everyday life of ordinary women consisting of both the joys and strains at the same time. She loves the God by heart and wants to be one with Him. She tries to be a free bird by becoming one with the God. It means that she rejects her identity as a common woman or *dasi* by becoming one with the God. Once she becomes one with God, she becomes powerful in all ways and has no any restrictions of the family, society or religion. Her poetry depicts her journey from the slavery to freedom and margin to the centre. Vidyut Bhagwat wisely points out in her article 'Marathi Literature as a Source for Contemporary Feminism' that her poetry is "full of references to the hard chores which she had to perform, which deprived her of the space necessary for a dialogue with her own emancipatory God." (Bhagwat, 1995:26)

The women were considered secondary to men due to the patriarchal family system as a result of which the women were marginalized in family, society and religion. No doubt, the marginalization was

not based on merit; but on the sex which reminds us of Simone de Beauvoir's famous sentence that says 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' which means a woman's attitude towards her body and bodily functions changes over the years due to the influence of family, society and religion. Even the *Varkari* sect was not an exception to it. She had some limitations in her worship to God; but her belief in God was not flexible. She loved the God by heart. Whenever she was in work, she used to utter the name of God. She writes about herself:

Whether grain grinding or pounding; Your name, Oh Infinite, I am chanting.
Your name is with me constantly; Not forgetting it even momentarily.
My only perennial occupation; Is Almighty's name recitation.
My mother, father, brother, sister; You are, O Sudarshan Chakra holder.
On your feet is focused my attention; So says Sant Namdeo's handmaden.
(m.facebook.com)

As a woman, she was not supposed to use Veena. Even, she was not free from the restrictions of the society specially designed for women. But, she revolts against the traditions where she threatens the God by saying that she, having her pallav down to her shoulder, will enter the crowded marketplace.

I will let my saree slip
from my head to the shoulders
Hold my head high and walk
into the market-place
Taking cymbals in hand and veena on
shoulder I will go
Let me see who forbids me
I have opened a shop in Pandharpur
put oil on my wrist now
Jam declares herself a prostitute
Leaving you O God, this 'home' (Bhagwat, 1995:26)

Her worship of God Vithoba and the poetry she sang in praise of Him became the cause for jealousy against her. She was triple marginalized in the Spivak sense in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. First, she was born in a low caste family. Secondly, she was an orphan and finally she was a woman. One can imagine about the status of a low caste woman working as *dasi*. She was not allowed to worship the God because she was *dasi* and had never-ending work to do. She was victimized at two levels. First, the patriarchal system had restricted her life for she was born a woman; even, the *Varkari* sect did not allow her to shoulder Veena. She was revolutionary by nature. She decided to fight against the customs and traditions as a result of which she let her *pallav* fall on the shoulder when every woman was forced to hide their heads under their pallavas. The falling of pallav on the shoulder was not at home; but in the marketplace which shows how determined she was to fight against the traditions. Secondly, Veena was not allowed to women; but she took it upon her shoulder and wandered in the main peth in Pandharpur. She considers the God Vithoba as her soulmate or her life partner like Saint Meera who thought of God Krishn as her husband.

It is uncommon that we find here in Janabai's *Abhanga* that she expresses what is inexpressible. It was a time when (and now also) woman could assert of becoming a slut by wandering in the marketplace having Cymbals in hand and veena upon her shoulder for the sake of even God. She does not fear of what the people will say about her which shows her love for God. She is so involved in God Vithoba that she felt His presence around her like Savata Mali who considered his well, bullocks, string, vegetables and everything, living and nonliving, as the various forms of God. She thinks that the

God helps her in performing her duties such as sweeping the floor, collecting the dirt, casting it away. She is indebted to Him for the favour He had done to her. She writes:

Jani sweeps the floor, The Lord collects the dirt,
Carries it upon His head, And casts it away.
Won over by devotion, The Lord does lowly chores!
Says Jani to Vithoba, How shall I pay your debt? (Tr.Vilas Sarang)

As she looks at the God Vithoba in a way which shows her feminine sensibility. Feminization of male is also a way of the feminists. In the process of feminization she considers the God as mother of all the saints. Like a loving mother, the God accompanies his children. In this regard, Saint Janabai writes:

My Vitthal has many children
with him is a merry crowd.
Nivriddhi rides on his shoulder
he holds Sopan by the hand.
Dnyaneshwar walks in front
beautiful Mukta close behind
Gora the potter rides his hip
Cokha is in his very heart
Vunka [Banka?] clings to his waist
Nama holds his smallest finger
Jani says, Oh Gopala,
it is a festival of your dear ones. (Zelliot 80)

If we look at the description of God having one on the shoulder, one aside, the other walking in front, one behind, the next on the hip, the other clinging to his waist and so on shows Him in the feminine form. By showing the God in feminine form, she revolts against the patriarchy. It can be considered as her wish to womanize the world or the quest for the matriarchal system where woman is at the centre and others are at margin. With the rise of patriarchal system, the woman lost her importance at home and society and she was marginalized. The process of marginalization of women was the result of *Manusmriti* that formed the laws for the behavior of women. The right of woman over her own body was taken away and it was told her that her body belongs to her would be husband and it is her duty to keep the purity of her body to be seduced by her husband after marriage. Due to the patriarchal system, she had no right of inheritance in her father's property and her body was the sole property of her husband. It means that she belonged to nowhere and she had no rights at all. By womanizing the God, she had tried to increase the importance of women.

On the other level, she might have thought that if she considers the God as a mother, He will be caring and loving her continuously because mother stands for the Creator, nurturer or goddess. She writes:

As a kite roams in the sky
And still thinks of its young ones
Or as a mother is trapped in the household work
And yet longs for a child
Or as a female monkey climbs from tree to tree
And yet clasps its young ones
So is mother Vithoba to us. Says a Jani. (Bhagwat 26)

By making the mother-daughter relationship between her and the God, she tries to be one with God. All her actions result due to the influence of God upon her. She writes:

Of God my meat and drink I make,
God is the bed on which I lie.
God is whate'er I give or take;
God's constant fellowship have I
For God is here and God is there,-
No place that empty is of him.
Yea, lady Vitha, I declare,
I fill the world up to the brim.

(www.southasiaarchive.com)

Saint Janabai becomes free to abuse the God by making Him her supporter, companion, mother or lover. By womanizing the God, she enjoys the status of equality. When she attains equality with God, she becomes superior to all men because they are inferior to God. She gets this superiority status not to overpower others but to enjoy her own rights. Though she rebelled against the tradition and asserted her identity, she is not recognized for her contribution to feminism, neither Eastern nor the Western. Though her *Abhangas* have the power to transform the society and make it ready to revolt against the ill traditions which had marginalized the women for ages. Her *Abhangas* are not even taken for explanations in *Kirtanas* by various groups of *Varkaris*. Even the translators have closed their eyes and not taken her *Abhangas* for translation as a result of which she remains an ignored feminist.

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