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Articulation of Feminism in Marathi Literature

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Abstract

Feminism has a long tradition in India in general and Maharashtra in particular. The work done by *Mahatma* Jotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule by following the ideals of *Chhatrapati* Shivaji Maharaj and *Rajmata* Jijau to educate the women to reform the society initiated feminism in literature and Tarabai Shinde, Mukta Salve, Bahinabai Chaudhari and other anonymous women writers have tried their level best to state the suppression, oppression, marginalization that women have to undergo. The present paper depicts the life and sufferings of widows with the help of the women's narratives. The selected two essays are reprinted by Baba Padmanji as an appendices to his Novel *Yamuna Paryatan* (*Yamuna Journey*). The novel is sub titled as "An Elucidation of the Condition of Widows in India." He asserts that 'there can be no substitute for a description of women's woes and anxieties made by women themselves.' The true value of his Novel, Baba Padmanji thinks, would have been heightened a hundred times if it had been written by an educated Yamuna on her own. The present essay deals with the merciless treatment of widows and the movement for widow remarriage. Women's narratives often depict her life as a problem and advocate the need for her independence and the women's education like Savitribai Phule who was of the opinion that education transforms a person into a human being. The selected essays provide a vibrant sense of what women went through and how the horrors were caused on widows.

In the patriarchal society, a woman has to sacrifice her life for the family, culture and Society; but she is not treated as a human being. She always remains an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a caring mother. The condition of women is depicted in her poem by Sughra Humayun Mirza, an Urdu poetess. She highlights that nobody cares for her. Her life is so trivial that nobody sheds tears even after her death. Throughout her life she is ignored. Nobody takes notice of her work, devotion and sacrifice. It is always a woman's unfulfilled desire that her work should be recognised. She writes: My last wish is this, that those who care for me, May strew a few flowers on my grave when I am gone. (Sughra, 380)

The first essay entitled 'A speech made by a woman at a women's meeting organised by the Prarthana Samaj, Bombay' is a speech read by a woman at the meeting of women organised by the Prarthana Samaj, and was published in the *Subodh Patrika* of 7th August 1881. The speech begins: See how terrible is this custom of not allowing widows to remarry. Women have to suffer great misery because of this. Besides, incidents like infanticide are extremely common, for widows are tremendously scared of the social stigma. (1881:357) The woman speaks so efficiently and still feels that she is not experienced enough to talk on all the miseries of the Hindu women. It means she thinks that what she had seen or experienced about the miseries of the Hindu women is all about a drop in the sea. First, she talks about the widow who is considered to be an inauspicious and polluting. To see the face of a widow in the morning is considered as an ill omen. She is not allowed to walk around in the house and is considered a thing and not a human being: "So the poor thing is forbidden walk around in the house." (1881:357) When any woman loses her husband, her hairs are shaved off and widowhood becomes her only identity forever though she is fifteen years old. She has to live all her life in despair due to many limitations and restrictions. She cannot wear pretty saris or ornaments. Neither she can mix with other people nor can she attend the religious ceremonies. And she has to leave all her life sitting in a corner. Even her parents consider her like a grit in the eye. They say: "Why was this wicked girl born in the first place? And if she was born, why didn't she die after birth? If our son-in-law had been alive, we would have given him our second daughter." (1881:357)

What a woman can do when her own parents wish her to die and their son in law to be alive. "Why was I ever born? What's the point of being alive? I'm not yet fifteen- and look at what a terrible condition I am in! No good clothes to wear, no mixing with people, no permission even to talk with anyone! Even my parents hate. People frown when they see me. What's the point of having been born?" (1881:357) This is not enough but she has to endure many more hardships. No one can cover all those hardships in a single piece of writing. The speaker throws light on the difference between male and female. If the man's first wife dies, he can marry the second and if she also dies, he can marry the third one. He is free to eat, drink, laugh and enjoy every pleasure; but the unfortunate widow is not allowed even one of them. The woman speaker questions:

"When God created them, he created them as equals. Can it be called God's justice that one is allowed every freedom while the other is forbidden to have any? This great injustice is really a result of the ignorance of our people." (1881:358) Like a great reformist, she advises the women to help the women as

much as one can. She assures that if widow remarriage takes place, there will be a positive change for women. She asks to encourage the widows for remarriage. She points out that the young girls are married to old men which results in the increasing number of young widows. If we have the custom of widow remarriage, the number of young widows will go down and there will be several other advantages. And most important is not to create any problem for widows. 'The plight of Hindu widows as described by a widow herself' is an essay that was published in *The Gospel in All Lands* in April 1889. The anonymous essayist begins her essay: "And since ours is a well-to-do, why, even wealthy caste, our regulations in this regard are extremely strict." (359) She refers to four major castes among the Hindus out of which she was born in *Kayastha* family which is the third in the hierarchy and more infamous for its ill-treatment of widows. She accepts the fact that widows are suffered anywhere; but states that the customs of *Kayastha* are very terrible if compared with other castes. When her husband dies, the wife is tortured severely. She tells an experience that she had before she became a widow. She participated in funeral procession. It was 3 o'clock in the summer afternoon when the people reached after completing all the funeral rites. People who were on the way used to take regular intervals for water and rest. But the poor widow could not ask for water fearing to lose her honour. The women surrounded her did not feel pity for her. At the end she became unconscious but still the torch event on. They dragged her throughout the road and kept nagging at her by saying: "Are you only widow in the world? What's the point of weeping now! Your husband is gone forever!" (360) When the woman did not have the strength to crawl, they tied her up into a bundle as if of rags and then dragged her off. She was one of the close relatives of the writer but no one dare to help her. One woman somehow manages to bring 1 glass of water for her. When the widow saw her, she ran to her like a beast and drinks the water. Then she fell at the feet of the woman who had given her the water and said: "Sister, I'll never forget what you have done for me. You are like a god to me. You have given my life back to me. But please go away quickly. If anybody comes to know of what you have done, both of us will have to pay for it. I, at least, will not let this out." (360) The Torture of a widow continues in many ways. She has to only once a day for a year after her husband's death. Many a times she has to keep fast completely on several days. Once she is back from the funeral of her husband, nobody visits her apart from the barber women. She has to stick her up in the corner. On writing of the condition of widows in general, she writes: "Oh, cruel corner, all of us widows know you so thoroughly well. And we never remember you unless we are grieved." (361)

A widow is like a living corpse. She has no rights in the home. All her relatives torture her. Even her mother says her as 'a mean creature'. (361) Her mother-in-law opines that the widow is a horrible snake who bit to her son and killed him. Her sister in law says: "I will not cast even a glance at this luckless, ill-fated creature! I will not even speak a word to her." (361) The widow is taken as responsible for the death of her husband. Her relatives say: "What a shameless woman! How callous! She cries because she wants a husband." (361) The writer considers it as an unendurable situation that no one can understand how painful it is unless she experiences it. On the eleventh and thirteenth day, the Brahmin comes to demand money, oil or many other things. If the widow is unable she has to promise that she will pay immediately. Sometimes the widow has to work as servant doing the household jobs to earn money to pay the Brahmins their dues. Even the barber women also demand money from the widow. The writer clearly the condition of women in general. She writes: "Thus, there is nothing in our fate but suffering from birth to death. When our husbands are alive, we are there slaves; when they die, our fate is even worse." (361) After six weeks she is given the same clothes that she wore when she became widow. She frightens to see those clothes again as if she had been widowed again. The widowed life of a woman consists of beating, torture and harassment and she needs to depend on others. In *kayastha*, a woman has neither a right to inherit her father's property nor does she get her husband's property. The marginalization is extreme in case of widows though it is a matter of her death. The writer observes: If a woman dies when her husband is still alive, her body is decorated with ornaments and new clothes, and then cremated. But when a widow dies, her body is just wrapped up in plain white cloth and cremated. It is reasoned that if a widow goes to the other world in ornaments and new clothes, her husband will not accept her there. (362-363)

Many women prefer to die before the death of their husbands. Some women commit suicide after the death of husband to avoid the dishonor and torture of widowhood. The writer comment on the ban on the custom of sati and asserts that many women who could have died a cruel but quick death when their husbands died now have to face an agonizingly slow death. To conclude it can be said that the women are marginalized because of their sex and have to live a life of slavery when their husbands are alive. The death of the husband brings torture, marginalization, suffering, sorrow and unhappiness in the life of a widow. Both the life and death of husband decorate their life with torture, harassment, agony and the

women have to bear the pangs of death throughout their death. The social customs of child marriage and ban on widow remarriage are responsible for the worsening condition of women. Widows should be supported by the family members and society and their exploitation in the name of religion and customs be stopped. Then and then only in the words of Bahinabai Chaudhari "but the wrists can still/ wrestle with fate."(Bahinabai Chaudhri, 355)

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