

Muted Voices: Devolution of Women through History

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Abstract: Suppression and characterization is a common concern associated with the lives of women. They have been subdued and assigned secondary roles for a prolonged period, which has outlined the mind-set of people. Gender roles and traditional beliefs have constrained the thought process of the society, in turn creating a lacuna in the system that has transformed itself into an acknowledged norm. Women are commodified and exploited which is widely accepted and normalized, at the same time, they are labelled and out casted if they step out of their restrained social construct. This status of women has been consistent throughout the evolution of the society. Her freedom is either limited by the society or criticized by it. Although we have women in high political positions and as global leaders, their journey towards success can be defined through struggles. This paper analyses the influence of historical beliefs in modern day usage, considering women in divergent roles, the idea of a glass ceiling, advent of lesbian culture, roles played after marriage and so on. Various instances are considered to portray and critique the development from the purdah system to the urbanized progressive woman. The paper also establishes an understanding to the psychological restraints towards the development of women across the globe.

Keywords: normalization, commodification, stigmatization, self-restraint, exploitation

Introduction

“Behave like a woman”

A common phrase heard by most girls. Although we work so hard to empower women across the globe, we still fall back; the root causes are to blame. We teach our boys to be tough and girls to be soft, yet we blame the society for being so harsh to our girls. This is just the way everyone is socialized which leaves not much for the imagination of people. We program ourselves to act this way and behave in certain manner which limits us widely and encasing ourselves within a loop with no ends. Most of the time we have set standards to meet to, whichever gender you belong to. Speaking specifically to women, think about a nurse or a teacher, the first image in your head is a lady who cares and is kind. There is no denial that it is a good image that has been projected, but think about a fire-fighter, I don't believe a lady is what comes to most minds. There lies the problem. Failure to associate toughness to women can sound ridiculous but sure is a problem faced by our society today. Various gender roles in the society, is what is one of the main reasons to limit the society and its thought process.

This paper aims at understanding the changes that took a toll on women's lives and what has changed ever since the beginning. The historical significance of women and what has changed? The reasons why women still experience a low status in the society and what has caused us to stick to this thinking? What are the impacts?

Historical references

Looking back into the past, we must analyse how and why the changes that occur right now have developed into a stage that we experience today. This world has seen many strong female figures in the past, they certainly broke the stereotype of gender roles then, it must be considered that we can achieve that today too.

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Enheduannaⁱ was the first known author, a Sumerian poet, considering that she is a woman and the poem was in praise of the female deity Innanaⁱⁱ it is sad that today women are denied education and low in literacy. There are references in the Jewish culture to a woman who spoke for the rights of woman, mixed genders and Jews, a strong heart at that time was indeed a deviant nature at that period of time. At the period of 500-400 BCE she spoke about gender discrimination in the society, and it is of much shame that we still haven't found a consensus to this problem even after so many years of change and development. There are many more female figures that have broken the gender stereotype in the past, consider Cleopatraⁱⁱⁱ or Boudicca^{iv}, they were strong warriors in their society and have been accepted and looked upon in today's society. However today women are considered weak and bounded to home.

Although great female role models have existed, mythical or fictional characters, religion wise have always showcased women as secondary or a curse to the society. Male dominance and complex has led to a situation where everyone including women considers that women are meant for secondary roles and for the aid of men. Take for example the famous fictional figure in the bible, Eve^v, she brought upon suffering to man due to her inability to listen also Pandora^{vi} of the Greek culture, where they believe that she released evil onto man. These references have no backup as to prove it actually existed, yet these prevail and continue to degrade the lives of women across the globe. It is however unreasonably doubtful as to why such revelations were made against women; again as all people claim to know, there could be various reasons to this. Male dominance, sexual desire and need for control in men, enriched ego, and physical superiority of men could be various reasons that could be among million others for the downfall of women's status in the society.

Aftermath

The slow removal of women from the mainstream society had begun with the advent of religion and ownership of property. Women were considered as property and this could be seen with the initiation of marriage and household, where set boundaries for women were drawn and that was considered their whole life. The role of women in the society was limited to such an extent that it has shrunk to just being the carrier of man's seeds and looking after the off springs. Women in job roles were denied to a large extent. If allowed to work they were only provided with small voluntary work which they were not even paid for. There are so many instances where men took over the nature of a woman's work and claimed it his own. Medicine was practiced in the early ages by women in households. This however was stopped and labelled as sorcery and witchcraft and was prevented from being practiced. Instead schools were created and a degree was provided to those interested in medicine practicing. However the irony to this system was that women were not allowed to read let alone to learn in these institutions. Women were psychologically limited by making them believe that they were demonic spirits and needed cleansing, they were asked to cover themselves and seclude from mainstream society.

Portrayal of women even in the modern society fell into a small pigeon hole^{vii}, they were Always delicate fragile and mysterious. Women were always expected to depend on somebody and were considered the damsel in distress. She was considered in able to defend herself or help herself. Even children's cartoons portrayed women in such manner so as to put this image inside minds of children. A woman was not considered to possess sexual desires and her virginity was sacred and purity was decided based on her virginity denial of sexual desires. Women began accepting herself a commodity in the society and failed to think otherwise.

Woman in the society normalized such behaviour and moulded herself into the mould that the society carved for them. The control of men over woman was consider normal and they were exploited to the maximum and still considered alright. Woman were expected to behave, walk, dress, look in certain ways as described by the society and if they dared to differ, they were out casted and denied all forms of support.

Today

What goes around comes around. This is something that most of us are familiar with. This can be said to apply even in case of women. After being subject to suppression and normalisation we have started to fight for the rights of women. The change or the movement that has played a key role in the uplifting of the status of women are the waves of feminism. The four waves have substantially influenced the status of women.

The first wave

It was considered to have taken place between the 19th and the 20th century. This period has given rise to feminism in the society. It was considered as the period of feminist activity and thought. The primary focus of this period was on women's suffrage and other political rights and legal issues concerning women. This gained importance after the age of enlightenment which was an intellectual and philosophical movement in Europe in the 18th century. The century of philosophy. It also raised questions as to the equality between genders and culture. The political origin of this era came from the French Revolution which raised questions of legal equality, freedoms and political rights. We also witnessed many wars across the globe during which there was a high requirement of man power that wasn't sufficient with men alone. Women had played a key role through various platforms by aiding their nations at times of difficulty. This led to the question amongst many people as to why women are not considered capable enough to vote and elect their representatives when they could help the nation at times of need. It showed that women were not as weak as they were considered to be. Women also started to express themselves and even fight for others.

As of today, we have many global leaders who are women and are at highly influential positions. But it is surprising to know that women didn't even have right to vote until late 19th century. International Alliance for Women was one of the major promoter for women's suffrage. The first instance of these rights being conferred on women was in 1881 when the Isle of men has done so. But this right was subject to women having property. From then until now many Nations have at various times conferred this right on women at various times. The most recent such instance was in December 2015 when the women of Saudi Arabia were allowed to vote. It has been a long struggle but we have been successful to a great extent and this success has a long way to go.

The Second wave

It began in early 1960s in the US and spread throughout the western world and beyond. It lasted until the 1980s. While the 1st wave focused mainly on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles towards gender equality, the 2nd wave broadened these into a wider range including sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, defacto inequalities and official legal inequalities. The writings of the French Author Simone De Beauvoir had in 1940s examined through her research that women have been perceived as the other beings or the second sex in the patriarchal society. She had also stated that male centered ideology was accepted as a norm. Women cannot be considered as any lesser than men just because they bear kids or because they menstruate. This was a period that brought change to a women's life with respect to her bodily sovereignty. In 1960, food and drug administration had approved combined oral contraception pill for women. This allowed women to have kids according to their stability and circumstances and without adversely affecting their career simply because they had conceived. The *Feminine Mystique*, 1963, by Betty Friedan focused on how women were better off using their capability outside the ambit of their house. She conducted a research through which she had identified that women were sadder when they were confined to the limits of their house. This also led to them giving up on any ambitions. The focus on reproductive rights and their measures was looked upon as more than just a demographic measure. It was recognised as an essential right that must be made available to everybody. This wave had been more successful at highlighting the needs of women than the prior time.

The third wave

It is generally said to have begun during the 1990s and to have lasted up until 2008. It was deemed to be an individual movement as its purpose included redefining what a feminist is. This was due to the fact that there was a chaos among people as the understanding of feminism was different among different people. It attempted to expand feminism to include women with diverse set of identities, recognising that women are of “many colours, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds”. The 3rd wave feminists broadened the scope of feminism by inclusion of queer role theory and abolishing gender role expectations and stereotypes. It also focused more on the individual needs of women rather than striving to achieve political changes. It also focused on the use of words as derogatory of women.

The fourth wave

It began in 2008 and continues to the present date. It can be associated with use of social media as a platform to uplift and activate gender equality and social justice. It has been used as a medium to aid women of all categories and to reach to as many people as possible. It has also helped in recognising that an individual is free to choose and decide their partners. The LGBTQ+ movement is evidence of the same. Where the sexuality of an individual is treated as that person’s choice alone. The society cannot make this decision or influence the decision of people.

Recent Developments

Women have accepted their societal status. They are slowly giving up their fight for the empowerment. Even women who have stayed strong and are trying to bring about change are being suppressed by numerous factors such as society culture etc., women are being constrained by psychological barriers that have been created over a period. These barriers are preventing them from moving forward. We must first ensure that these psychological barriers are removed so that women are able to think independently and for themselves rather than to be within the limits set by other factors. Most of us have been subject to gender stereotype. Children are taught the ways as to how a boy should behave and how a girl should behave. Any change is not accepted which put down them down preventing them from being who they want to be with the fear of being outcasted by the society. This is taking away from people their individuality. It is time to stop stereotyping. What many forget is that women and men are biologically different. They undergo different process during their life time. Women are stigmatised from menstruating or giving birth to children. These must be talked about more openly to normalise them as nothing more than biological processes. It should be stopped from becoming a means of discrimination between men and women.

Stop objectifying women. Objectifying refers to thinking of individuals as objects in both general and sexual manner. Objectification^{viii} is more with respect to women than men. It is forgotten that they too are individuals, moreover human beings and therefore must be conferred with the same status. Media has influenced the lives of people. They have also become a platform for objectification through various advertisements that are broadcasted a vast number of times in a single day. Though not voluntary this ad’s which glamorise violence and objectify women effect the mid sets of people including that of children. This has led to acceptance of glamorisation and objectification as normal in the society which further influences the acts of people. The same is carried around for generations. That becomes the reason for the change of this mindset to take much longer than necessary.

The society has assigned gender roles^{ix} which must not be deviated from. What people fail to understand is that what is considered as an accepted gender role in one society is not the same in another. This leads to misconceptions among people. What is deviant in one society may not be deviant in another. Understanding this aspect is essential to aid women empowerment. It creates a restriction on women as, in the present day, there are

many opportunities which come up for the sake of their empowerment but they are unable to utilise them with the fear of deviating from their gender role. Role reversal must be accepted as in individual's choice against comparing it to what is deemed right.

Establishing high levels of corporate leadership in order to promote gender equality is mandatory^x. It becomes a medium to show women what they may achieve if only they were to fight for it and not give up. Society must ensure the protection of victims of violence rather than criticizing them. Victims must be protected as they set an example to other victims. When other see the kind of treatment that victims are given or the blame that is attached to them for being the reason a crime was committed against them, it would hold back other victims from coming out to seek justice. Education and awareness about the option of 'resilience'. Women must be informed that they have the option to resist any atrocity against them. It is completely their choice to let them become victims or warriors.

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ⁱ2285-2250 BCE. She is the world's first author //known by name and was the daughter of [Sargon of Akkad-Sargon the Great](#), 2334-2279 BCE

ⁱⁱwas the [Sumerian goddess](#) of love, beauty, sex, desire, fertility, war, combat, and political power, equivalent to the [Akkadian](#) and [Babylonian](#) goddess [Ishtar](#). She was also the patron goddess of the [Eanna](#) temple at the city of [Uruk](#), which was her main cult center. She was associated with the planet Venus and her most prominent symbols included the lion and the eight-pointed star.

ⁱⁱⁱCleopatra, was the last active ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt, briefly survived as pharaoh by her son Caesarion.

^{iv}She was a queen of the British Celtic Iceni tribe who led an uprising against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire in AD 60 or 61

^vShe is a figure in the [Book of Genesis](#) in the [Hebrew Bible](#)

^{vi}[Pandora](#) is a figure from [Greek mythology](#), who was not only the first woman, but --as an instrument of the wrath of [Zeus](#)-- was held responsible for releasing the ills of humanity into the world.

^{vii}It is the method by which items go into preset places, a reference used to relate to how pigeons enter their home in pigeon farms.

^{viii}Objectification, refers to the act of treating individuals as mere instrument of sexual pressure

^{ix}Gender roles refer to the role or behaviour learned by a person as appropriate to their gender, determined by the prevailing cultural norms

^xA goal set by the United Nations with respect to women empowerment.