

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Vol. 3 Issue 3 June 2017

Impact Factor 1.854

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

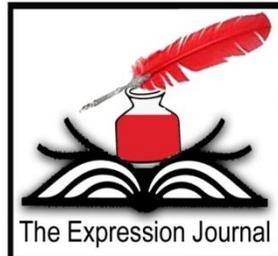
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The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 1.854)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132



A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE BOOK TITLED SEVEN FACETS OF WOMEN (PAST & PRESENT)

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&

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It is my profound pleasure to go through the pages of *Seven Facets of Women: Past & Present* written by Dr. Meghna Sharma which is a lucid document on the status and condition of women in India and worldwide. Dr. Meghna has described the condition of women with passion and pangs. She has profusely quoted from Vedic texts, writings and statements of our past luminaries like, Swami Vivekanand, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, from the works and orations of Social reformers of Gujarat and Rajasthan in particular and other social activists and campaigners in general.

In my commentary on Dr Meghna's book, I would like to review her book on following prominent issues she has so passionately raised through the pages of her book:

- (a) Spiritual status of women- Hindu ideal of women
- (b) Changing status of women in India and abroad
- (c) Changing status of women in India and abroad

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- (d) Working women/ career women's challenges in their dual roles at work-place and home
- (e) Arya Samaj's efforts for Feminist Reforms-pertaining to evils prevalent in society
- (f) Women's participation in Mass Movements launched in Rajasthan etc.
- (g) Possible solutions to the predicament of women
- (h) Conclusion

Starting with the first issue, I can firmly say that citation of Rishi Manu in this regard by the writer is apt and cogent: "Where women are respected there the gods delight; where they are not, there all works and efforts come to naught". (*Manusmriti*, III, 56). She is very appropriate to refer that... men have turned women into mere manufacturing machines." Dwelling on Swami Vivekanand's concept of "Indian Womanhood" the author forcefully underlines the assertion of the great sage: "There is neither man nor women (in Vedant) for the soul is sex-less... It is lie to say that I am a man or a woman" rather sans gender, we are pure & absolute consciousness. In his approach to identity of women Swami Vivekanand fused & blended together the ideal of the West and the ideal of the East in the role of women as wife and role of women as mother respectively. But Vivekanand was aghast to express that the principal reason why India had degenerated was that there was no respect for women. Even in U.S. Swami ji noted that Americans worshipped youth and beauty. They seldom fell in love with wrinkled, bald and grey haired persona.

Swami Vivekanand as Dr. Meghna vehemently pinpoints found a panacea for the miseries of women in the magic word of Education: Education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet." The ideal of woman as Vivekanand professed was the old time intensity of trustful and devoted companionship to the husband.

The second salient issue raised by Dr. Meghna revolves around the changing scenario of status of women in India and other places. She aptly refers to Sri M.K.Gandhi on women empowerment "if by strength is meant moral power then women is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition? is she not more-self-sacrificing? Has she not greater power of endurance? has she not great courage? Without her man would not be (complete)." The punch-like comes from a great statesman and ex-P.M Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru: "for out of the women comes the new generations and it is from their lips and from their laps that it begins to learn."

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When I turn my glimpses at the third hue of her prismatic description on the pages of the book under review, I would like to do justice to the concerns Dr. Meghna has vented—challenges before working/career women. Her concerns are justified that in the phase of Post-independence India, women status has phenomenally elevated as she has turned to education and thereupon professional career. She has to work more sincerely and justify her position than her male counterparts. In addition, she has also to look after her domestic commitments. Men in the role of husbands adopt recalcitrant attitude to her condition instead of recognizing her sacrifices for the family and her work-place.

In her profession sometimes she has to bear with erotic advancement, staring, eve-teasing, allurements and other similar pranks from her male-counterparts. In the wake of husbands under transfer, she has to fulfill the role of both the parents and that of the official duties, hence, trebling her pressure from all sides. She suffers the agony of divided loyalties. Late-night office hours have added more woes to her injury. The challenges are grinding primarily on two counts.

- i) Hardships at work-place
- ii) Hardships at domestic and social level
- iii) Hardship on account of nutritional disorders as women folk at work spare little time for their personal well-being. Further, it instills a sense of guilt on account of perception of woman being the sole care-taker of home affairs.

The crux of her argument lies somewhere in recognition and attention towards the working woman of the family. Now much legal protection is in the force for them but that's empty rhetoric without attitudinal change of men-folk which education and laws in tandem can mitigate.

In the book, Dr. Meghna has tried to explore historical landscape that was instrumental in eradicating social evils like widow enslavement and Purdah system along with malaise of Dowry. In this regard the role of Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati played decisive role in breaking shackles of women's slavery. The movement that started in 19th century onwards professed vehemently for widow remarriage, abolition of Dowry system and Purdah system alike. She has quoted Arya Martand that reported 41 widow remarriages in the years (1929-30).

The writer has adduced to landmark statement of Swami Dayanand Saraswati wherein he thunders that "keeping women under Purdah was definitely unfair. It is not necessary that Purdah may safeguard the character". Character is safeguarded by way of

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living. English women did not wear Purdah but they were more intelligent, bold and liberal as compared to the Indian women.

Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya also questioned the rationale behind “keeping child widows under widowhood and not attempting to let them free off this sinful life.” Hence, the role of Arya Samaj and reformist and social thinkers like Pt. Malviya broke the ice of evil-customs in society. Arya Samaj made it mandatory for women to attend social functions and processions for women’s welfare. The writer has meticulously recorded the decision of Hindu Mahasabha’s Delhi Session in which the chairman Raja Narendranath elicited the reply to his question as to how “you can follow the orders of Manu by forcibly keeping your daughters and sisters illiterate in widowhood and under veil (Purdah)”. (March 13-March 15, 1926)

Arya Samaj made Ajmer the centre of religious and social reforms wherein the religious rituals and Lady Bhajans were organized. It afforded opportunity to women to come out of four walls of their houses and promoted their free association and gathering. The chain around their waist was loosened. It did enthuse them to feel equality and liberty walking shoulder to shoulder with their male counter-parts. To give vigorous push to reforms in Ajmer Child-Marriage Prohibition Act was passed in 1929 that fixed the age for boy on 18 years and that of the girls on 14 years for marriage.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati is the Beacon Light Post of Social reform movement in India during the first half of 20th century. He launched forceful movement against the evils of child marriage, compulsive widowhood, female illiteracy, untouchability of the downtrodden classes and caste system. Dr. Meghna has referred to the excerpts of the book “The Soul of India” written by Reen Court wherein the author pin-points that “there is no doubt whatsoever that the 1905 Revolt of Bengal was an indirect result of the Arya Samaj’s nationalism and Dayanand’s organization was indeed the first focal point of Indian Nationalism.”

Probing the root cause of women miserable condition in India, Dr. Meghna has touched the nerve centre of their predicament. She is justified in enumerating the causes ranging from female illiteracy, economic dependence, caste restrictions, religious probation, low morale, lack of leadership qualities and over and above all callous and insensitive attitude of males towards their counterparts in particular and women in general. The author painfully stresses that the woman’s general status in the family and in the society is irrevocably low and unrecognized. Since birth they are subjected to deprecation, humiliation, violence and subjugation.

The author perceives a ray of hope in the recent laws enacted to safeguard their esteem and honour. Some laws are as follows:

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- i) Criminal Law Amendment Act 2013 provides for 20 years sentence for gang-rape offenders. Stalking and voyeurism are now declared offences punishable with imprisonment and are non-bailable.
- ii) Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2016 incorporates provision for imprisonment to parents marrying their wards below the age of 18 years.
- iii) Law against Domestic Violence 2005 provides for punishment not only to spouse but also to in-laws in joint family set-up.
- iv) Women at Work-Place Act enacted in 2013 enlist harsher punishment against sexual harassment against women work-force.

To take the appraisal to its logical conclusion, it is worth mentioning that the journey of women's onward march to empowerment can only be smooth, spontaneous and complete when the radical transformation in the attitude and perception of men folk occurs in the mind and soul of male conscience. In the second decade of 21st century the torrent of women's emancipation and empowerment is blowing fast and hard. One can delightfully note that men folk are coming up willfully in large numbers to extend their helping hand to the creative and industrial ventures of women for promotion, help and contributions. I think the day is not far off when the glorious dream of women's progress and achievements would be overwhelmingly fulfilled. They are advancing, they are creating, they are deciding, they are managing and occupying glorious pinnacles of success in almost all fields of professions they have stepped into. Very soon Dr. Meghna's message through the treatise she has authored is likely to engulf every nook and corner of the country.

Seven Facets of Women (Past and Present) penned down by erudite scholarship of Dr. Meghna Sharma is not only a book but a vision document. It is likely to turn into a Manual of Women's Empowerment not only in India but also for all countries of the globe.

Prof. L.U.B. Pandey

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