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Traversing the Tradition: Gender Disparity Capsized in Dharavi

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Slums have scattered the landscapes of many large cities in the less developed world since early times. With increasing urbanisation rates in the second half of the 20th century, they have in most cases multiplied. However, among all other slum regions, Dharavi in Mumbai is known to the outsiders as the largest slum in India, for its filthy, pest-ridden surroundings with no basic amenities. But, after many years of enthusiastic hard labour, the dwellers of this region have come out in flying colours, proving their uniqueness before the world. They bear testimony to the age-old adage, 'Where there is a will, there is a way'. Another astounding fact regarding Dharavi is that the women belonging to this slum are given prime importance as that of men. They are never marginalized. Instead, they all join hands in unison in their fight for survival.

The present paper explores how Rasmi Bansal, Dee Gandhi and Deepak Gandhi have dealt with the astonishing accomplishments of the residents of Dharavi in their docu-fiction, *Poor Little Rich Slum*. The focus is placed on the vibrant female community. Amidst all difficulties, they have proved the worth of women as passionate and proficient citizens of the world. Knowingly or unknowingly, they are in pace with the late nineteenth century feminist ideal –'New Woman'- because of their domestic as well as career-oriented life. The authors give a collection of real life experiences of the residents of this soil with enlightening illustrations.

INTRODUCTION

In all societies dominated by muscle power and money power, the patriarchy has defined the physical and psychological identity of the inferior sex. Implicitly or explicitly, women are considered the subdued 'other'. Consequently, women and all aspects of womanhood are controlled and belittled by patriarchy. They are denied the authority to indulge in the affairs both of the family and society. They live in complete darkness, enchain to the brutally powerful triad, father-husband-son, throughout their life, as is stated in *Manusmriti*, the earliest work on Brahminical Dharma in Hinduism by Manu.

Eventually, women could emerge as the powerful 'other' of men. The series of protest movements pioneered by women leaders aimed not only at securing equality for them but also to facilitate their empowerment. With the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and the American Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) women gathered much importance. The movement of feminism played its prominent role in three successive waves – the politically active first wave, the culturally significant second wave and the academically striking third wave. Major texts which contain the actions and reactions of these ages include Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Helena Cixous *The Laugh of Medusa*, Mary Ellman's *Thinking about Women* (1968), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Betty Frieden's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Elaine Showalter's *Towards a Feminine Poetics*, Patricia Spack's *The*

Feminine Imagination and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. Consequently, in many democratic countries, a new way of thinking has emerged which sought a more effective role for women in society. Paving the right way for the future generation of women, a strong ancestry went by and their power is felt everywhere.

Poor Little Rich Slum portrays Dharavi as a dynamic institution full of verve and vitality. Here it is seen that, the age-old portrayal of slums as breeding grounds of communal violence and troubles are deconstructed to a great extent. The people of Dharavi are depicted as living in peaceful co-existence, supporting and encouraging each other. Adding more and more to their cultural ambience, the men of Dharavi are distinguished for the equal significance they give to their female counterparts, which in a way contrasts the patriarchal society in the world outside.

'THE NEW WOMEN' WARRIORS

When society made men the autonomous rulers, women strived to destroy this historical truism. The 'New Woman', an icon of changing gender norms, represented this tendency of young women at the turn of the nineteenth century, to favour new, modern choices and pursue public roles. They paved the way for revolution, growth and empowerment in varying degrees. This feminist concept had its name coined by the writer Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," published in the *North American Review* in March 1894. Later it got popularised in Europe and the United States by literary geniuses like the British-American Henry James and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen. Every woman who breaks herself free from the four suffocating walls of her house, so that she can be an earning member, belongs to this group. Dharavi has turned out to be an eye-opener when scrutinized from this perspective.

The particularity of Dharavi is that, alongside men, there are equally strengthened women who are capable of putting their maximum effort to develop themselves, their family and society. These women highly epitomize the ambitious group of 'New Women', in their dauntless struggle for economic as well as social independence. Here, many traditional prejudices as Tennyson says in the poem, 'The Princess',

"Man for the field and woman for the hearth;
Man for the sword and for the needle she;
Man with the head and woman with the heart;
Man to command and woman to obey;

All else confusion." (427-'31) nurtured by men are demolished. Women have freed themselves out of the shackles of their doubly oppressed state of being a woman and a slum occupant.

The emerging 'Dharavi new women' are contemplative about their predicament and choose to protest and fight against the generally accepted norms and currents. They are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. In *Poor Little Rich Slum*, the third section 'Cauldron of Change' contains a chapter titled "Woman Power", which shows their convincing influence. They have turned to a dominating force; no longer can they be subjugated or pushed to the periphery.

The most noteworthy example to be pointed out is Hanifabi. To become an earning member and in order to make both ends of her family meet, she willingly accepts and faces all

challenges that come through her way. Craving for a change in her surroundings, she also chooses social work as a part of her life. Women in her neighbourhood are always supported and helped by her in their needs. The thought of *Aashiyana Mahila Mandal* which protested the violent atmosphere to which women are fastened to, came to the mind of Hanifabi when she and her companions were prevented from practicing their rights as partners of the society. So, women are taught that silence is not at all a solution for the violence they are subjected to. Instead of putting any rebellion against their male counterparts, the organisation tries to make a compromise between men and women, in families as well as the society. Likewise, child marriage or marriage even at the age of 14 or 15 (of girls) are prohibited that they are offered an opportunity to continue their educational life. Every mother thinks, “I want a better life for my girls. I do not want their dreams to be crushed like mine.”(*Poor Little Rich Slum* 32)

Kishori Project founded by Dr. Duru Shah is meant to make the girl children aware of the bodily changes that would occur, when they reach puberty. Those in schools are provided information in general classes and for those who have dropped out of the school, special sessions are given in which they are free of all bondages.

Dharavi does have a “Queen Bee”. Rani Nadar is that much self-confident, hopeful and empowered. She has her daughters going to well-known educational institutions. Rani has gathered double strength, for she has a supportive life partner, who helps her with her profitable tailoring centre, ‘Rebe Rubi’. Such earning women are, in addition, given loans by the banking industry.

The house Rani lives in is typical Dharavi. One 10x10 feet room with a giant bed. In one corner stands a desktop computer and printer. “We bought it for the girls,” says Rani, proudly. “There is Internet connection also ...”
...But she dreams of more...She says, “I want them [her daughters] to go out, work, see the world, gain confidence...” (*PLRS* 72, 74)

The above quoted exemplars confirm that in a world of globalised capitalism, our new woman is a super creature, who has vigorously shattered the glass ceiling. Education and professional careers have offered several opportunities to uplift themselves from the pits of unevenness and inequality. She is free to choose a life she wants thereby fulfilling her wishes.

The “new woman” may not be the ‘ideal’ or the ‘best’ woman. She is new in the eyes of the world, being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society, and in exploring her true potential, along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs. She has carved a position for herself in almost every area. Today, the women’s movement has assumed an individualistic nature where women demand human rights and personal independence, dismissing the depressing socially defined roles.

The willingness of the ‘other’ to work for themselves and the society has impressed even the societal authority that, many organizations have been set up, for women’s betterment. *Mahila Women*, meaning “women together”, is a credit scheme designed to assist women pavement dwellers in Mumbai. Similar associations include *National Maternity Benefit Scheme*,

International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and so on.

The ‘new woman’ who came forward with new ideas of what it meant to be a woman, what she should be allowed to accomplish, speak, think, believe, and desire, “is necessarily pro-woman but not entirely anti-man” (Tendon 127).

The broad term ‘the advancement of women’ could be applied to an unlimited number of areas from basic education to more extreme ideas of equal social rights. In between come those who make a bursting entry into work forces. Though the idea of women working outside of their homes was by no means new, but the number of women doing so and the variety of employment available make considerable difference in this extraordinary slum. An American author Olive Schreiner writes in her 1911 book *Women and Labour*, “Today we are found everywhere raising our strange new/ Cry –‘Labour and the training that fits us for labour.” (29)

CONCLUSION:

Without nourishing any anti-man ideas either in themselves or in the forth-coming generation of young girls, the women of Dharavi step ahead daringly, creating a new world. Though backward and self-effacing in the watchful eyes of the observers from ivory towers, the queens and princesses of Dharavi have proved themselves the backbone of their native place as well as the modern descendants of the twentieth century concept of “The New Woman”.

Such instances from *Poor Little Rich Slum* show how women have entered the public sphere, conquering to a large extent the patriarchal authority, without thinning the manliness of a man and the womanliness of a woman. With their fervently resisting approaches and manners, they have contributed significantly to restructure the notions regarding submissive femininity. They have become the ‘new’ slum goddesses who accompany their slum gods (i.e. their male counterparts) in all actions and decisions. The sure-footed entry women have made into the forefront of the society is no longer considered an offence but a defense, not a mere fashion but real passion.

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