

Vol. 8, Issue-VIII (July 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



The Criterion

UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Present Day Situation of Women in the Historic Mauryan Land

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Article History: Submitted-30/05/2017, Revised-03/07/2017, Accepted-21/07/2017, Published-31/07/2017.

Abstract:

The paper *Present Day Situation of Women in the Historic Mauryan Land*, as the name itself suggests talks about the condition of women in the historical Mauryan land which now has become a part of Asian Continent with most of the land masses getting their own identity as different countries as Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. The paper not only focuses mainly on the condition of women in these countries in the contemporary world, but also tries to make an attempt to see how the literary works of each of these countries have treated women characters. The inherent urge of this paper is to make the world a better place for women taking lessons from our forefathers who ruled this land with such relish.

Keywords: women, Mauryan land, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, contemporary, literary works.

The Mauryan empire that saw its inception after the downfall of the Nanda Dynasty in 322 BCE had its fair share of rights and wrongs, atrocities and justice, and war and peace. The dynasty was considered to be one of the largest in the present day Asian continent during the reign of King Ashoka the Great. The geography of the kingdom extended from parts of Iran and Afghanistan to the entire subcontinent of India (excluding the southern region) and Bangladesh measuring 5,000,000 km² in 250 BCE ^[1]. Mauryan Empire is regarded for many successful wars and conquests, with the war of Kalinga (262-261 BCE) becoming infamous for its massive genocide of 200,000 men, women and children. ^[2] With all the wars and cruelty that existed within the Mauryan Empire it becomes evident that women of the society during the kingdom's period were considered to be subordinate to men, as was mentioned by Chanakya who further in his book "Arthashastra" went on to mention rules which women should follow and the manner in which they should be treated in the society. But the reality was not that gruesome. Women did have a say in whatever they did and also in the family matters. Women during that age were considered to be contributors to the progress of the society and hence were entitled to education. They had rights of acquiring jobs as farmers, daily wage workers, artists, dancers, etc. They had the right of acquiring property and support the family that they lived in. However, women were bound by several rules wherein it described the inequality between the sexes concentrating majority of power in the hands of the masculine gender. The Arthashastra Book III, Chapter 2 imposes some laws on the marital lives of women which under certain circumstances entitles the power of remarriage to men but not to women and imposes regulations on women with

regards to property owned by her in case she fails to bear a male child. The Arthashastra Book III, Chapter 3 leaves women aside from the pleasure of taking part in sports and consuming intoxicants while also debars them from the right of choosing their own partners. These rules mentioned by Chanakya in Arthashastra, had failed to become laws of the land as people did not treat women too derogatively. There was a sense of righteousness which probably emanated from the fact that Mauryans were also kings who decentralized the power and had entrusted ample power in the hands of the democratic village *Panchayats*. Due to such democratic nature of the kingdom, women did enjoy a place of importance and freedom in the Mauryan society. That the dynasty was named after Chandragupata's mother Mura, is the reason enough to rejoice at the place of importance women held under the Mauryan empire. Having said this, one has to accept that women who wanted freedom had to fight for it. Many of them who could not fight were subjugated mercilessly by the society. So one can say that it was a society where paradoxes coexisted, though there were many good things which can serve as lessons for the modern day world as far as women's place in the society is concerned.

The Mauryan rule ceased to exist in 180 BCE with Brihadratha as its last ruler but the practices of keeping women bound trickled down as time passed with many being still prevalent in the contemporary 21st century in worst forms. In fact atrocities and crimes like physical abuse, domestic violence, human trafficking, etc which were considered as serious punishable crimes back in the Mauryan period have increased manifold which in most cases go unreported and ignored. The Amnesty International in 2008 noted that the extent and prevalence of violence against women in Kurdish regions of Iran is "impossible to quantify, but discrimination and violence against women and girls in the Kurdish regions is both pervasive and widely tolerated." According to the United Nations, discriminatory laws in both the Civil code and the Penal Codes in Iran play a major role in empowering men and aggravating women's vulnerability to violence. The provisions of the Penal Code relating to crimes specified in the *Shari'a* namely, *hudud*, *qisas* and *diyah*, are of particular relevance in terms of gender. In 2008, self-immolation occurred in Iran where it was reported that 565 women lost their lives in honour-related crimes in Ilam, Iran. ^[3] In Iran, some studies estimate the Type I and II Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among Iraqi migrants and Kurdish minority groups, ranging from 40% to 85%. FGM in Iran is not new; however, the unavailability of data made it difficult for the researchers to dig out the truth about its presence in the country. From the beginning the government is reluctant to admit its existence and ordinary people were also silent as the whole subject is considered a taboo. ^{[4][5][6]}

The condition of women portrayed in literature is not any different than what actually happens in Iran. Woman in this land is viewed as a lesser object only alive to satiate a man. Massoume Price in her survey about the women's history in Iran talks about an interesting personality of Iran who attained unimaginable stature during a time when it was unthinkable for a woman to reach those heights in the 19th century. She talks about Quratu'I-'Ayn – a woman who mastered Persian, Arabic and Islamic literature. She managed to rise to greater excellence in theology.^[7] She met Seyyed Kazem Rashti and his successor Seyyed Mohammad Bab, the founders of the Babi movement in Iraq, where she had been for her religious studies. She made many public appearances without her face veil

which angered even many forward thinking men in Iran. Later on she was executed for voicing her concerns for women's liberation from the clutches of age old servitude. This is the gruesome history and the reality of the women in Iran. There were many efforts historically too by various men who tried to help women use the opportunities given to them and make use of them for their betterment. Out of which there is this famous call by Reza Shah, in 1936, who stood next to his unveiled wife and daughters called on the women of Iran to come forward to use the opportunity to better their future.

"Ladies, know that this is a great day, use the opportunities which are now yours to help the country advance"^[8]

Though there were such efforts made, the plight of women has not improved in Iran. The literature also shows woman to be subservient to man in Iran. Men in Iran try to show women as weak and needing support or as a companion of evil spirit. A woman in Iranian literature obtains greatness only if she is a mother. Only the mother's character is considered worth reading or mentioning. The words of a woman character written by a man are deeply derogative to womanhood itself. It seems she herself is readily accepting her lowliness without any hesitation.

"...I have little patience, you have such endurance, you are a man. My heart is fragile, you are not fragile, you do not break, you are a man. Let my life be an offering to you, man"^[9]

One could argue that the aggravated situation of women in Iran is solely due to the geopolitical state of affairs of the Middle East, but a glance at even the South Asian countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh could result in being as horrific as that of its Middle Eastern neighbours. As mentioned by the renowned news agency 'Al-Jazeera' (2015-16) a report by Global Rights estimates that 90% of women experience physical, sexual or psychological abuse or child marriage in Afghanistan. The position of women in Afghanistan has traditionally been inferior to that of men. This position varies according to age, socio cultural norms and ethnicity. Before 2001 under the Taliban's regime, women endured unspeakable harsh conditions and were deprived of basic rights. The Taliban regime was nothing but the strangulation of women on all fronts – educational, social and political. It was like women and their existence did not matter at all. The infamous Taliban officers were found comparing a woman to a rose, which should be kept at home and not to be brought out in public.

Why does the regime insist that women be confined at home? Reducing women to mere objects, the minister of education says, "It's like having a flower, or a rose. You water it and keep it at home for yourself, to look at it and smell it. It [a woman] is not supposed to be taken out of the house to be smelled." Another Taliban leader is less poetic: "There are only two places for Afghan women in her husband's house, and in the graveyard."^[10]

Talking about the hypocrisy of the Taliban, Malala Yousafzai who was shot by the Taliban brings out the double standards of the ruling group.

“I spoke of the irony of the Taliban wanting female teachers and doctors for women yet not letting girls go to school to qualify for these jobs”^[11].

Contrary to what has been written in Iran, the literature of Afghanistan always tried to give the women of the country their due place of respect in the society. Many writers have tried to become the voice for women of the land. In spite of this, the gruesome reality is that women were pushed to dungeons with no parallel in the history of mankind, in Afghanistan. People like Khaled Hosseini have tried their bit in giving some respite to the women of the land by becoming the torch bearers. Khaled Hosseini who himself is a war refugee in America has been writing many novels which bring out the anguish of the people who are caught in the crossfire of war. In his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini brings out the agony of the women of Afghanistan through his characters Laila and Mariam. They endure a life of abuse and distress but stand for each other in the face of calamity proving that women can achieve whatever they want to in their own ways even amidst extreme subjugation. Knowing that they are destined to suffer, they protest against accepting it. Therefore the story of tussle and the heroic grandeur of standing tall facing odds emerges. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* though Mariam and Laila suffer unthinkable brutality, ultimate winner is the spirit to live on and the desire to live in peace.

When they first came to Kabul, it distressed Laila that she didn't know where the Taliban had buried Mariam... But Laila sees now that it doesn't matter. Mariam is never too far. She is here, in these walls they have repainted, in the trees they have planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children's laughter... But, mostly, Mariam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns.^[12]

Despite impressive efforts made during the post-Taliban regime and some significant strides in education, in many ways things remain extremely difficult for women.^[13] The Asia Foundation's report states that women's literacy rate in Afghanistan is lower than other countries with only 12.6% of women being literate as compared with 90% in Iran, 67% in Saudi Arabia and 62% in Pakistan. Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC)'s report also mentions the death of 150 women in the same period due to ongoing armed conflict such as suicide attacks, explosions on roadsides and air strikes. Having almost no identity in the country, women of Afghanistan lead a life, which is non-existent. They serve the purpose which is not theirs. They breathe to satisfy man's lust, superiority complex and honour of the tribe. There are more number of

humiliations inflicted upon women in the name of honour and pride – *nangaurnamoos*, than anything else.

"Department for the Propagation of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice"

constantly roams the streets. Often teenage boys armed with automatic weapons, they also carry broken-off car aerials or electrical cabling to whip women they decide are not properly observing the regulations. ^[14]

Not just women but the horrors also extend to children. In 2012, a fifteen year old girl reported her experience of being raped by a local tailor to AIHRC who threatened her not to disclose the case. Days later, the girl confessed the tragedy when she was physically assaulted by 50 men of her village who assumed that she had sexual inflections. On hearing her plight the district governor detained the perpetrator who later was released after just a day. Further on investigation by clergymen, they alleged her claims to be false and punished her with 50 lashes while the culprit was left unharmed and free. Such is the case of not just one but of several others in the country out of which many go unheard and unreported.

"I had seen more death—the tsunami, two different earthquakes. But I could somehow understand natural disasters. This was a human disaster, and I couldn't make sense of the hate." ^[15]

Similar is the situation with Afghanistan's neighbor Pakistan who in its present scenario also has faced the unlawful and brutal inclinations of the Taliban which in bits and pieces continue to affect the land even today. One such instance can be derived from the case of the Nobel laureate, Malala Yousafzai. Malala as a child became an advocate for girl's education which resulted in the Taliban issuing death threats against her. On October 9, 2012, a gunman shot Malala when she was traveling home from school. This story serves as an example to the denial of basic rights to women in Pakistan. Not just in terms of women's education, the situation in Pakistan is grave due to reasons such as child marriage (*vani*), bridal exchange (*wattasatta*), dowry, honour killings, etc. Pakistan is infamous for its dowry related deaths with annual rates exceeding 2.45 deaths per 100,000 women, the highest in the world. ^{[16][17]}

"Westerners usually associate the plight of Pakistani women with religious oppression, but the reality is far more complicated. A certain mentality is deep ingrained in strictly patriarchal societies. Poor and uneducated women struggle daily for basic rights, recognition, and respect. They must live in a culture that defines them by the male figures in their lives, though these women are often the breadwinners of the families." says Zara Jamal.

Zara Jamal is a common woman who has suffered a lot in her life because of the mentality of the patriarchal country that she lives in. Though intellectuals and thinkers like Mumtaz Ali were way ahead and showed deep concern for women's education, the situation of women in Pakistan is not that good. Maumtaz Ali had written a book called *Tahzibu'n-Nisvan* (Women's Rights) which talked about how the old theological ideas emerged only because of the need of the times. He very clearly refuted the claim that women should be subservient to men. In spite of such efforts women are still an oppressed lot in Pakistan. An irony for women is that, should a victim speak about physical or sexual abuse, she is seen as having lost her and her family's dignity. Thus many rapes go unreported as the victim fears that she will become worthless in the Pakistani society.^[18]

Just like Pakistan, Bangladesh is not far behind in mistreating women. In fact all these countries do not allow a girl to become a woman at all. They start being harsh towards the girls right from the beginning. Hence even Bangladesh has obtained notoriety in treating its womenfolk bad. The first blow comes with the lack of education. The literacy rate in Bangladesh is lower for females (55.1%) as compared to males (62.5%) – 2012 survey estimates for population aged 15 and over.^[19] The condition of women starts becoming more exasperating due to child marriage in Bangladesh which is recorded highest in the world. This also contributes to the terrible condition of women which gets magnified due to the prevalent practice of dowry, which though illegal, is widely practiced by the people of Bangladesh. According to Human Rights Watch, 29% of girls get married before 15 years of age and 65% of girls get married before 18 years of age.^[20] This is the contemporary reality of the women in Bangladesh. But the treatment of women in Bangla literature has amazingly been without any bounds and shackles. Begum Rokeya sketched the lives of bold and emancipated women through her literature. *Sultana's Dream*, is one of the world's earliest examples of feminist science fiction, which was written by Begum Rokeya as early as 1905. Such stride in the literary annals had to be percolated to the masses, but the masses strangled themselves in the age old patriarchal customs and traditions and pushed their girls into the abysmal depth of horrendous life.

Considered as one of the fastest growing economies in the present world with its GDP crossing the \$ 3 trillion mark, India still ranks 125th out of 188 in the gender inequality index.^[21] Following the course of the early Vedic period, although women (especially mothers) in the country are furnished with the divine status, modern day practices have a different story to tell. According to a Thomas Reuters Foundation survey, India stands as the fourth most dangerous place for women to live in.^[22] The cases of acid attacks, child marriage, domestic violence, dowry, female infanticide and sex selective abortion, honour killings, accusations of witchcraft, rapes, sexual harassment and human trafficking have been on an ever rising scale.^{[23][24][25]}

“Father you will be proud to know you left something behind, the year you died I inherited a mind”,^[26]

quotes Malani Silgado in her poem, which to a greater extent in India stands true. Though woman in the current days of the country is achieving milestones in every field, she, still in the society, is considered to be a man's subordinate whose primary duty is to obey the masculine figures of her family right from her father to husband to children, whose priorities are always placed on top of the hierarchical order. Looking at the literacy rates of the country it can be said that women in India are denied of their right to access to education and to make a living for themselves as only 35.3% of them derive secondary education compared to 61.4% of men having access to the same. When it comes to the rate of crimes against women in the country India as noted by an internal survey conducted in 2012 witnessed a drastic number of 196.7 crimes on women every 100,000 women in the year.^[27] With the population of India surging at 1.2 billion, the atrocities and crimes committed in this country have always been deprived of a voice and a representation thus extinguishing the slightest hope of justice and equality for which modern women in India have been fighting for, for over decades. India is a multi cultural country where people of various faiths coexist. But when we look into each religious community, we find women being subjected to atrocities everywhere. Every community thinks it should not give a girl child better education as she has to move to other house as a wife ultimately. Her life revolves around one big event and that is marriage.

But contrary to the condition of women in the contemporary world, Indian literature has been very supportive of women's cause. Though India has various regional languages, writers in every language, writers have shown women as strong characters and in full control of their lives right from the beginning. Though there are times where women are shown meek individuals, the strong women roles from the literary world have always blazed the horizon. Women writers in India also have played a vital role in shaping up the conscience of the nation. Innumerable female characters of Rabindranath Tagore, women characters such as Faniyamma, Chandri in Kannada literature and various others from other Indian Literature are all the examples of what women can do and be. In Kannada literature the writers have shown their anger against the objectification of women. They refused to accept that notion and through their writings educated people to accept woman's dignity as the primary thing for woman's survival. India produced many great women writers like Meera Bai, Akka Mahadevi, Aaydakki Lakkamma and many more. One can say that though there were many restrictions, India did make way for some of her fiercest women to live the life they chose. One among such women is Akka Mahadevi, who lived in the 12th century. She was the one who was married off to a king against her wishes. But, once she realizes that she could not live with him anymore she denounces every riches that marriage had brought and comes out of her wedlock to live as a *Sanyasin*. Her life is the life of rebellion against the established norms of the society. When her husband tells her she has no right in the palace on anything that belonged to him, she even renounces her clothes and comes out of the palace covering her modesty only with the locks of hair that so abundantly grew on her head. She later on wrote a famous *vachana*- a couplet which asks her husband not to touch her as she is wedded to the supreme God.

Emmegonduchinte; samagaranigonduchinte

Dharmigonduchinte; karmigonduchinte

Enageennachintetanagetannakamadachinte

Ollehogu, seragubidumarule

EnageChennamallikarjunadevaru

Olivarooliyaroembachinte^[28]

In this couplet AkkaMahadevi chastises the efforts of her earthly husband, as he wants to grope her. Giving many examples where there is a paradox as to whose thought process is right, she tells him a cattle wants to be alive so it is bothered about saving its life, whereas the cobbler wants good cattle skin to make the footwear, hence wants to see the cattle dead. In the same fashion, she says, you are driven by your lust and are filled with cardinal desire, whereas I am bothered about the supreme entity the omnipresent God and am bothered whether he will be kind to me. This is a telling commentary on the society too. Such couplets which are written by her show the tolerance of the society, which, unlike other societies, had given freedom to its women to express what they felt like. It also shows that women were allowed to have an opinion of their own. They were not staked or burned or stoned or being called as witches or the sorcerers. Instead such women who wanted to live a life of their choice were left to live the way they chose. Having said this, the atrocities inflicted on women in India do not get diminished as there have been cases where women who had no voice were burnt in the name of Sati. Many a times it makes a sensible person become really gloomy to know that one belongs to the same country where people believed in burning women on the pyre.

When we look at all the countries that had been ruled by the great Mauryans under whom women had enjoyed tremendous freedom, and compare the same with what is happening to the women in the very land of Mauryas today, one comes face to face with the harsh reality of subjugation and atrocities against women which is appalling. Any number of thinkers and reformers could not succeed in alleviating the women from the fall they have had. Time alone should reverse its course and make the condition of women better in this land.

In the words of the 19th century Indian philosopher Swami Vivekananda, “There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.” Deriving inspiration from the wise words of Swami Vivekananda, every country irrespective of its tradition, history, geopolitics and state of affairs must work towards not just empowerment of women but also their equality. From times immemorial the world has been a witness of devastating and undoable malfeasance against women which without a doubt has set up a stereotype in the society about women being incapable of achieving what a man can. This stereotype has been ingrained in our minds to such an extent that whenever the society witnesses a woman breaking the barriers of all the negativity around her, we rush forward to find and figure out ways to destroy her cause and success. The Pakistani Nobel Laureate MalalaYousafzai fortunately is a living example of this argument. It is of utmost importance for the world to understand and realize that women are not born to be the subordinates to men and are not just a thing for objectification. A woman’s role in the society is much larger for us to comprehend. As seen in the Mauryan times, it is important for us to respect women and accept the fact that they are an equally integral part of the modern day society.

This mere acceptance can terminate the global problems of criminality and injustice against women and turn the world into a better place to live in.

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