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Feminist Thinking of Swami Vivekananda: A Brief Analysis

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Abstract

After 1960, in India, feminist movement has acquired a place in discussion of social science, although it is true that in India feminist thinking actually started from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The beginning of nineteenth century, free-minded social reformers, from Rammohan to Vidyasagar, fought whole-heartedly against the cruel injustice of women. But in the midst of modern day discussion on feminism, one name is until now forgotten or forbidden, the great Indian Yogi, Vivekananda. He is known as a nationalist leader, Karmo yogi, devotee of Veda and spiritual superman. Though discussion and research on Vivekananda today is endless, but Swamiji's thinking on feminism is still now negligible though it is too important a part of Swamiji's idea. He believed that in the future, Indian women would cross the chapter of glorious achievements made by the ancient Indian women instead of making them only as a reflected glory. He tried to increase awareness, develop and empower women not only through education but also by enlightening them through the philosophy of Indian spiritualism, which might be considered as an effective system or approach in the process of empowering women. According to him 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.

Keywords: *Feminism, Swami Vivekananda, Contribution, Equality, Society, Empowerment.*

Introduction: In the 21st Century, the discourse on feminism has acquired a much larger space today. With the advancement of civilization it is expected that there is a growth of the power of thinking and power of analysis among human beings. But what we observe in the society is only perversity in different cases. Still in our male-dominated society, our thinking about women has the least changes. The place of women in the 21st century world has given birth to a paradoxical situation. On one hand women are advancing in respect of participation in child education to international education, on the other hand, become a prey to different types of social inequality and injustice more and more. With the passage of time, the gap in the field of inequality and injustice is growing wider day by day. Actually a society depends on the assimilation of certain views, systems and sense of value etc. which constitute by individual's socialization. But the matter of grief is that socialization occurs in the midst of a patriarchal society. In earlier days, patriarchal system would denote a bigger

family where the overall rule would be in the hands of some father or father like guardian. But now the term denotes the social custom of male's dominance over the female. In the present world, sex inequality is too prominent in our social system. As for examples, hotel, restaurant, tea-stall, club are mainly the fields of male domination. Without male guardians, entry of the women in such places is not socially granted. On the other hand, kitchen, the bathing ghats are not only the places of free movement for women, but also the places of their sovereignty. In such places male entrance is almost forbidden. So it is clear that the division of male and female not only depends on the biological differences but also on a long time and complex thinking of the society. So Simon de Boevere justly remarked that 'One is not born a woman, but becomes a woman'. The remark is equally applicable both for male and female. In this field, there is no difference between India and the western countries. In a developing country like India, where the feminist plays a important role, the position of women in greater field is still derogatory, they are suppressed and oppressed. In greater field the worth of a women, is mostly judged by her power of child-birth. Proudly we declare that a woman giving birth to male child makes the woman worthy. Though after 1960, in India, feminist movement has acquired a place in discussion of social science, although it is true that in India feminist thinking actually started from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Vivekananda's feminist message: At the beginning of nineteenth century, free-minded social reformers, from Rammohan to Vidyasagar, fought whole-heartedly against the inhuman torture on women in the name of 'Sati'. So in the modern day discussion on feminism, the role of such great immortal names of Indians is no less important. But in the midst of modern day discussion on feminism, one name is until now forgotten or forbidden, the great Indian Yogi, Vivekananda. He is known as a nationalist leader, Karmo yogi, devotee of Veda and spiritual superman. Though discussion and research on Vivekananda today is endless, but Swamiji's thinking on feminism is until now negligible though it is too important a part of Swamiji. In our short discussion we will try to present some dimensions of Swamiji's thinking on women. We will also discuss Swamiji's contribution about feminist thinking. Before adopting his yogic self, his early name was Narendranath Dutta. The greatest even of his life was his meeting with Ramakrishna in 1881. Narendranath became absolutely attracted by Ramakrishna's simple and straightforward but steadfast thinking about the presence of Almighty God. In 1893, before going to the mission of Religious World Meet in Chikago in America, with the request of Khetri Maharaj, he adopted a new name 'Swami Vivekanada'. Until now his speech in Chikago is a subject of inspiration for the Indians. His thinking was not only guided by Ramakrishna but also the effect of philosophy of Hume and Spencer, the Western philosophers on him was no less. Before beginning the discussion, we should keep in mind that Vivekananda was not a political character by any means. He never expressed any kind of political thinking of his own related to active politics. In a letter, he clearly declared, "I am no political agitator. I care only for the Spirit." Except some stray political discussion, it is thought that the main stream of Vivekananda's thinking was related to social justice and nationalism. Actually Swamiji was not any simple reformist thinking about the reformation of any one or two

classes of people, he usually talked about the true formation of a nation. It is true that as a country is with half number of men and the other half of women, so without the advancement of women, the total development remains half-finished. So thinking about the total development of a country, Swamiji had given much stress on women's development, self-establishment and equality. According to him 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. Swamiji's main stream of thinking about women is going to be given proper stress here.

Features of feminist thinking of Vivekananda: Because of difference of thinking in between east and west, in 19th century, the effort of the freedom of women faced a new problem. Those women who were educated and employed had to face criticism and ill remarks from the society. Again in newly awakened India as the instrument of self-introspection, reawakening of ancient pride became mixed with women's freedom. Again in case of social reformation, revolt against colonial rulers gave birth to a new complexity. In the critical juncture of such an era, the appearance of Swami Vivekananda gave birth to a new thinking in the fields of social thinking. In the midst of nationalistic revolution, thinking about women had no individual importance and if there was some importance it was not related to politics. In greater social respect, there was no discussion on women. Here the point of thinking of Swami Vivekananda gets special importance. Even after giving due importance to nationalism and national revolution, he was really troubled thinking about the position and importance of women of that time. We must have to know the then position of women in Bengali community before understanding Swami Vivekananda's thinking about women. In 80s of the last century the gateway of universities for women became open only for a limited number of women. Some women could leave some impression related to their capability of self-earning and ability to take part in creative activities though the greater part of women was until then submerged in illiteracy, negligency of other sex. Within the age of ten most of the women were married, there was no light of education for them, besides these there was the evil system of '*kannadan*' in our society. For men and women the place was different--for women it was inside, for men it was outside. This was the background, where in the midst of absolute darkness there was a slight ray of hope.

In social revolution of the 19th century, one of the vital views was freedom of women and development for women. Among great theoretical thinkers in this revolution of social reformation, Swamiji was one of the brightest stars. About the need of social reformation, Swamiji was not at all doubtful though he believed in evolution of the old. His thinking about social reformation was not restricted to any particular age even in the present day world it is equally applicable. He did not mean by reformation the reformation of any particular part, or class or race, he actually meant the development for all. He once asked what difference would be created by the development of one or two particular class or race; it would create no difference to the total race or community. Not only that he criticized the

negative thinking about women. He told that we address the women low, degraded, unholy. The fruit of telling such is that we are beastly, dominated, slow, poor and not enthusiastic.

For the true development of women and giving them back the true honour, before Swamiji, Raja Ramahon Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar were the two great Bengali legends. As the introducer of a new age in India, Raja Rammahon Roy was the first Indian social thinker who detected sex division and oppression as 'unique social problem'. On the other hand, Vidyasagar's thinking about women could cross the limit of any particular age. To stop child marriage, multi marriage system and sati, the role of these great personalities was no less. But lots of critics think that on some matters, Vivekananda's contribution were much greater, though they admit the contribution of other two great personalities equally. Swamiji addressed Vidyasagar as the great hero for successfully introducing widow marriage and stopping child marriage. Vivekananda congratulated widow marriage law as a great step of freedom for women. Again side by side, Vivekananda reminded us that only forward-looking laws are unable to solve the problems of women there is the need of creating proper weather for the proper application of those laws. As pre-preparation he told about the need of the change of mind and soul. He again thought that without proper weather, law is valueless. He was against imposing reformation forcefully and artificially. As a result of forceful imposition of reformation, those who are benefitted by the reformation have to remain dominated by the will of the reformist and the flow of reformation becomes choked. Of course he added that he had full sympathy for any kind of reformation work. But it was better to wipe out disease than suppressing it. Actually Swamiji cherished the opinion that without thinking separately about women for both the sexes there should be a high thinking. He also mentioned with due respect Ramchandra in Ramayana, as he built a golden Sita in place of marrying for the second time. Nivedita came to know from Swamiji that in old Arya social system, there was the custom of enlightened fire be there at the time of marriage. Every-day in the early morning and in the evening, both the husband and wife would pray in front of the place of fire. From this custom it becomes known that the motto and responsibility of both the husband and wife were the same. According to Vivekananda, in the present day world the equality we claim for both the men and women, was present in the old days also. The whole thinking of Vivekananda was including his thinking about building up a total nation and nationality. For future India, he dreamt a society without suppression, oppression and based on equality. But before it he expressed his philosophy related to building up proper human beings because human beings decide the future of a community or nation. So without building up idealistic, educated and upgraded human beings, building up enlightened society is impossible. Just like Rammohan, Vivekananda also wanted to give force on Vedanta culture which was about to be extinct. In between Rammohan and Vivekananda, Vaidic consciousness got no reflection in any way except in Ram Chandra Vidyabagish of Bhrambha Samaj. The main aim of both Rammohan and Vivekananda in Vedanta discussion was with new assessment of religion there would be the flow of thinking in respect of society and nation.

But in building up a nation Vivekananda had to face different obstacles, most of which were from superstitious beliefs. For building up a nation, Vivekananda wanted to raise up the mass. He thought that for building up a nation, total development of the common people was a must. So in addition to giving due importance to reformation movement, he gave much importance to internal development and education. According to his opinion this was the path of relief and freedom. He understood that until the common people would become educated they would not be able to understand their own needs and they would not be able to solve their own problems. Until then we have to wait. For this mass education is needed. His thinking to solve the problems from the root is the base of his thinking about women. So it can be told that for Swamiji thinking about women or feminism was not a separate chapter, he discussed feminism in respect of total development of a nation.

Establishing equality among men and women-about this Swamiji's thinking is until now applicable. For this only reformation is not sufficient change of thinking is also necessary. Vivekananda not only told that for a woman, except her husband everyone should be considered as her sons, but also he told that for every man, except his wife every woman should be considered as his mother. He was enough disturbed thinking about the then system of child marriage and widow marriage. He wanted to give much stress on education than remarriage for widows because education will show the widows the path of self-sufficiency and respect. According to Nivedita, the problem of widowhood was not a social problem only, it was known to Swamiji. For widows, Vivekananda not only told about theoretical or moral teaching. He expressed a favourable remark about the inclusion of exercise, gardening, maintaining farm house, travelling etc. with formal education. Vivekananda thought that there was a relation in between widow marriage and child marriage. He thought that if we could stop child marriage the problem of widow marriage might be lesser. He thought that child marriage created hindrance in the path of self-expression of women. Attacking the reservationist, he stated that those people who were fearful about losing religion if the girl of twelve or thirteen were not pregnant, again they were in political agitation with the claim of political rights. In case of other countries it would be a case of real shame in place of political agitation. Enraged Swamiji asked was there any human being in the country. Vivekananda thought that early marriage would create restriction or hindrance on the path of building up a nation. Because of early marriage the girls were giving birth to children. Sometimes the new born baby died or if the child remained alive he/she would suffer from malnutrition. This was a great loss for a country. To stop child marriage he was really hearty. He wanted to form a 'math' totally guided by the women. There he gave clear dictate that before the age of fifteen, no guardian would be able to arrange marriage for their girl children nourished in the 'math'.

With Swamiji the discussion on Vedanta that came into light, he has shown the path of liberation for women. He used to tell that in soul there is no sex division, so Vedantic thought should be utilized in our life style. According to him, when a man goes to the highest level of his expression then the differences of sex, race, colour etc vanish. He had great objection about blind imitation of the British. In the western countries the tradition of

showing gallantry as courtesy towards the women was considered by Swamiji as nothing but disrespect towards them. Marxist feminist thinkers normally blame the financial causes for the present position of women and their degradation. They think that as most part of financial hold is with the men, the society becomes male dominated. So they think that to establish equality in society primarily establishing financial equality is a must. In the thinking of Swamiji we can perceive the reflection of thinking of Marx. Related to the introduction of marriage as social custom he told that at the beginning of civilization the name of a child would be chosen according to the name of the mother. But gradually with the help of physical power men started to take hold on money and property and society gradually started to become male dominated. So he gave stress on women's independence. In today's world, according to liberal philosophy, both for the male and female equality and freedom should be established in society. In this respect Swamiji was no exception. He told that father as a guardian, to keep their self-respect in society would make their immature daughters married to even old men, standing on the verge of death. Taking birth in such a kind of society, Vivekananda declared women's right in '*Bhrambhacharyya*'. He thought that without willingness, even a woman has the right not to marry throughout her life.

Conclusion: Though Swamiji's liberal thinking could cross the border of India and spread throughout the world conquering time, his thinking about women became a subject of criticism sometimes and partly. Vivekananda had especial belief on the image of a mother who is selfless, self-sufficient and ever-forgiving. In the modern world, in respect of feminism, such kind of thinking can easily give birth to criticism and controversy. Some critics of the modern time think that Swami Vivekananda's feminist thinking is itself controversial because on one hand he has told about the self-expression, self-dependency, self sufficiency of the women, on the other hand he has supported ideal motherhood, chastity etc. for women. Only in motherhood a woman gets her fulfilment-today's women do not think such, have not the belief. Swamiji had excessive craze for Sita's ideal as the ideal of patience, but in today's world feminist thinking seems troubled with such thinking of Vivekananda. Who was the ideal model of woman for Vivekananda ---- about this also there is the controversy. On one hand he had cited examples of Sita, Sabitri, Damoyanti, on the other hand he also gave examples of Khana, Lilabati, Meera etc. But all these are considered as lack of proper observation of the critics related to Vivekananda. But in the midst of those famous women, we can perceive the assimilation of most of the great qualities. Swamiji cherished the hope that with proper mixture of the power of soul and intelligence, Indian women could be the role model for the world. Some critics of the modern day assess Swamiji feminist thinking with perverted criticism. According to their opinion, Swamiji thought that for women both the paths are open---either they have to take the traditional role of wives and stay under male domination or they can court the lives of nuns. But all these thinking of the critics are not sufficient because Swamiji admitted the role of women in all the different fields of life---it may be the field of education or '*Bhrambhacharyya*'. In today's world of globalisation, the main hindrance to the path of equal status of women is the lack of proper hold on economic rights. In this respect Vivekananda could cross the border of age restriction. According to Vivekananda every

woman should learn something with which she can earn something. Thinking about women's right of self-sufficiency Vivekananda thought about the introduction of Agricultural and Economic School and Sells counter of industrial product. To get true freedom for women Swami Vivekananda never admitted male's domination. According to Vivekananda male can dominate and intervene up to giving women facilities of education. The women should be such educated so that they can solve their own problems themselves. For them no other person can do it. It is not expected to be done by others. Like women of other countries, our women can also achieve this standard. In Swamiji's thinking, before his thinking about building up a nation, he devoted much on the discussion of philosophy of building up mankind. He thought that educated and conscious ideal women enlightened with spiritual power can build up a true nation. In Vivekananda's opinion, whether it is education or meditation, without religion there must be some shortcomings. He thought that all the nations are vibrating with an all-conquering rhythm and the strings of Indian history are bound in that rhythm called religion. In his words:

"In each nation, as in music there is a main note, a central theme, upon which all others turn. Each nation has a theme, everything else is secondary. India's theme is religion. Social reform and everything else are secondary."

Religion means not the lifeless false beliefs; it actually means building up true character. According to him depending on the motto of sacrifice and service the true characters of both male and female should be built. Indian Yogi has always kept women apart in their path of meditation because they think that women are nothing but the barriers in their path. Swamiji had criticised it vehemently. Even the 'math' for women, that he planned, he wanted to give all the driving force of the math in their own hands. In every kind of religious culture the subject of male domination is a proved truth. But in this matter Swamiji could carry on his individual thinking. From Switzerland he wrote to Ramkrishnananda in 1896 that: the difference in between male and female, racial division, class division, educational differences are hell like divisions. Let them remain in the midst of family. If the same kind of division can be perceived even in religious places, then what is the difference in between religious place and hell? After expressing all those thinking about women, Swamiji's concluding speech were that men and women are not each other's competitors, they are actually substitutes for each other. We have taken birth to make our life fruitful and also to help each other. It is not the act of true copy of men done by the women, dwelling in the midst of equality by both men and women in equal respect and co-operation can bring forward movement in society and nation.

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