

Feministic Concern of Bishnu Rabha in his Non-Fictional Works

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Article Info

Volume 82

Page Number: 4368 - 4373

Publication Issue:

January-February 2020

Abstract:

Bishnu Prasad Rabha (1909-1969) was a doyen of Assamese culture, a genius in the spheres of literature, art and music. Feminism is the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. Rabha was a thinker and a visionary. The plight of Indian women appalled him. Rabha saw with his own eyes that the women of India and of Assam were bound, deprived and oppressed. He has expressed his sorrow in his essays that the women are still bound by the covert restrictions and inhuman regulations of the society and religion. These were the essays he wrote in the time of the great wars in India's pre-independence era. In many of these essays the author has adopted the stance of a feminist. He wished to see the Indian woman granted unconditional opportunities for all-round progress as in the Soviet or the West. His philosophy in the support of woman's emancipation attains strength in the light of the opportunities, rights and freedom accorded to women of the Soviet for the development of their human faculties. Rabha was not a Feminist in the theoretical sense of the term as we may not place him securely within the waves of the movement. Yet, he was no less than a feminist in his attitude, with his deep concern for the absolute evolution of women.

Article History

Article Received: 18 May 2019

Revised: 14 July 2019

Accepted: 22 December 2019

Publication: 22 January 2020

Keywords: Women, Feminism, Society, Gender-biasness, Emancipation.

1.0 Introduction

In certain essays penned by Bishnu Prasad Rabha, a genuine concern for the Indian women and their contemptible condition is clearly discerned. These were the essays he wrote in the time of the great wars in India's pre-independence era. With his intense Communist leanings, we hear him voicing for the equality of the sexes. He brought before the readers the picture of life Indian women led during those times and strongly implied a vehement claim that the women should be accorded their rights and privileges and also should be provided with enhanced, healthier opportunities. We recognize his sincere yearning of a feminist for an upgraded and liberated life for the Indian women at all levels. Moreover, Rabha

had this vision while keeping women in the center of the social mainstream. For, he had the honest belief that without the freedom and development in the lives of the women, social progress and normal momentum of the society was unthinkable and a mere figment of imagination.

Rabha was a thinker and visionary and he deeply felt this in his heart that the society played a major role, as a catalyst and also as a redeemer or rescuer in the state of its beings. In the essays taken up for study, the revolutionary writer has based his views and critical thoughts upon a comparative analysis of the status and condition of the women of India along with those of the contemporary women of the Soviet Union. Instances of such non-fictional writings of Rabha

include “Naarir Samasya Ki Hobo” (What About the Problems of Women), “Sovietor Naari” (Women in the Soviet), “Sovietot Shishu” (Children in the Soviet), “Samasaamoyik Bharotor Naari” (Contemporary Women of India), “Soviet Deshor Naari” (Women of the Soviet Nation), and “Soviet Parliamentor Janadiyek Naari Pratinidhi” (Women Representatives in the Soviet Parliament). Feminism advocates equality of the sexes and supports activities that try to achieve change that helps women to get equal opportunities and treatment. Rabha was not a Feminist in the theoretical sense of the term as we may not place him securely within the waves of the movement. Then, he was no less than a feminist in his attitude, with his deep concern for the all-round progress of women.

1.1 Objective

The objective of this research paper is to critically analyze Bishnu Prasad Rabha’s non-fictional writings written before the Independence of India, to identify his Feministic attitude. The paper will try to recognize his subjects of discussion and argument. The objective is to indicate and study how the author has emphasized a need for the emancipation and development of Indian women. Further, the paper seeks to make a comparative study of Indian women with the women from the Soviet Union as stated by Rabha in the chosen essays.

1.2 Methodology

The methodology adopted for study in this paper is basically analytical. The primary source used for study is the particular prose works of Bishnu Prasad Rabha in Assamese, which are referred to here. The secondary sources are books written by other authors and critics on Bishnu Rabha and his literary creations. Further, views and opinions in journals and other research papers available in various libraries have also been relatively incorporated.

1.3 Appalling circumstances for Women in India and in Assam

In several prose works by Bishnu Rabha the plight of Assamese women is brought to light. This apart he has been a witness to the deplorable state of women in India at large. In the essay “Naarir Samasya Ki Hobo” the author has given a true representation of both, with the concern of a feminist:

“Today, woman is at the bottom of everything. Woman has been thrown to the lowest rung by religion, the society, the politician and the government. The women class has nothing to call its own. It has even lost its own independence. And a woman can do nothing according to her own desire. She cannot roam about, read or write freely. She cannot eat, wear, stay, give speech, organize political meetings, sing, dance or take part in dramatic acts. A woman today is imprisoned within her own house. Religion says women cannot be relied on. The society says women should always be suppressed. In the political view, a woman gets freedom simply to participate as unskilled labourers in factories.” (Rabha 846)

Rabha saw with his own eyes that the women of India and of Assam were bound, deprived and oppressed. We may argue that although some sort of positive change has come today in the condition of such women, it cannot be called total or complete upliftment as sought by this radical writer. Women are still bound in many respects. She is still bound by the covert restrictions and inhuman regulations of the society and religion. Assamese women and women in India have not been absolutely equal; they are still to stand identically, with equal rights and privileges in all spheres of life, with men. At present too we have not come to that phase when we can boldly say that the illegal, ruthless attitude of the society towards women have been undone or invalidated in India.

1.4 Marriage in India

Bishnu Rabha says in the essay "Soviet Naari":

"In our place marriage itself is viewed as a means of livelihood for women, whose human progress is then kept under suppression, while there (in the Soviet), instead of doing so, women are imparted complete scope, freedom and equal rights for the progress of their human qualities." (853)

The author of this comparative awareness adopts the stance of a feminist. In India, the traditional ideas of marriage are restrictive for the woman. As Rabha says, marriage is a means of livelihood for women in India. For the Indian woman marriage has particular import because it is as if their only way of living life. Rabha seems to say that if the Indian woman does not marry, life itself would be disrupted for her. This is the belief that is ingrained in their consciousness. But then, the Indian wife loses her freedom and rights. She is absolutely oppressed and she is subjugated within the unjust oppressive social laws. Rabha is disheartened more when he is exposed to the knowledge about the Soviet wife. In the Soviet the women have a contrasted view about marriage. The Soviet woman after marriage does not bear suppression; rather, she enjoys all her rights and opportunities equally.

Rabha's critical viewpoint reminds us of John Locke (1632-1704), who was a prime propagator of individualistic feminism, the first segment of Feminism. Locke's work *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) carries views against the traditional definition and meaning of marriage. In Locke's philosophical views and perceptions we identify a theorist who was a believer of social impartiality and of woman's liberation. Locke said that marriage does not merely make two individuals husband and wife, as is understood in traditional concept of marriage. He terms marriage a pact in which the individuals of equal status and rank come together. This view was earth-

shattering for Western traditionalists. Rabha's similar feminist outlook takes shape when he observes with sorrow the plight of the Indian woman after marriage. His philosophy in the support of woman's emancipation attains strength in the light of the opportunities, rights and freedom accorded to women of the Soviet for the development of their human faculties. In the essay under discussion, he has said:

"Here in our place once a girl is married – the thought comes to her parents that the provision of food and clothes, for which the girl is married off, did the girl actually have the comfort and happiness of those material supplies? Generally they catch a family that can provide food and clothes. And yet most of them have to regret. The meaning of 'swami' (husband) in our parts is 'the provider of food-clothes to the woman'. And the wife is one who engages in the praise and devotion of a man with an aim to secure meals and clothes. The meaning of 'Pativrata' (a devoted wife) and 'Satitva (chastity)' is that the man who supplies a woman with meals and clothes – the woman worshipping that man in all possible ways of deeds and speech. Since the husband makes food and clothes available for his wife, so the husband will have complete right over his wife." (853-854)

Rabha wanted that the woman in India was not a slave to her man, not the woman worshipping the man. He desired that the woman did not intend to achieve meals and clothes through a process of devoting to the man. Instead he wished to see her granted unconditional opportunities for all-round progress as in the Soviet or the West. Rabha, like Locke, held a view in favour of a woman's harmonious existence with her husband.

1.5 Unreasonable Social Regulations against the Indian Woman

The social regulations in India are biased towards the man and the woman remains victimized in this system. This is Rabha's

realization upon analyzing the punishments for the female indicated in the traditional social system. The author is pained that the man does not require undergoing such penalties. He clearly states:

“To whatever extent he might be a criminal and might have committed wrongdoings, there is no penalty for the man. In spite of already having a wife he can go ahead and re-marry end number of times, so much so that even without marriage he may keep any number of women he wishes. There is no amendment or trial required for that. All his ill actions are to be supported just because he is a male member of the society. Even when the husband is ailing, ugly, a flawed character or unfit, if at all the wife becomes unhappy and gets attracted to another man, the society cannot acquit even that woman. There are horrible penalties arranged for her. When it comes to the man, every crime can be excused. In such a society of ours, the chastity of the Indian woman and man’s good conduct and justice in relation to a man and a woman?” (854).

Rabha asserts in the above that the social rules are unfair for the woman, with horrible penalties for her. The ill actions of the man are, however, supported in the social decrees. As in the case of re-marriage, the man has complete freedom while the woman suffers punishment dictated by the society. Such biased regulations cripple the Indian woman. The Feminist Rabha poses a serious question even for the India of the 21st century.

1.6 Suppression of Woman’s Desires

Rabha is critical of the attitude and approach of the Indian man towards women. The desires of the woman are perpetually ignored. She remains just an object deserving sympathy. He condemns the guardians who do nothing better than hang the girl to a man only to ensure food and shelter. Rabha highlights a stark contrast in the duties of the guardians in the Soviet:

“There, parents don’t need to hang any girl to the neck of a person in search of food and clothes. For, they know the daughter is capable of earning and fending for herself” (854)

Such a distinctly different picture has a moral for today’s India. Our society still has the majority guardians who heave a sigh of satisfaction by giving away a girl in marriage to an accomplished man. They must first make all provisions available for the girl to be self-dependent and make her capable in providing for herself.

1.7 Women as Mothers

In the essay “Soviet Shishu” Bishnu Rabha has stated on the commendable efforts made in the Soviet Union:

“...those agricultural farms of the localized self-government – those government agricultural farms and factories and industries, silpanchal, in all those areas huge Shishu Sadan (child care provisions) are made and under the supervision of child specialists, foster mothers, nurses and doctors, till the age of 2-5 years they are provided support and care.” (856)

There are significant scientific and social basis and grounds in support of such facilities, to validate their necessity. In these lines Rabha is similar to other acknowledged Feminists who saw immense significance in the need for assistance systems for pregnant women and mothers. The individualistic feminist Betty Friedan had introduced in *The feminine Mystique* the idea of setting up child care provisions to relieve women of the struggles of rearing children. The socialist feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1936) in *Women and Economics* also boldly stressed on the need to establish child care provisions. Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) further reaffirmed the need for public houses in the service of pregnant mothers, child care homes and community kitchen houses. It appears that following the appeal of the individualist and socialist feminists, child care

homes grew in the West. Such steps taken by the government not only relieved the mothers but also endowed them with opportunities to concentrate on their own spheres of interests.

Yet, the state of women in India has almost remained unchanged. After so many years of independence, similar public systems and provisions have not been contrived and actualized in the country. Rabha has written that the Soviet Union has accorded the education of a child the primary place of importance. The government has incorporated child care and children's education within its policies:

"According to the government, instead of leaving the liabilities and tasks related to child – rearing on parents and particular individuals, the government should take them up in its hands. More than the production of goods, they believe the production of human capacities is of a greater import" (855)

Although Rabha has not made a comparison of Indian and the Soviet ways of bringing up children, it is quite evident from his views that it is a moral duty of our government as well. Then at least the women would be able to take out time to develop their personality. Otherwise, the mother of a child finds no scope for her personal progress, bearing the burden of motherhood for five-six hours daily. It must be admitted that the government of India has taken up the right to education within its policies; but, sadly, it has not been successful in implementing the strategy one hundred percent. Hence, the possibility of putting up child care centres and community kitchens seems far-fetched.

1.8 Conclusion

Bishnu Rabha vouched for gender equality in the society. The society defines and objectifies the woman. As such they are made to lead a different life than a man only because the society constructs her as a different being. As asserted by Simone de

Beauvoir: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". It seems to us that Rabha hated this process of woman-creation by the society, from his heart and soul. The woman remains powerless to revolt for reasons including lack of education. In the essay "Samasaamayik Bharator Naari" Rabha brought to light that in the times before independence, only two women out of one hundred could actually read and write. He further made it plain that during the same time, in Buryat Mongolia, the least developed region of Russia, 80 women out of a hundred were literate. Illiteracy was the prime cause that pushed women towards suffering. This was the major weakness that made her a victim in the the process of suppression. It was the one hurdle that pushed her back from attaining economic independence and subsequent liberty. Without doubt, the Feminist Rabha felt like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) that women must not waste their lives simply in getting married, serving their husbands and in production of kids and rather be enriched with a wholesome existence, engaged like men in explorations of utmost value and worth.

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