

EMPOWERING WOMEN: THE POTENTIAL AND STRUGGLE OF INDIAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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Abstract: Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections. Thus women's empowerment can be seen as a means of creating social environment in which they can take their own decisions and make choices of their own either independently, or in a group for the betterment of social environment. Women empowerment also helps the empowerment of other weaker or disadvantage sections in society. It also helps men to free themselves from the clutches of hierarchy and exploitation. Social empowerment of women is a social process, which requires collective mobilization, orientation programs and leadership qualities. From ages together, women are experiencing bitter situations in this male dominated society. The words like liberty and equality has no meaning, because she has not yet found this in the society. It is difficult to get a solution for women, especially those who are in rural areas, as they are illiterates. Many writers have written about their plight and empowerment of women not only in Indian literature but also in African American literature. Women have to voice against injustice not only for her but for other women too.

Keywords: African American, Indian, literature, society

Introduction:

Women in the field of Entrepreneur:

Women through their efforts and skills can run family business with confidence. Their courage and mobility in all fields of society has empowered them. The following are some of the problems faced by women entrepreneurs:

- a) They are given less importance in the family
- b) Problem of finance
- c) Scarcity of raw materials – high prices of raw materials and scarcity causes more problems
- d) Limited mobility – as they have to take care of their families, they have limited mobility compared to men. She is looked upon with suspicion in the society if she goes out alone.
- e) Lack of education – In India around 60% of women are still illiterates. Illiteracy is the root cause of socio-economic problems. They are not aware of business or economic activities. Lack of education also causes lack of mobility.
- f) Male dominated society – In Indian society men are given more priority. Women are seen as homemakers. Moreover, they are not treated equal to men.

NGOs like RUDSET in Karnataka have achieved success levels by providing job to women. Motivation, persistence, and patience are the distinct traits of determined and dedicated women who can make things happen. It is possible by women anytime to transform the mindset of men. The following are some of the examples which show the potentialities

of Indian women. For ex: Kiran Bedi, the woman police officer has compassion and concern and total commitment towards the issues of the society. She has struggled many attempts to bring back aberrant individuals into the society by giving the woman prisoners better health facilities, education, civilized environment, yoga, meditation and other basic amenities at Tihar jail. Her book "*It's Always Possible*" has inspired many readers and set a precedent for those who can wield authority to retain the human touch.

Women in general are most of the time are subjected to the humiliating experiences, where they have lost their dignity or self-respect in society. One should know the struggles, achievements and aspirations of women in this world. Today in the 21st century, Indian and African American women have achieved many things in the field of constitution but still there is a long way to go and fill their due place in social, economic and political structure. For this, the empowerment of women is a basic requirement for the progress of their nations. Many have taken the full advantage of the changed circumstances, but still a large number of womanhood is suffering from deprivation and discriminatory attitudes. If today women are in a position to speak up with confidence and courage, it is because of the performance and struggles of the women writers and pioneers.

Today's women do not like to sit at home after marriage, instead, they are working in all fields like – literature, aeronautics, business, fields, arts, sports etc. In Indian literature, for ex: we have Toru Dutt, a young writer who died at the age of 21. But her works provide a rich insight into the period she lived in. We also have sister Niveditha, who was Irish by birth, but later became an ardent follower of Swami Vivekananda and had also worked for the uplift of Indian women. Swami Vivekananda was convinced that the salvation of India lay in the hands of women and it could be done by educating women. Education in earlier years was considered as the main instrument for women's uplift. We have a list of women pioneers. For ex: Margaret Cousins, the founder of All India Conference, Annie Beasant, the mother of theosophy and crusader for Home Rule for India. Some pioneers belonged to rich and enlightened families and few also came from traditional background. Among them there are educationists and also housewives who have become social reformers.

In the list of women pioneers there is Savithri Phule , a revolutionist who established the first women's school in 1848 in Maharashtra. She had to face a kind of banished and humiliated situations for she took the cause of oppressed women. Pandita Ramabai, also has a significant place. She has laid the foundation of the movement of women's liberation in India. Because of her efforts, in 1889, nine women delegates for the first time attended the Indian National Congress. Till that day, women hardly ever attended Congress sessions. She fought for the equal rights of widows and could not stand injustice done to women. As a result of her revolution, today we have women leading political parties. In pre-independence era, Indian womanhood had the brightest person, Sarojini Naidu. She was rightly called as "the Nightingale of India" by Gandhi. She championed the Hindu-Muslim unity and devoted much effort in bringing the congress and Muslim league together. In the field of arts, we have an eminent artist and India's cultural queen Rukminidevi Arundale. She started kalakshetra and renamed Sadir, the art of Devadasis as Bharathanatyam.

In political and administrative leadership there have been a large number of world class women. In post-independence era we have the leadership of Indira Gandhi, and administrators and educationists like Lakshmi M. Menon, Lady Thackersey, social activists

like Durgabai Deshmukh and Naoroji sisters who can be considered as few among the makers of empowering Indian women.

In the African American literature, we also have important woman writers. They are Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Walker, Phillis Wheatley (the first African American woman slave to publish her poetry), Lorraine Hansberry and the list goes on. Even in the nineteenth century itself there were also famous Blues singers Ma Rainey (she is also seen as main character in August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*), who was called "the mother of blues", Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith ("the Empress of blues"). These are some of the examples to show the better and empowered conditions of African American women. There are also men writers like Frederick Douglass, Du Bois, who have voiced against the condition of oppressed African Americans.

August Wilson, whose ten plays cycle called as *The Pittsburgh Cycle* has also showed the better ways of empowering African American women. His plays *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *The Piano Lesson* and *Fences* has the element of women empowerment. The play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* has the theme of woman's power and powerlessness. Ma Rainey makes her band fellows as well as whites to wait for her for a long time. Everybody listens to her as she is a famous blues singer. Wilson's father Frederick Kittel abandoned his family when August Wilson was five years old. Hence Wilson had to live with his mother Daisy Wilson. As a tribute to his mother, Wilson changed his name from Frederick August Kittel (before) to August Wilson (later). His plays show the sufferings, dedication, responsibility, motherliness, heritage and capabilities of African American women.

In the last part of my paper, I would like to discuss the struggle of women with reference to Kamala Das' poem- *An Introduction*. Through this poem, Kamala Das tells that how women in the society are targeted and treated badly. Kamala Das is one the significant poets in Indian English poetry. She has been rightly called by *The Times* in the year 1999 "the mother of modern English Indian Poetry. *An Introduction* is selected from the volume, *Summer in Calcutta*.

In her real life she was loved and betrayed by her husband. In most of her poems she tries to find real love in this male dominated society. Through this poem she makes the readers to understand that there

is an urgent need for women empowerment. We also see how she aspires for her individual identity in this society. As a writer, Kamala Das protests against the oppression of the women and tries to liberate them. This poem shows that how the poet as well as women in the world are humiliated, exploited and how Kamala Das has to surrender herself in the name of sex i.e. as early as at the age of sixteen. For her, love for woman is more precious than for a man. She beautifully writes:

.....In him..... the hungry haste of rivers,
In me..... the ocean's tireless waiting.

In most of her poems she talks about the status of the woman inside and outside the family. She is seen as a sister, mother and daughter etc. At the same time she is sexually harassed. Kamala Das is against the exploitation done to women whether physically or mentally. She calls female body 'a burden', hence she writes: "I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored my womanliness." She was forced by her family members and neighbors to wear female attire and to follow the traditions and

customs by becoming a wife and a mother and do the household work. She was asked to stay within the four walls of the house. In her real life, her husband had no true love for her and betrayed her. He considered her as a plaything. Through this poem, the readers understand the themes of suffering of women, her quest for true love and womanhood. The Indian women are in a trapped condition between modern society and traditional values. They should come out of this and think rationally.

Conclusion: Woman in order to empower herself, she should sympathize another woman. She has to take bolder steps, should be rational, self-reliant, rebellious, radical and confident. Thus the poetry of Kamala Das, the plays of August Wilson, the role played by the women pioneers, the role of African American writers and blues singers, women ministers in concern for children and women welfare and feminist movements and all their efforts directly or through literature gives the spirit and idea for each and every one to empower women.

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