

Practice of Assertive Careerism: Identifying the Life world of ‘Modern’ Indian Woman

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Abstract

How is everyday life-world¹ of Modern Indian Women? Let's understand it through life world of a girl newly settled in New Delhi. Chitra, twenty-five year's old - middle class girl, from a city of Bihar has come to study in New Delhi. She has chosen a professional course which assures her employment. Living in Delhi, her everyday activity has changed. In hometown, she was a homely girl, wearing three piece salwar-kurta- chunni (Indian traditional dress). She was submissive in attitude who used to indulge in household activities too. Now, she wants to become a modern woman. The symbol of modern identity for Chitra are - modern outfits, western low waist jeans with short tops, high heels, high eyebrows and chemically masked face. Basically, there is a change in her culture² manifested in her dressing sense, body language and life style as such. She is having only one dream in life that is her own career/job/employment. To achieve her dream, she is ready to use every means. Body is her capital - physical maintenance and figure consciousness occupy in her all thinking, making achievement of career as 'the value' of life that gives her success, security and happiness. That is what gives her identity in life. She realises always that there is no meaning of her education if she is not pursuing 'career' anyhow. This 'lifeworld' of Chitra raises the following questions in front of 'Social Science' in general and 'Feminism' in particular-

- Why are women asserting her career harshly?
- Does education means only to attain employment in life?
- Why are Indian women feeling an identity crisis?

Keywords: Lifeworld, Modern women, Feminism, Culture

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper will discuss each question one by one. One framing matter must be clearly understood in the outset. Women, here, have been used as 'a category of analyses'. Two main causes can be traced for methodologically using 'women as a category of analyses'. First, being women is symbolised as a particular sex or body which they experience

similarly in common. As Charlotte Bunch (1995) puts it, the common ground of feminism is the body of the woman and the violence committed against it, including violations of women's right to reproductive health, the universality of rape, and the allegation that women are universally locked out of public and into private spheres. Two, patriarchy is omnipresent in multiple shades cutting intersection of caste, culture, and class. Feminism's authority rests on its claims to speak from women's experience. That very experience, however, demands attention to the diversity in women's circumstances. There is no "generic woman"³ gender is always mediated by other forces that structure identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Recognition of this diversity complicates the search for theoretical coherence and political cohesion.⁴ Yet if this paradox cannot be escaped, at least it can be reformulated. The factors that divide women also can be a basis for enriching analysis and building coalitions. If feminism is to make good on its commitment to speak for all women, its concerns must extend beyond the specific sex-based injustices that gave it birth. Any ethical and political framework adequate to challenge gender inequality must similarly challenge the other structures of subordination with which gender intersects. Such a framework, informed by various postmodern, pragmatic, and critical race perspectives, rests not on some single standpoint of woman, but on affinities and alliances among women.⁵ It clarifies that it does not mean that all women are asserting career harshly or all women are trying to get modern identity.

A. Why are women asserting career extremely?

In India, there is division of labour in family. Man is considered the primary bread-earner and woman is ascribed the role of home-manager and caregiver. Since the last two decades, large numbers of women have entered in workforce. Entry of women is well accepted as they also have potential to develop their latent talents which they have proved through their contribution in various fields. But, women are asserting their career harshly, making it as the 'centre' of life. Why is the need for such an assertion? Becoming skilled and making career is something worthy, but giving it priority over all other things is like making life hard and 'one-dimensional.' Some deteriorating tendencies have been found in some women nowadays. They are so concerned about their

career that they are ready to do anything. A fair selection based on skill and talent is always welcomed, but some women are ready to use their body for getting a job. They think it as 'women power'. These tendencies are manifestation of 'self assertive identities' manufactured through unprecedented consumerist attitude in the liberal capitalist world. They want success by any means. Gradually, women are losing their own culture. The growing sense of objectification is legitimized by women herself. Gandhi says that it is the means which justifies end, but for these modern women it is the end which justifies the means. Nowadays, education, for women, has become only a means to get employment.

B. Is education means only to attain employment in life?

An educated girl means an employed girl otherwise there is no essence of education. This has become the perception of almost every person nowadays. No one is concern about the wider goals of education and its intrinsic meaning.

'The real difficulty is that people have no idea of what education truly is. We assess the value of education in the same manner as we assess the value of land or of shares in the stock-exchange market. We want to provide only such education as would enable the student to earn more. We hardly give any thought to the improvement of the character of the educated. The girls, we say, do not have to earn; so why should they be educated? As long as such ideas persist there is no hope of our ever knowing the true value of education.'⁶

Employment is one of the aspects of education. But, nowadays, pursuing education means a girl should be away from all traditional responsibilities, they feel household-work/home-making all as inferior. The meaning of education for women has been simplified to employment. If a woman, after education, does not pursue job, she is not considered the 'modern' one but traditional.

This is the result of 'neoliberal ideology' where human thinking is categorized as profit and loss. There is no other essence of life other than economic fulfillment. Education has become an instrument to attain 'modern' identity. It is because all are thinking on 'economic lines' only.

Why does women assert career anyhow? Economic spaces contribute to identity building but the lack of it perpetuates subordination under patriarchy. Somewhere, they know that patriarchy does not give them space if they are economically dependent. Economic assertion is what gives them identity? Women, nowadays, are asserting career not because it is the wish of her family or a compulsion for economic security rather it is for their concern of identity. This gives birth to the question why women are feeling a crisis for identity in the Indian society.

C. Why are Indian women feeling a crisis of identity?

This section proceeds with an assumption that, like Chitra, all Indian girls across caste, class, and age want to be identified as 'modern'. The concept of 'modernity' in contemporary Indian society has been equated with westernization, industrialization and the sense of superiority for western culture. Modernity assumes that women can be emancipated only through 'western economic rationality'. Feminist thinker, A Ong, more and less similarly states:

'By using a tradition/modernity framework, these western feminists view the destruction of 'traditional customs' as either a decline of women's status in a romanticized 'natural' economy, or as their liberation by western economic rationality. This either/or argument reveals a kind of magical thinking about maternity which has proliferated in third world governments, while confusing and obscuring the social meaning of change for people caught up it.'⁷

There are various manifestations of modern identity in public and private domains. Change in appearance and body language, consumerist approach, importance of body over mind, less importance to the feminine or traditional attributes, simplification of education only as a means to attain employment, a quest to appear younger than age, a wish to look unmarried being married can be observed as 'modernity' in the public domain. Needless to say, one needs to stop and think over the so called modern identity.

Actually, there is, in general, an identity crisis in Indian society for women. Identity of the Indian women in family or private domain in the Indian patriarchal society in itself is controversial in general and in women's studies in particular. There is no independent identity of women in India. It is always presented in relation to the male members of a family. For instance, she is someone's 'bahu' (daughter-in-law) or 'beti'(daughter). In some communities she does not even have the right to retain her name which is considered as the first identity given at birth of the social human being. The most popular expression of identity for the Indian women is ghar ki ijjat (image of family). It means that the social image of a family largely depends on the image of its women in society. In family life, the manifestation of identity is acceptable if she works outside making employment a compulsion for the assertion of identity generating work-family conflict or the public-private dichotomy in the language of gender studies. Thus, the confusions and misunderstandings about modernity open doors for problems in the public and private life of women. The overlapping and the consequent confusion in both the personal and public identity are threatening to family and cultural peace culminating into the loss of the 'human self' which reflects in the postmodern crisis

of identity and postmodern dilemma of values for the 'modern' Indian women.

D. Solution: A Soul Searching Quest for Identity in Patriarchy

The notion of 'identity' is 'fluid' and 'multidimensional'. There is nothing like 'absolute, monolithic, universal identity for the modern Indian women rather women in India are situated in particular social structures enjoying 'multiple' and 'composite identity'. Everyday search of Indian women is not about a search for identity but about self-expression, self-realization and personhood. The quest should be the search for truest identity of human existence in women with all other social identities. There should be a shift from the patriarchal identity to a shared identity.

One has to be balanced in approach. Like Chitra, there are many women who have made 'career' as the only mode of self-expression of their life. To be skilled and get employed is something worthy which gives satisfaction, but, for career, girls are losing everything like traditional responsibilities and good relationship with their partners. Job cannot be the only value of life rather there are other beautiful aspects of life which make life peaceful and worthy. A job gained through bodily demonstration rather than skill puts women again in a tighter grip of the patriarchy. Life needs a balance. Women need to work but they cannot pursue career like men as they have various natural roles to play. Career is not an end rather a means to an end. Women need a career to break patriarchal barriers but if they pursue a career by surrendering to men's wishes rather than breaking the barriers they would be accepting themselves being put under the patriarchal cage.

II. CONCLUSION

Taking a human development approach, rational and scientific attitude in the discourse of identity, the paper suggests finding the identity of the 'modern Indian woman' with its mental ability intact. Women need to focus more on skill and talent rather than objectifying themselves as a commodity for 'career'. A quest for success is genuine but there is no short cut of success in life. This will not give the perpetual peace and satisfaction. Identity of the modern Indian women is not only a problem of identity but of self realization of their personhood. What scholars need is to create a feminist perspective that is duly friendly to Indian women. The concepts of modernity and identity have to be relieved of the deep rooted andocentric paradigms and the essentialist thinking that have plagued it so far.

REFERENCES

- [1] The sociological work of Alfred Schutz provides a rich and meticulously developed conceptual vocabulary with which to discuss what he called 'the everyday life-world'. Schutz defines that 'the region of reality in which man can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by

means of his animate organism'. Schutz, Alfred, and Luckmann, Thomas (1973) *The structures of the life-world*, Evanston, IL: North-Western University Press, p.3.

- [2] Culture is a term that has many different inter-related meanings. For example, in 1952, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn compiled a list of 164 definitions of "culture" in *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. However, the word "culture" is most commonly used in three basic senses: Excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities, also known as high culture, an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning, the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization, or group.
- [3] Elizabeth V. Spelman *essential Woman*, 187, 1988.
- [4] Deborah L. Rhode *Feminism and the State*, Harvard Law Review 1994 Vol. 107, No. 6, pp. 1181-1208.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Gandhi Mahatma on education, <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-gand.htm>, Link: Gandhi On Education: excellent collection of quotes from the National Council for Teacher Education.
- [7] Ong A., *Colonialism and Modernity: Feminists Representation of Women In Non Western Societies*, *Inscriptions*, 3/4, 1988, p.83.