

Women in English Literature

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In 1774, the new Council and Supreme Court were established in Calcutta. Sir Warren Hastings was appointed as the Governor General and thus the political change came in India. With the establishment of the British rule, not only political but also economic, social and cultural life of Bengal went through changes. Calcutta was the center of most of the literary, religious, social and educational movements in the 19th century Bengal. The new risen middle class was eager to welcome English education, Western Arts and Sciences in India. The Bengalis thought that British would bring to them peace, prosperity and security which they could not enjoy during the Muslim rule. People due to English education, inclined towards rational thinking which led them to rethink about their rigid social customs and blind religious faith. The revolution that came in every field had changed the scenario of the country.

The British introduced the enlightenment of European Renaissance. Indians thus entered in the new age of science and humanism. Earlier, the Christian Missionaries used to impart English education in Bengal. The missionaries had also at the same time, converted so many Bangali Hindus into Christianity by pointing at the superstitions in their religion.

In 1817, 'The Calcutta School Book Society' and 'The Hindu College' were established. Thomas Babington Macaulay, the Law member (1834-1838) in the Governor General's supreme council in India, wrote a long Minute on Indian education, which led Lord Bentinck to pass the resolution to spend Government's educational funds on English education alone. In 1857, the university of Calcutta was established, which marked the ushering of Western education in Bengal. Most of the reformers who brought about the massive changes in society, had the English education.

They were RamMohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Keshobchandra Sen, Derozio, Debendranath Tagore etc. who contributed in the reformation of the society. Not only such social reformers but there were Ramkrishna Paramhansa and his learned and dynamic disciple Swami Vivekananda who preached the people the true meaning of the Hindu scriptures. They also stressed that all religions were true and pure in essence, if pursued properly. Vivekananda, in 1893, at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, made the Western people think that the Hindu religion was one of the loftiest religions and it never taught rigid and superstitious beliefs to the people. Thus, Bengal in the 19th century was illumined by such remarkable social, religious and literary reformers.

Not only the Indians but the British Orientalists also played a vital role in re-discovering the past glory of India. Sir William Jones, H.T. Coleridge, James Prinsep

etc. were such orientalists. ‘The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal’ was founded by Sir William Jones in 1784 at Calcutta, which promoted Asiatic Studies.

In 1885, The Indian National Congress was founded. The educated people, who loved British in the beginning, for the changes and education they introduced, were also conscious now that their own country i.e. India was not free. By the end of the nineteenth century, the scholars expressed their love for liberty through the medium of literature.

19th century India was striving for independence and Bengal was one of the most important centers of India where people struggled for the right of freedom. Any culture and civilization is incomplete without its women folk. The position and status of woman in a particular society reveals the true facet of the society. In the 19th century, women of India acquired new confidence, consciousness and courage that they had lost because of the social evils against them. Women of India got involved in the agitation against British imperialism when the 24 reformers like Gandhiji inspired them. But such movement gave birth to their own struggle also – the struggle for social justice.

In Bengal, during the second half of the 19th century, the birth of a girl child was still not welcomed. A girl was brought up with relative neglect. Only few girls could get education and that also would be ended by early marriages. Margaret M. Urquhart, who lived in Bengal for twenty-five years and saw the life of Bengali woman as it was actually lived during the 19th century, could see both darker and positive sides of their lives. She mentions that a “wise passiveness” is a distinguishing trait in the character of Bengali women. Bengali woman, before the gradual change came in the 19th century, had to face the bitter realities of the society. There were so many evil socio – religious practices, sinister customs, irrational religious rites and inhuman superstitions, which made the Bengali woman a victim as well as neglected entity in the society. The woman of Bengal, though lived in seclusion, her fine and rare qualities were not hidden. She was always a loving and devoted mother first. She is a good, efficient and painstaking housewife, who was caring by nature. Bengali woman was simple yet beautiful.

In a woman of Bengal there always was the blend of inner beauty with the outer beauty and that made her natural beauty. When we look at her physique and features, she is of average height yet the stature is graceful. In complexion she is fairer than the southern and western women of India, but darker than the northern. She has the expressive eyes and the clear skin and refined features. A Bengali woman always has obsession for her fine hair. The Bengali woman was lively and witty, though she was deprived of education. Many of the Bengali women had a great natural intelligence and desire for knowledge too. Bengal produced the talented women like Swarnakumari Devi, Lilabati Mitra, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu etc. Bengal could have produced more and more women intellectuals but for so many years the women had to starve for knowledge, and they had been taught self-suppression. The Bengali women could not express their desire to learn or to get formal education. The education for a Bengali woman did not

mean the development of the mental faculties, but on the contrary, she used to get a training of submissiveness and unquestioning acceptance of authority. The society made her, outwardly at least, meek and timid. Thus, the intellectual difference between Bengali man and woman was manmade.

There were a few who could get education, in the sense of 'schooling', but that also used to come to end at the time of marriage that is at about eleven or twelve years. Marriage meant the family alliances rather than individual 26 partnerships. Marriage was a lifetime bond, as there was no provision for divorce. In such marriage, there was no scope for romantic feelings as social norms and discipline were important than love and affection between husband and wife. Young married couple was not supposed to meet or even talk with each other during the daytime in the presence of elders. The wife would rise earlier than the other members of the family, and would take the dust of her husband's feet reverently. She was not supposed to eat anything before the male members of the family had been fed. Not only that but the young women of the family were not given the healthy food like fish or milk which was considered as the common source of vitamins in the Bengali diet.

If the bride could not bear a child in a reasonable period of time, the mother-in-law might think about the remarriage of her son. In some families the son would be made to marry again, if the wife could not give birth to a male child. According to their religious blind faith only son could save his father from the pains of Hell after the death, as he performs some requisite rites. The Bengali mother always seemed to be a son-loving mother but her love, however did not exclude her daughter. Mother was always a comrade for her daughter, especially when she visited the paternal house. Her mother gave freedom from the stricter rules and conventions at least during her stay there at her father's house. Although woman is regarded as 'Sakti' in India, especially in Bengal, even a little girl is addressed as 'Ma', yet 27 this mother had to endure lot of pains. Scholars have reflected such a grim picture of the early nineteenth century Bengal where woman suffered a lot. The terrible sufferings and social injustice made almost all the reformers to think and act for the cause of emancipation of woman. Child marriage was the root cause of physical and moral degradation in the society. Though it was irrational, it had been institutionalized by society for centuries. In Bengal, the reformers like Raja RamMohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshobchandra Sen, Debendranath Tagore etc. paid attention to such problems and tried to eradicate them from the society.

Raja RamMohan Roy (1772-1833) established the Brahmo Samaj on 20th Aug 1828. He made unsuccessful attempt to prevent his brother's widow Alokmanjari committing Sati, in 1811. Herself immolation gave a rude shock to the mind of Ram Mohan Roy and he began his work against the social evils of the Indian society. The British could not decide whether they should interfere with the socio-religious structure of Indian society or not, therefore they were hesitant to do anything against the custom

of Sati. In Bengal, there were many instances of sati. Ram Mohan Roy persuaded Lord William Bentinck (1828- 1832) to outlaw the custom of sati. Ram Mohan Roy declared that the Vedas did not sanction it. Even other enlightened Indians shared the same conviction about such diabolic custom. Ram Mohan Roy continued his campaign against sati and he used his journal 'Sambad Kaumudi' (which appeared 28 from 1821) as a regular platform against sati. In 1822, he published his celebrated article entitled "Modern Encroachment on the Ancient Right of Females" in which he explained that women committed sati to escape the horrors of a widow's life.

The orthodox Hindus were against the abolition of such ancient and time honored religious rite, yet it was abolished in 1829 by Lord Bentinck. Sati was abolished and it was declared illegal and punishable by criminal courts by Regulation XVII. The reformers could not stop because sati was not rooted out yet. The custom continued to prevail in other way, as a widow was permitted to live, but her existence was made miserable by the society. A widow was considered an unauspicious person and hence excluded from all the socioreligious ceremonies. In Bengal, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Ram Mohan Roy advocated the right of a widow to remarry. In the first quarter of the 19th century remarriage became the center of their reform activities. In October 1855, Vidyasagar sent a petition signed by him and 900 Bengalis to the British government in which he demanded that remarriage should be given legal sanction. In Bengal orthodox Bengalis, were large in number; so a counter petition was sent against such a reform in the society. There were 37000 Bengalis of that orthodox section and Raja Radhakant Dev was the leader of that conservative group of Bengal. Despite their hostile reaction, the reform movement did not stop, as it gained the 29 able leadership of Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar's own son Narayan married a widow and set an example in the society. In 1856, the bill for widow remarriage was introduced in the Governor General's Council by J.P. Grant and the bill became as act. Though the bill was passed by the British Government, the credit of this change goes largely to Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar also did a pioneering work on the issue of child marriage but his sincere efforts could not root out child marriages. They were successful only when the child Marriage Restrain Act, popularly known as the Sarada Act, was passed (in 1929).

Polygamy was also one of the major evils, which were responsible to lower the status of Indian woman. Though it was more prevalent in Bengal, especially among the upper class such practices were common. In Bengal, the upper classes such as Kulin Brahmans carried it not only because of the desire to have more children, rather sons, but also because of their extreme sensuality. The reformers raised their voice against polygamy and they also made women realize their own worth. In fact, In Bengal, the late nineteenth century or the early twentieth century was a time when women realized their pitiable condition. Of course, they themselves had not emerged as the womenfolk with independent voice. The reformers' attempts to spread higher education were successful to some extent. Vidyasagar wanted to introduce many other changes. He

might not have got much success in implementing the idea 30 of widow-remarriage, but the idea regarding female education had been relatively more successful. It was a time when woman's literacy was considered as the sign of her immorality. There was a belief prevalent in orthodox Indian society that educated women were likely to be widowed. Some educated people of upper class, however tried to educate the women of their families, yet such instances were rare in the society. Though the woman of Bengal used to get the education of religion and culture at home, she had not received the formal education yet.

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