



## Understanding the Suppression of Indian Women through Nivedita Menon's Seeing Like A Feminist

By

**Dr. Divya Maheshwari**

**Associate Professor, Tolani Commerce College, Adipur**

### Introduction

SEEING LIKE A FEMINIST has been written by Prof. Nivedita Menon, a proficient author and a lecturer at JNU, Delhi. She is well-known for her feminist ideologies and over the period of time, has been a staunch supporter of several Feminist Movements across the country. In this book, she has put forward the concerning attitude of the society towards a woman that hinders her personal development and pulls her backwards whenever she dares to march forward with all her might to conquer her desired ambitions. The author lists out several contemporary beliefs and systems that symbolize the atmosphere inside a usual Indian family and tries to draw the reader's attention towards the restriction of women that has been in picture since ages and have been the chief driving forces behind the conquest of females in our country. The researcher here has tried to understand the dynamics behind the suppression of women, the causes and concerns, the obstinate authoritativeness that has been an obstacle for women of all ages, irrespective of the caste or creed they belong to.

This book has served as an influence and a superintendence in providing substantial evidences and ideologies in stipulating the reality of the atrocities and the mental burden that the world around has been inflicting on women. More important, the book presents a narrative of the actual objective of Feminism and also points out the loopholes, the myths that people have instilled in their brains about this ideology and what does this generation need to understand in order to empower the concealed identities of women.

### Critical analysis

#### Is patriarchy the fuel to all misery?

Patriarchy is not a new term for someone trying to go about an in-depth study on Suppression of Women. Rather, one may ask any learned person to list out the reasons that lead to the oppression of women in the society and majority of the people would list this one by default. But the underlying issue is that although most of the mature persons are aware about this bottom-line, people are not ready to acknowledge or condemn patriarchy when they witness it inside their own families, against their own sisters, wives and mothers. Patriarchal beliefs and conditions are widely evident through several instances time and again. We see it, we give it a thought, accept that it is a perennial process and move on without letting it consume much of our time, not realizing that this is indeed a silent adhesive which ruins the overall development of women. To be exact, Patriarchy has been in effect since ancient time periods which is why we have more examples of the rebellions by women in history. The two main ideas that cater to the roots of Patriarchy are "DOMINANCE" and "EGO-

PAMPERING". The males who follow this adamant ideology are prone to self-obsession, often at the cost of derailing the existence of the women around them. Conflicts cannot be resolved when one party is dominant and the other a mere destitute. The Females do not have much in their control and are left with nothing but a never-ending tolerance and a forever service to these men.



### **Dynamic forces in the family and society**

The judgemental eyes of the society force the women to follow certain stringent norms and pre-decided ideologies and order her to behave in the exact same manner as is acceptable to the society. People are stuck in this tyrannical mentality that has a direct effect on the mental stability of a woman. Firstly, when all the strict rules are imposed right from a juvenile age, it becomes difficult for a girl to develop improvised opinions and beliefs of her own. This confines a girl into the contemporary and out-dated system that can hamper her growth as a person. Moreover, she is left with limited perspective of the world around her, thinking that getting married, starting a family and eventually taking care of every need of her family is her whole and sole responsibility. We would have seen many grandmothers who have lived similar lives, unknown to the fact that they could have conquered the whole world and would have followed their passion and desires had their families been a little supportive to them. All they needed was someone to stand up for them, considering that it was impossible for a woman to voice her desires or opinions in front of her family. To some extent, many women are still facing similar problems in this modern world. This strict-policing is done right from when the girl is in her growing years. Sadly, a girl is sternly taught how to sit and stand, speak and dress; instead of teaching her the importance of becoming a self-assured and a financially independent woman. Although this should be enough evidence about suppression on women but unfortunately, this is just one of the countless attacks on the autonomy of women.

### **Gender roles and stereotypes**

There is a heart-wrenching story in the book about Moni, a girl from West Bengal who was stripped naked, tonsured and beaten cruelly. What was her fault? That she playfully dressed like a boy! We are very well-aware of the reality that there are many such MONIs in our country, going through similar atrocities that we can't even dare to look at or read about. Why is this zero-tolerance subjected to each and every action of a woman? Has the society been mis-lead about the whole ideology of Gender- Appropriate behaviours that they grow into a fearful devil in order to bring a girl within the so-called periphery of their obnoxious rules and regulations? And who set these rules? We often take this aspect for granted but it is high time that we stand against these norms and if needed punish the tormenters. Regrettably, this does not end here.

According to a study, 9 in 10 women belonging to the small towns in India quit their jobs in a metro city and chose to work at a relatively lower position in the workplaces near to their homes just because they weren't allowed to by the males in their families. Even Career Choices are guarded by the men in our society, restricting women from taking charge of their own lives. One might argue that this is because women are not safe when residing alone. Why are they not safe? Again, because of Men; if not entirely, maybe 95% of the time and this is utterly concerning. It is often taught that MEN should be strong, confident and brave while WOMEN should be shy, sensitive and devoted to the males. This is a mirror to the fact that the very upbringing of children has been imprecise and demeaning to the identity of women.

### **Pondering over the lives of subaltern women**

Majority of the issues that we address under the cloud of feminist movements are the problems that women from all sectors of the society are encountering from time immemorial. But more often than not, the issues faced by sub-altern women in our country are not given much emphasis. This section of women has always been quiet and un-confident to even question the ill-doings and improper attitudes of the society that they are subjected to on an everyday basis. Unfortunately, they've accepted that since they don't have the authority to fight for their rights and respect, and since there is no torchbearer to instigate the movements against the wrongdoings, the



only option they've is to keep their mouths shut and wish for the time of crisis to pass quickly. Many short- stories, essays and novels from the Tribal, Dalit and Sub-Altern Literature throw a light on this painful reality. Taking into account the problems they go through; the primary concerns would be- (1) Educational impediments (2) Unavailability of Healthcare facilities (3) Cultural Discrimination and (4) Societal Constraints. When talking about the Foundation of Feminism or a revolution in terms of Freedom for Women, we should be considerate of the issues that these sub-altern women are going through and make substantial and consistent efforts in trying to pull them out of these hurdles and show them a hope for a possible bright future where they can attain freedom and get what they desire for. The only way to achieve this feat is by spreading social awareness among these communities, especially the upcoming generation from the sub-altern areas.

### **What is meant by gaze of a feminist?**

The relevance of the title of this book is discussed critically by implying the significance behind the term – “SEEING”, which of-course has a broader perspective. To give a proper understanding of the title, the author states the stoic difference between the gaze of a patriarch and that of a feminist. She mentions that- RAPE; according to patriarchy is a crime against Family Honour and according to a feminist is a crime against woman's autonomy and integrity. It is no exaggeration to state that women have always been treated as ‘OBJECTS’ and ‘POSSESSIONS’ and this can be proved not only through the views discussed in the earlier sections of this article but also by the instances that we come across in news headlines on a day- to-day basis. For a moment, we may think that women have come far ahead as compared to primitive ages and that they have accomplished so much for themselves, but it should not be forgotten that there are many career-oriented women in our society who leave their professional commitments in order to take care of the equilibrium of their families. That is never the case with the males in our society. A woman is judged for every bold decision and the number of people to support her in that decision is often scarce. A Single mother, a divorced female, an unmarried woman, or a woman who is set to start a new life by marrying for the second time after coming out of an abusive first marriage; every single one of these women are criticized, damned and are labelled as faulty and a hazard to the honour of their family and the society. Gaze of a feminist is different from this viewpoint and struggles to pave a way through these incongruous ideologies of the society.

### **Knitting the golden future**

The main idea of feminism is to foster the belief that no matter what, change is possible. The women need to be made aware of their rights and shouldn't be refrained from the liberty to be able to DREAM of a life full of love, self-respect, care and dignity. This would not happen all at once but it is a gradual process, the seeds of which need to be sown since the day a girl is born. She deserves an upbringing in an environment where she feels loved, safe and most important, Free to choose the right direction for her future; not just in terms of her partner but also the ambitions that she would have set for herself. She must be taught to work faithfully towards her goals and when needed; should be given all the necessary support and commodities that open up new avenues for her personal growth. Secondly, the true embodiment of the idea of feminism is the zeal for Empowerment. Although becoming financially independent and educationally accomplished are viewed as the epitomes of being an empowered woman, in today's world, the main victory would be when she passes on the legacy to another Girl who belongs to a socially backward community or is a victim of either the mental traumas or physical assaults that would have taken away all her hopes for existence. To be able to ignite the faith within her, to inspire her and support her, to make her believe that she is important and that her existence is special and that she holds the power to



create a life that she has desired for, to help her fight against the odds and eventually make her an empowered woman too would be the real definition of an Empowered Woman in the upcoming generation.

### Conclusion

A contextual and an in-depth analysis of “WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FEMINIST”, would open up newer opinions and possibilities for a better outcome that pertains to the surreal growth of women in future. It is often misinterpreted by the people who are stagnant with the age-old beliefs and principles. But we must not just convince but be headstrong enough to change these stubborn doctrines which have impacted women in the worst possible manners. It is to be noted that the only way to bring about a massive change is by consciously acknowledging the concerns, rectifying the errors, being confident enough in calling out the mis-treatments and finally knowing one’s boundaries. A Feminist woman would be well-aware about her duties and responsibilities as much as she would be of her rights. To become a feminist does not mean pulling the males down or plotting against them or being jealous of their achievements and victories or leaving all your chores for them; But True Feminism is knowing how to maintain a perfect balance between your personal and professional attributes. Most important to not humiliate a woman who is a home-maker or who has chosen to work for someone; Feminism means to form a community of like- minded, supportive, and optimistic individuals who are proud of their own choices and are considerate about those of others. If we are able to install this outlook into the minds of the Youth, we would see a world full of healthy relationships, self- confident individuals and creative ideals in the upcoming future.

### REFERENCES:

1. Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. Pages: Varies depending on the edition. (2012).
2. Hooks, Bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. (2004).
3. Amato, Paul R., and Alan Booth. *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. (1997).
4. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (1990).
5. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*.
6. Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.
7. Tong, Rosemarie Putnam. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. (1998).
8. hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. (2000).
9. "Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger" by Rebecca Traister (2018)
10. "We Should All Be Feminists" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014)
11. "Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto" by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser (2019)