



BOOK REVIEW: SEEING LIKE A FEMINIST

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4.1 INTRODUCTION:

The world is not the same for women as it is for men. Women are among the most vulnerable sections of the population in the world. The patriarchal structure of the society with its gender roles often violate women's right and results in oppression and exploitation of women. So, feminism looks at the world from a different perspective. Various western feminists like Virginia Wolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett have contributed to the feminist literature. But feminists of the third world come with the idea that women are not a homogenous category and hence their experiences are not same with western women and feminists. '*Seeing like a Feminist*' is a prominent contribution of Nivedita Menon to the feminist literature. Nivedita Menon is a contemporary feminist academic of India who briefly taught in Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi, and is currently a professor of Political Science in Jawaharlal Nehru University.

4.2 RATIONAL OF THE BOOK:

In this book, Menon is presenting to us feminist perspectives on various issues related to women's life and related debates in India. This book is a must read for anyone who wants to know what feminism is. As she mentions, the title of the book is inspired by the James Scott's

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'Seeing like a State', but the way she uses the word 'seeing' has differences with James Scott's book.

The book starts with an introduction and it has six chapters. At the last, it has a concluding chapter followed by notes, bibliography, acknowledgements and index. In the introduction, Nivedita Menon talks about the prevailing hierarchical social order where the male and the female have different identities and this seems like natural. Continuous practice of rituals and cultural norms produce this naturalness. Menon uses the example of 'nude makeup' to this. She cites Feminism as understanding of processes of gendering. That is about how proper men and women are produced through various means. Feminism also has concern about gender based injustices and existing structural inequalities. Feminists believe that these inequalities can be removed and they work for that.

The first chapter of this book is on family. Here, the author critically analyses about present form of Indian family and marriage which are patriarchal, patrilineal and virilocal. Family as an institution is unequal and hierarchical. Only heterosexual and biological family is regarded as legal. In such families even younger males have more power than elder women; property and family name flow through paternal line. It is woman who leaves her natal home after marriage and she doesn't have any rights in her natal home. Menon points out that this form of family is not the only form of family. Nair community from which Nivedita Menon belongs to had matrilineal form of family earlier. Even today, in khasi society of Meghalaya there is a form of matriliney. It is only after eighteenth century onwards all other forms of family and property inheritance were mostly discarded and now only existing form of family is thought as normal.

Menon also discusses about how family fosters sexual division of labour, where women are mostly assigned unpaid household works or other less paid and valued feminized works (eg. teaching and nursing). She points out that this sexual division of labour is not natural as patriarchal society portrays. Menon also analyses hectic and dehumanize working condition of domestic servants, most of them are women. The tradition of dowry has link with this form of family and marriage. Marriage is seen as an ultimate goal of women's life to which girls are being prepared from their very childhood. Through all these, patriarchal family results secondary status of women and oppression and discrimination of women within family and



personal life. Feminists raise their voice in favour of public attention in those matters and use the slogan that ‘personal is political’.

The making of a distinction between sex and gender is an intrinsic feature of feminism. Like many other Feminists, as for example Simone de Beauvoir in her book “*Second Sex*”, Nivedita Menon also talks about this distinction. Sex denotes biological differences between men and women while gender denotes social construction. The author elaborates how most of the subordination and oppression of women are prevailing on the basis of the idea that man’s superiority over women is natural and unchangeable. She uses the term ‘biological determinism’ to this idea. Societies not only differentiate between men and women, but also establish superiority of masculine characteristics over feminine characteristics. It is also interesting that the very idea of masculinity and femininity are varies with time and place.

The author also talks about how the division of bodies into two types- male and female leads to disregard of the people who have both masculine and feminine characteristics. These people are made to choose one sex between the two to perform. Failing to perform as one of these two sexes leads to punishment even to the death. Nivedita Menon advances the argument that “... the body has been formed as much as by ‘culture, as by ‘nature’ ” (p.65). This means it is not like gender is the only product of social construction; sex is also constantly impacting by external factors. Physical appearance, size and shape of bodies, neurophysiology, hormonal balance ect. are impacted by external social, cultural and economic factors. She gave some examples which signify that the physical differentiation between men and women is so meager. She reveals the fact that even men can lactate. Menon also discusses about issues of menstruation, gender test.

Menon illustrates desire and sexuality of human as fluid. One person may experience different kinds of desire and sexuality in one lifetime. Then, she problematizes homophobic modern societies as they recognize only heterosexuality as natural. People who fail to perform gender appropriate behaviour are often punished or tried to make them heterosexual. Here, Menon raises a very simple yet serious question that: “Is it natural to be normal? (p.93) By not accepting people the way they are as not natural is itself a great paradox. The author criticizes section 377 of the Indian Penal Code as it delegitimizes sexual activities beyond heterosexuality as not natural. The judgment of Delhi High Court on section 377 in 2009 is a historic judgment in this regard. The judgement, holding that consensual same sex under section 377 of Indian Penal Code is no longer criminalized, got a huge amount of support from



people. Thus, Menon is not only concern about women's issues, but also about issues related to people of other gender. Menon discusses about queer politics and counter-heteronormative trends. She illustrates the plight of hijras and support the demand of hijras to identify as third gender.

Nivedita Menon identifies two perspectives on rape. Patriarchal understanding of rape is based on the idea that rape is evil because it is matter of dishonour of the family. Rape is worse than death; a rape victim cannot lead a normal life afterwards. This kind of understanding reflects in various judicial judgments where victims are being blamed for wearing shorts, going out of home in night ect.. On the other hand, from the feminist perspective rape is a crime as it violets the autonomy and bodily integrity of woman. So they raise voice against blaming the victim. For them it is the honour of the rapist which is being lost not the honour of the victim. She criticizes Indian society because here rapists are made to marry the victim as solution of rape but a two party consensual sex outside marriage is seen as a crime. There are also so many instances where alleged rapists are not punished for lack of evidences and proved rapist got reduced punishment. There are so many cases in court from years in the hope of justice as for example Bhanwari devi case. Instances and cases of rape and sexual harassment of prostitutes, widows and unmarried women are never taken seriously as they don't fall under the category of 'good women'. Menon also raises issues like sexual harassment at the workplace and educational institutions. She also pointed out the landmark judgment of Supreme Court (1997, Vishakha vs. State of Rajasthan), Bill on the Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at Workplace, 2010 ect. which are welcomed by various women groups. But the question of false complaints is always there. It is also a matter needed to look by Feminist that accused should not get excessive punishment of the crime he has done.

In the fifth chapter of her book which is on Feminists and Women, here, she discusses about the debate on Uniform Civil Code versus personal law. It is historically proved that all personal laws on marriage, inheritance and guardianship are discriminatory in nature towards women. Various women's movements had been took place for demanding UCC even before India's independence. But the issue of UCC came into notice as a matter of national integration versus cultural rights of community. It has rarely got focused as a feminist issue. This is reflected in judgments on the Shah Bano case, on triple talaq case (1994), on Sarla Mudgal case (1995). Menon elaborates about the tendency of marginalization of minority



identities and interest in the name UCC instead of looking at women's real issues. So the realization has come to women's movement about rethinking about UCC. Menon advances an important argument that "the following of heterogeneous practices need not be inherently inequality, nor the imposition of a uniform law necessarily the opposite" (Menon, 2012, p.154). So, feminists talk about focusing on gender-just law. She also discusses very critically about projection of Islam as regressive in India as well as in west and taking of anti-democratic and anti-muslim move.

Menon also discusses on various aspects of the issues like sex work, bar-dancing, commercial surrogacy, pornography and abortion. Feminist had criticized many time the commodification of the female body , where women body or parts of body sell as other commodity through sex work, in advertisement project, in bar-dancing etc. But many women are there who choose on their won to commodify their bodies, as in other profession people commodify their other faculties (intellectual, musical ability, physical labour). Due to lack of education, limited job offers women choose to become sex worker or bar dancer. So Menon talks about a shift of feminist understanding regarding this. This shift talks about looking at these works see like other forms of labour. Menon also points out that criminalization of sex work or bar dancing may result violence to women. Feminists also claim of right to safe and legal abortion of women. But there are seen contradictory views among feminists on sex selective abortion.

5.3 CONCLUSION:

Nivedita Menon, thus, in this book discusses on various feminist debates. She also discusses about various shifts in feminist understanding. The book questions on the very nature of society, its assumptions, its institutions, its objectives and its claims. Though this book she denounce the idea of western feminism that women's issues and experiences are universal. Basically in Indian society women don't have a singular identity. Women are not a homogenous category. They are at different position and situations. So their experiences are different. She criticizes various aspects of Indian society and prevailing ideas. The book provides few answers to these problems and questions it has raised. But this book compels it readers to see the world from a different perspective. It tries to show us a path of thinking in order to question them too. It talks about how societies are producing gender roles and norms like they are natural and people are practicing them blindly. The book gives a very good idea



about feminism. The book ended with the idea that feminism is not fossilized concept, but an evolving theme that is inconsequential without the contextual basis of time, location and individual experiences.