

Editorial

Feminine Genius: A Literary Project

A feminist project starts from an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and a subsequent awareness that the situation is man-made and, therefore, can be reconstructed by conscious action by women and men. The experience and understanding of women constitute the basis for identifying relevant questions on feminine identity and their roles. Historically, the feminine project took different forms: defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic, and political rights, assuming the roles of men, and attempting the reversal of the binary opposition of male and female in favour of the latter, etc.

Fine arts, literature and media play significant roles in the oppression as well as the promotion feminine genius. Our worldviews and perspectives are influenced by the words and motifs of the language that we use, and the language that we use by our experiences, which are in turn also by sex and gender. That there is a relationship between our language use and our forms of life is obvious. Words do matter, and our language choices have consequences. Our minds grasp things not as they are in themselves but in a discursive horizon, and words get their meaning not from their reference to external things but from their relations to all the other signs in a stream of discourses and life.

Within feminism, the literary project resists sexism in literature and sexist practices in the society. According to the feminists, the ideologies that claim that observed differences between men and women are natural and necessary, or that women have an essence that explains and justifies their subordination, are manmade and, therefore, are to be deconstructed. The androcentric language promotes the hegemonic patriarchy and makes it difficult for alternative visions of reality to emerge.

Everyday language-use shapes and sustains particular forms of gender roles and often supports male supremacy and female subjugation. Men are linguistically represented as actors and women as acted upon, passive. Men control the institutions that promote language – such as schools, churches, publications, and legislatures. This is gravely disadvantageous to women as they promote a male worldview, subordinate women and render them almost invisible. It is argued that male power over language allows men to shape not just imagination, but also reality. A feminist critique should enable women to break free from the constraints of male language, institutions of culture that promote hegemonic patriarchy, and to articulate alternative visions of the world for feminist goals and for humanity in general. Feminist writing is neither the same as nor opposite to men's writing, but differently structured, as a result of differences in women's experiences.

A feminist literary project implies for many that women in some sense constitute a group who share a position of difference based on gender. Their experiences and their literary creations share in a horizon that is different from the male experiences and texts. It is also noted, however, that women's experiences are so diverse and sensitivity to feminist experiences, strengths and challenges demand that there is no universalizing or homogeneous category of the 'woman'; the differences are to be taken into account. When we look and explore the landscape of 'feminine genius', we see all sorts of distinct and indistinct movements, such as political, racial, psychological, linguistic, and religious. The concept makes a tangled impression. One cannot find the description of *the* 'feminine genius'! What we have rather to do is to consider various projects rather than giving a complete theoretical articulation on "Who and what is woman/feminine?" One should focus attention both on the distinct categories of feminist projects and on the ways in which the insights of feminine genius, however categorized, may inform our understanding of human beings and our characteristic ways of life. There is neither an undifferentiated equality between men and women nor a conflictual difference.

A feminist literary project is good for the promotion of a just and compassionate society. It is good to live in a world of men and women than to inhabit a world of sexless creatures. If we believe that women and men deserve social equality, then we should think seriously about how to reflect that belief in our language use. The attempt to create a feminine language – a language of the women, by the women, and for the women – to express the feminine experience and feminine goals is, however, misguided. A neutral language that can accurately capture reality in itself is also an ideal that cannot be achieved. Perspectives are particular standpoints. Instead, we must aim to create a gender specific and inclusive language, sensitive and congenial to feminine humanity. This follows from our perspective that men and women are singularly unique but partners in the building up of a humanity that stands for the welfare of all. Language, purged of male bias, can be turned into a discipline that can help in the attainment of feminist ends and the promotion of a just and compassionate society. An effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life, beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women, is imperative on all men and women of good will.

The project of the *Journal of Dharma* in this issue is to celebrate alternative genres to promote feminine values and systems, customs, and institutions. The first essay, "G. B. Shaw's Androgynous Women: A Reading from Indian Perspective" by Rajni Singh, examines some of the women characters of George Bernard Shaw in the light of the concept of androgyny as found in the Indian tradition. Some of the women characters of Shaw are a blend of heterogeneous elements, which finally culminate in androgyny. Shaw's creative world is full of strong, self-complacent women, who take androgynous position instead of exchanging places with men. His heroines overturn customs and emphatically demand for their status as human beings. It is interesting to note that Shaw departed from the Victorian standards of morality and presented woman as a manifestation of 'Life Force' (presented in plays such as, *Candida*, *Back to*

Methuselah; and in "The New Theology", a sermon delivered in 1907 in London) which carries echoes of the 'Cosmic Force of Nature' as found in the Indian philosophical tradition. 'Androgyny' in Indian tradition is highly plural and conceptually complex. The ungendered 'Brahman', 'Purusha-Prakrti', 'Siva-Sakti', and 'Ardhanarisvara' are different concepts from different ancient Indian scriptures that signify wholeness, completion, unity, and androgyny. Shaw firmly believed in elimination of social, economic and political differences between sexes and strived for bringing about a state of social unity in which principles of distributive social justice are lived to the core by each and all members of the society. With this vision, he provided full spectrum of experiences and feelings to his women characters. The Shavian women come out of the confines of gendered boundaries and move toward plurality by taking androgynous position.

Aju Aravind in his article "From Animation to Reality: Race/Gender, the Myth of the American Dream and *Tom and Jerry* Cartoons" argues that the animated cartoon *Tom and Jerry*, widely acclaimed as one of the most 'innocent' and 'pure' forms of entertainment, also infuses in the viewers a perception that underlines the concept of 'preferred reading,' to propagate the ideologies of 'producers and transmitters of the text' which was essentially racial and gendered. The paper examines *Tom and Jerry* as a cultural, political and historical phenomenon and analyzes how they manipulate identities and images of the black female to construct a potent ideology that sustains the material and cultural interests of its creators.

There is ambivalence and lack of finality in the structure of texts with representation of women. "Ambiguity And Ambivalence as Structural Principles" by Lalitha Sarma R. and Rajeshwari C. Patel studies the ambiguity of character delineation and ambivalence in the structure of feminist texts using Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* as an alibi. The ambiguity and ambivalence in *The Golden Notebook* is intended, deliberate and consciously artistic. The incommensurability of woman's experiences, her variety and contrariness, demand and deserve a higher order of conscious

artistry. Ambiguity, as in the dilation of boundaries in the self, is, therefore, ineluctably intertwined with ambivalence in the form of texts that negotiates gender as a category of perception.

"Women and *Nibbāna*: An Analysis of Early Buddhist Texts" by Abhinav Anand and Ajit Kumar Behura argues that the *Pāli* Buddhist texts present a mixed basket of egalitarian and non-egalitarian, and soteriologically inclusive and androgynous Buddhist worldviews towards women. Despite the institutional androcentrism and ascetic misogyny these texts teach that Gotama, the Buddha gave teachings to all human beings irrespective of their caste and gender, and also taught that women are equally capable of realising fruits of stream-attainment (*sotāpanna*), once-returning (*sakadāgāmi*), non-returning (*anāgāmi*) and the highest spiritual goal (*nibbāna*, *arahant*). The *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* narrate the stories of Buddhist men and women, who realized perfection during the lifetime and after the death of historical Gotama the Buddha. The paper argues that in spite of the negative portrayal of women in some of the texts, early Buddhist worldviews were progressive with regard to the gender issue, though sexual difference is affirmed, a common *saṅgha* is not provided for both sexes, and additional rules are given for nuns. The social and institutional patriarchy does not exclude women from realising *nibbāna*.

There are some amazing biblical heroines who have accomplished the divine dream for a just and compassionate society through their seemingly irrelevant but vigorous and dynamic lives. Regina Komban presents the story of Naomi and Ruth, from the biblical book of *Ruth*, as paradigm for resolving the contemporary social issues like immigration, family life, widow-hood, racism, inter-religious relationships, and food, in her essay "Naomi And Ruth: Biblical Heroines as Paradigms for the Formation of a Just and Compassionate Society." They accomplish the endeavour to be the life-paradigms in the formation of a just and compassionate society through their astute leadership, flawless friendship, covenant faithfulness and more over by their absolute trust in the Lord who rewards the faithful and it is the relevance of this biblical novella of the

Hebrew Bible to the present day. The paper deals with the biblical concepts of *hesed* and *sedāqāh*, which reveal the mind of God for the formation of a just and compassionate society in the Hebrew Bible. The book of *Ruth* holds out the practice of *hesed* as the ideal lifestyle for Israel. Naomi shares the leadership role with her daughter-in-law Ruth, and became the catalyst for divine intervention. Their flawless friendship brought forth joy and contentment to the-could-be predicament of two widows.

The articles included in this issue, thus, affirms the variety and plurality of feminine genres and motifs in literature, including the religious texts. Along with the predominantly patriarchal narratives the literature contains rays of hope and models for the promotion of a just and compassionate society. Recognizing and celebrating the feminine genius in the literature is necessary for the removal of the marginalization and discrimination of women, and for the well being of all.

Wishing you critical and creative thoughts on the feminine literary project for the promotion of a just and compassionate society, may I submit this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* for your reading and reflection, enjoyment and enlightenment.

Jose Nandhikkara, Editor-in-Chief