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**Feminist Reading of The High-Caste Hindu Women in the Context of Colonized India**

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**Abstract:**

India, colonized under British rule, was a shackle to the freedom of women, creating favorable conditions for male domination while harassing women more and more. In this context, Pundita Ramabai Sarasvati, an Indian writer in English, emerged as the voice of the voiceless, the singer of the silenced, fighting for the rights of women through her literary output and through her social activism. Ramabai's work, *The High-Caste Hindu Women*, is a feminist manifesto portraying the fate of women as always being on the side of those who suffer and are exploited. Thus, the paper presents the feminist reading of *The High-Caste Hindu Women* in the context of India, colonized under British rule.

**Keywords** – Feminism, women's self-reliance, women's education, native teachers, colonized India.

**Introduction:**

Building up the character and developing the strategy for the freedom of India from colonial rule was equivalent to heeding the growth of saplings while sowing seeds still lay with the "fundamental contradiction between the interests of the Indian people and that of British colonialism" (Chandra 11). The anthology of the freedom movement was a compilation of economic, social, cultural, political, educational, communal, racial, and gender injustices. Each frontier alike witnessed a great deal of harassment, unrest, inflictions, misinterpretations, and suffering loud enough to rise and write for the cause of the Indian struggle for independence. These frontiers were many in number but focused on the tasks, worked to develop different task forces, and collaborated in an interdisciplinary way to guide and to be guided, to fight for one and for all, thereby making the risk bear fruit. Each frontier was not fixed, not one of constancy, but each of them underwent transformations, shaping

and changing their ideologies now and then, only to attain their ultimate fixed, unwavering goal of freedom.

Seen in the context of India colonized under British rule, the frontier of gender injustice already suffering, suffered a great deal more to add to it. Women 'the weaker sex' grew weak and weaker to their breaking point until social reformers, social activists, and educationists entered the scene at their localized level and tried to reverse the lot of so-called meek and timid creatures. Ramabai will be celebrated here, treading the red carpet of analysis as the woman behind the first feminist manifesto in the context of years of freedom struggle. The paper will sing in words and bring to light the efforts of darkness under the lamp in making its existence known.

Contextually to analyze, the economic situations of Indians were deteriorating under the selfish interests of the British rule; the situations pressed hard enough to strangle the social and domestic situations of India to suffocation. When coming directly to gender differences, India had been a major contributor to numbers of female mortality - be it because of female infanticide, *suttee*, suicide, violence, murder, and whatnot. Females, then, were so soaked and imbibed under patriarchal norms that they couldn't even realize that they were strangled. They had been hammered by tradition to accept this strangling as a way to heaven. Strangely, male dominance is integrated into our existence deep enough to recognize it to be fatal and deadening.

To take up this cause, to fight with women's lot emerged the scene – Ramabai, a social reformer, education and women's rights activist, a Sanskrit scholar, and author of four main literary contributions. While there were martyrs who blissfully died for their actions, there were heroes who "worked for years, day after day, in an unexciting humdrum fashion, forsaking their homes and careers, and losing their lands and very livelihood – whose families were often short of daily bread and whose children went without adequate education or health care" (Chandra 19-20); there was still another group of freedom fighters, actually writers as fighters. The literary genius of the nation through their novels, stories, slogans, poetries, autobiographies, biographies, and so on, all focused on awakening India to fight for freedom, fit in the tag of writers as fighters for independence. And one among these many is Ramabai. From among her four major literary contributions, this paper will focus on her work *The High-Caste Hindu Women* published in 1887 which is famed as India's first feminist manifesto. As per Rachel L. Bodley in her exemplary introduction to this title, *The High-Caste Hindu Women*, "the reader of this unpretending little volume catches the first utterances of the unfamiliar voice" (i). Ironically, Ramabai is not unfamiliar; in fact, she has become the exemplary voice for the voiceless. As per Bodley, Ramabai, during her years in America, came in contact with different educators and philanthropists. It is through these encounters and interactions that slowly "Ramabai has found popular ideas concerning the women of India erroneous and it is to correct these and also to reveal fully their needs that the following chapters have been prepared" (vii).

Ramabai's biography shaped the biographies of other women. Her life, and her sufferings, direct and indirect, made her a fighter to fight directly or indirectly for what constituted the second major mass of India, which is for women. One reading of *The High-Caste Hindu Women* is enough to tag her feminist and to tag her as a writer fighter. She was not among the followers, but among the leaders, and in parallel, in her years, she was led by her father. In her literary output of *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai argues for women, contrasting the arguments from *Manu Smriti*, which were intended totally against women. "All men with more or less faith in the law regard women, even though they be their own mother's 'as impure as falsehood itself'" (Sarasvati 53). Ramabai argues women during those years were all treated worse, in fact, like animals. They were required to work as per the whims of society and their male counterparts unquestioningly like animals. Each page of her work takes us to the dark road hovered by harassing misinterpretation and mistreatments. Nowhere do the ancient texts testify to the inferiority of women. It is his story interpretation. The men were the scholars; they misinterpreted the ancient Sanskrit texts to facilitate their domination and bring women to submission, doing "their best to make a woman a hateful being in the world's eye" (55)

It was Ramabai who contributed to her story interpretations. Like a fine artisan, she worked on the shoes thrown over the women and refined them to create heels to raise them above enough. Ramabai clearly Stated the problem, reached its root cause, and then rose to write and fight simultaneously, contributing to the seeds being sown for India's freedom. As history bears witness, both men and women participated in the freedom movement. Ramabai has a Special bearing on this effect. Ramabai reverberates how society, for dissecting the image of women, in the backdrop of the freedom movement and before, using the tools of child marriage, widowhood, the institution of marriage for girls, women in religion, women in education, social evils for girls like suttee, dowry and so on.

But this is not all where Ramabai sojourns; she gives the solutions and appeals to her fellow beings to provide for three essential needs of her fellow women that are "1st, Self-Reliance; 2nd, Education; 3<sup>rd</sup> Native women teachers" (100). Favoring self-reliance Ramabai believes that the progress of women is impossible without self-reliance because women are "so cruelly cropped in their early days that self-reliance and energy are dead within them; helpless victims of indolence and false timidity they are easily frightened out of their wits and have little or no strength to withstand the trials and difficulties which must be encountered by a person on her way towards progress" (101)

Next, in sequence, she urges her fellow beings to stand for their own cause of education because, without education, they are no less than a pile of "ignorant, unpatriotic, selfish and uncultivated" (105) beings. Education is the only tool to awaken them to the common cause of sisterhood in awakening. Education has the capacity to crown a beggar to power, so why can't a woman crown herself? Oh yes! "a popular belief among the high-caste women that their husband will die if they should read or should hold a pen in their fingers" (103). There were many instances of selfish manipulation, but Ramabai fought for her fellow

women's lot. She earned from her writings and used them to invest in the education of women. Her efforts in the form of Arya Mahila Samaj and Mukti Mission raised her to the pedestal of a pioneering education activist. Sublime pleadings of Ramabai through her established societies and its branches promoted education and discouraged child marriage. Lastly, Ramabai pleaded with native women teachers as the issues of language would prove to be a hindrance to teachings from non-native women. Thus, she requested for native women to teach through actions rather than through examples, as Ramabai writes about the need for a "body of persons from among themselves who shall make it their life work to teach by precept and example their fellow country women" (106) and thus resolving the issues of language. All throughout, Ramabai presented women as "hungering and thirsting for knowledge" (107) and that education only can help them evolve from their subjugated, submissive, and deteriorating plight.

In alignment with our reflection on feministic aspects in *The High-Caste Hindu Women*, the same when analyzed for the background behind it, it would appear that the dynamic aura of Ramabai was not that consequential of her nature but, most importantly, of her nurture by her parents whose lasting influence and "able" education imbibed into her character and in her making as "Pundita" and "Sarasvati". Ramabai's father, Dongre, a scholar of Sanskrit influenced by his mentor, took to heel to teach Sanskrit to the women he was responsible for. Against patriarchal views, he supported the cause of education for women. Though he was being slandered and criticized, he never paid heed to the stones thrown at him. In fact, he used it all to polish and refine his ideologies and thus embark on the journey of teaching all those who wished and wanted to be educated. In the context of the Indian freedom movement, when patriarchy was harrowing women because, in their opinion, they were authorized by religious and ancient texts, it is hard to believe that there could have been a liberal to support the cause of women's education.

Ramabai's words bear testimony to this line of thought discussed for a long. When Ramabai was enquired as to what opportunities had formed her notions on education, she replied, "I am the child of a man who had to suffer a great deal on account of advocating female education and who was compelled to discuss the subject, as well as to carry out his own views, amidst great opposition... I consider it my duty, to the very end of my life, to maintain this cause and to advocate the proper position of women in this land" (xvii). Thus, in the context of the Indian Freedom Movement, the paper has painted the hues and the aura of Ramabai as a feminist. Inspired and enlightened by the suffering lot, Ramabai pleads to the victims of colonization: "Tell them to help me educate... for I solemnly believe that this hated and despised class of women, educated and enlightened, are, by God's grace, to redeem India!" (xxiv). Thus, *The High-Caste Hindu Women* by Ramabai portrays her as a feminist in the context of the Indian colonization under British rule.

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