



TO BE OR NOT TO BE?
AN ANALYSIS OF PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN WITH REFERENCE TO
THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

In the present era, the changing social mores, economic advancements, fast pace of living have created a tremendous impact on the moral, religious and cultural fabric of the society. Today, the women are educated, well-bred and economically independent which make them never willing to settle for a marriage of convenience. When they decide to remain single, they are scorned at and made to suffer the turmoil of depression. The concept of remaining single is followed by a train of problems like loneliness, old age problems and no company to share or take care, meaninglessness, missing motherhood etc. Hence, they are left with no options but marriage.

Key words: Marriage, single, meaninglessness, motherhood, loneliness, depression

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The twenty first century is an era of material affluence, political consciousness, democratic reforms, cybernation, globalization, technical advancement, mechanical progress, privatization and educational expansion. As the result of advancements, people have become materialistic in their approach and so the twenty first century philosophers and sociologists lay stress on the revival of cultural and spiritual values. Their idea is to benefit the community as well as the individual by inculcating in the minds of the people, the values of simplicity and the importance of human relations. The idea is not simply to drive out Mammon by refusing to become the slave of the money machine and cash nexus but to strike a balance between money making and leading a fruitful life. In this context, it is noteworthy to refer to *The Times*, which in a series of articles devoted to

the future defines a new objective as, "The values which should come first are the human and aesthetic values. Some nations make civilization a by-product of the creation of wealth;" whereas in reality it is recommended to make "wealth a by-product of the creation of a worthwhile civilization"(Bedarida, 289).

Contrary to this objective, the twenty first century witnessed tremendous upheavals in social values. Young men and women of the twenty first century looked back upon the conventional norms with a skeptical lifting of the eyebrows and an ironical grin. They regarded the traditional norms as dully hypocritical and stuffy. A peculiar feature of the early twentieth century was its impassioned belief in the permanence of nineteenth-century institutions, both temporal and spiritual. In the twenty first century, the idea of 'Permanence of

Institutions' (Ward, 5) is displaced by the sense of universal mutability marked by a bewildering flux of ideas and of tentative experiments. In this era, phrases like 'competitive spirit', 'private enterprise' and 'individual choice' are more frequently heard and they have displaced ideas about socialism, cooperation, nationalized industry. The changing social mores, fast pace of living have created a tremendous impact on the moral, religious and cultural fabric of the society.

The emergence of new attitudes towards morality, marriage, female sexuality and divorce, no doubt, have liberated women from the stranglehold of social, moral and religious constraints; but at the same time, they have played havoc with their emotional and personal lives. In this regard, it is noteworthy to recall the words of Keynes (1883-1946) who was the first to proclaim that life is more important than the economy, "The day is not far off when ...the arena of the heart and head will be occupied or reoccupied by our real problems – the problems of life and of human relations, of creation, behaviour and religion" (Bedarida, 288).

So far as sex is concerned, the casting-off of the heavy hand of morality has left scope for a wild free-for-all. Prudery, of course, and conventions and taboos all go by the board. The imposed orthodoxies were replaced by a demand for absolute freedom, a licence for enjoyment and flights of fancy and at the same time a serious attempt to discover and establish new standards of behaviour. Though the institution of marriage retains its sanctity for those who desire permanent relationships and the stability of family life, it does not lose its popularity among the flippant who keep divorce in view as a back door to escape when the sentimentalities and social trivialities pall. Despite the advancements in every field of the civilization, the women are still left with no choice other than getting married.

In the early times, women were not allowed to be educated and were kept at home to cater to the needs of the domestic household. They were nurtured to be an obedient daughter, dedicated wife and selfless mother and so their ultimate motive was to get married. With reference to marital relationships where 'the victims are expected to go about perpetually together,' and 'be

for ever holding claims over one another, exacting or making useless sacrifices, and generally getting in one another's way,' Mona Caird (1855-1932) says:

The man who marries finds that his liberty has gone, and the woman exchanges one set of restrictions for another. She thinks herself neglected if the husband does not always return to her in the evenings, and the husband and society think her undutiful, frivolous, and so forth if she does not stay at home alone, trying to sigh him back again. The luckless man finds his wife so very dutiful and domesticated, and so very much confined to her 'proper sphere,' that she is, per chance, more exemplary than entertaining. Still, she may look injured and resigned, but she must not seek society and occupation on her own account, adding to the common mental store, bringing new interest and knowledge into the joint existence, and becoming thus a contented, cultivated and agreeable being. No wonder that while all this is forbidden we have so many unhappy wives and bored husbands. The more admirable the wives the more bored the husbands.

Women were not provided with any professional training to take up any job, so with hardly any capital to invest in the marriage market, they had to rely on luck to captivate a rich young man. The predatory hunt for a suitable match was a desperate act, an insurance for economic survival, against all odds.. She was adored by men due to the fact that:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming, she was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult art of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it-in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the mind and wishes of others. Above all- I need not say it- she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty...in those days...every house had its angel. (Professions for Women, 61)

In this context, the pioneers of women writing like Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen etc., in their writing, raised a strong objection to the sentimental treatment of girls as 'angels.' In *Vindication of Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft felt that if women were better educated, they 'would not marry for support,' (148) establishing quite clearly nexus between marriage and monetary support. Wollstonecraft associates lack of a proper education with women's exploitation in the marriage market.

Later when the women started getting education and the training to become a governess, nurse or teacher, they were not encouraged and working wives were not liked by the society, as it was felt, that it was a married woman's responsibility to be in the home, caring for her children and making things comfortable for her husband, when he returned after a hard day's work. A weekly magazine of the 1860s called the *British Workwoman* cautions women to stay at home, "Wife of the labouring man! Take warning in time. Try to make your home happy to your husband and children. Remember your first earthly duty, and, whatever the temptations to go out to work, STAY AT HOME" (Calder, 41).

As there was a sense of fear that dreadful consequences were likely to follow from a wife going to work: children improperly fed and cared for, a disordered house and a lack of hot dinners which might drive the husband to drink, a general disintegration of family life, the society never recommended women to take up a profession. It is worth quoting one of Disraeli (1804-1881)'s character in *Sybil* (1845) who condemns working wives saying, "We have removed woman from her sphere; we may have reduced wages by her introduction into the market of labour; but under these circumstances what we call domestic life is a condition impossible to be realized for the people of this country; and we must not therefore be surprised if they seek solace or rather refuge in the beer-shop" (Book 1; Chapter 2) Further, motherhood following the wifehood was regarded as the supreme achievement, and caring for the young the most exalted activity as expressed in the following lines:

If she be a mother, still higher, nobler is her mission. If to the weak hands is entrusted the task of rearing the young immortals, for service here, and glory hereafter; if the gem be given to her to polish which shall one day sparkle in the crown of the Saviour, let her walk softly, for angels might envy her high vocation, and the Almighty looks to see how she is nursing the child of Him (Calder, 74).

In addition to this, the married woman of the class was constantly told not to trouble her husband with her own petty problems, to bear the pain of illness in silence, and to prevent knowledge of all indelicate matters from reaching 'innocent' ears (Hartman, Introduction). Gilbert (1936-) and Gubar (1944-) clearly demonstrate how the 'eternal feminine' was assumed to be a vision of angelic beauty and sweetness: from Dante's 'Beatrice' to Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House', the ideal woman is seen as a passive, docile and above all selfless creature. Gilbert and Gubar stingingly comment, "To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead" (The Madwoman in the Attic, 45).

The crusaders of the feminist movement believed that with the emergence of the fully emancipated woman who is intellectually man's equal, who is economically independent, and who has discarded all her shackles, woman will attain her real status in society, a status based on security, dignity and freedom. This was the cherished hope but the facts, as they are today, belie such a hope. Rather, the economically independent, educated, emancipated modern woman finds herself burdened with new or different shackles like remaining unmarried obsessed with the sense of alienation and the quest for identity.

Today, the women are liberated and more contributive towards the nation. They are equivalent to men in every socio-cultural and economical aspects. They are educated, well-bred and economically independent which make them authoritative to make their own decisions. The emancipated woman who makes lesser demands and has lesser expectations is "(at best) respected, but seldom loved" (Firestone, 143). She is denied the love and happiness which she seeks through

marriage but she is not ashamed of her failure. This predicament can be best expressed in the words of Mahadevi Verma, the famous Indian writer, "Man wants blind devotion and mute acceptance from a woman. If the woman is the man's equal in intellect, she can question about her rights anytime and on not getting a satisfactory reply can also revolt. So why will a man create a disturbance in his peaceful life by marrying such a woman" (Verma, 63). The liberated women of today find it difficult to compromise and they are never willing to settle for a marriage of convenience. They crave for such a relationship where, "Little is said: I respect his silences he respects mine, for, like him, I have become taciturn. Thus there are no tedious confessions of past affections, no digressions from what is truly our affair. We know each other so well by now that there is no need to ask questions, to offer explanations" (Brookner, 212). When they decide to remain single, they are scorned at and made to suffer the turmoil of depression. The concept of remaining single is followed by a train of problems like loneliness, old age problems and no company to share or take care, meaninglessness, missing motherhood etc. If the marriage is for protection, love and companionship, then the women should be given a choice to opt for live-in relationship (a man and a woman living together) which may sound tempting and palatable but it comes with a series of social issues like legal heir/illegitimate child, too many successive relationships and heirs, social image of the people involved in such relationships, existence of the institution of marriage, parent-child relationship, familial relationship etc. Hence, what the French writer Simone de Beauvoir says regarding the future of women in her famous work, *The Second Sex* (1949), "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true most women are married or have been or plan to be, or suffer from not being" (445) stands true even in the twenty first century.

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