

P.B. Shelley and Bharathidasan on the Miserable Lot of Women in Society: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The paper throws light on the vexation of the poets Shelley and Bharathidasan after witnessing the miserable plight of women being treated in the society women in general and treated in low esteem both in the West and East. Both the poets share the sufferings of women at home, domestic slavery and the passive tolerance they women endurance, in spite of the atrocities inflicted against them across the ages. Money, longing passion to amass materialistic benefits and forced arranged marriages are considered major reasons for the sufferings of women in the society. The social, cultural taboo framed by patriarchal society in India forces women to get away from the narrow outlook by encouraging widow re-marriage. The poets believe that education and economic security are considered as remedial steps to redeem these pathetic women out of their miserable plight.

Keywords: P.B. Shelley, Bharathidasan, Atrocities on women, materialistic benefit, encouragement, education, economic security, remedial steps, miserable plight, widow remarriage, perceptive, consciousness.

Comparison is a source of knowledge, a method of inquiry and a technique used by all scientists and artists. As H.H. Remak puts it, Comparative Literature is nothing but the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country and the study of relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief such as arts, science and religion on the other. It is a kind of literary venture to raise the spirit of nationalism, contributing as much as possible to the development of academic criticism at an international level. A Comparative study of literatures across the cultures establishes the unity of literatures and as Rene Welleck has put it, “all literatures should be studied from an international perceptive with a consciousness of the unity of the literary creation and experience”. According to him, “literature is one as art and humanity are one” (P 50). No doubt, the universality of great literatures does significantly penetrate the deeper layers of a given culture. It is essential that in all of our studies of literature, our perspectives should be widened, and our local and provincial sentiments should be suppressed. As one goes deeper,

one realizes that great writers are not of one age, or of one culture; they are for all the time and of the entire community. That is why a comparative analysis on the works of Shelley and Bharathidasan representing occidental and oriental cultures sounds really a rewarding experience for any literary comparatist.

The very purpose of comparative standpoint between two writers in terms of parallelism is not to establish the superiority of one over the other or to extol one's native literary culture at the expense of foreign culture with which it is compared, but to throw light on the writers' perceptions on a comparative viewpoint from an international perspective, thereby making a distinct contribution to the development of our national culture. Truly speaking, comparative evaluation is a balanced appraisal of the writers compared with all similarities and dissimilarities. The device of comparison includes in it the dissimilarities too with equal emphasis. Taking into account such a view for a comparative analysis, what has to be borne in mind is that one can easily find profound affinity between Shelley and Bharathidasan, though belonging to two different cultures and literatures without any demonstrable direct relationship. Though they are widely separated by time and place, one can visualize a kind of legitimate mingling of two cultural streams running in all respects.

There is no shadow of doubt that there is a wide gap of almost a century between the lives of the two poets, getting themselves exposed to different social atmospheres and cultures, for one can obviously find Shelley as one representing the intellectualism of the West whereas Bharathidasan is found to be the one representing the intellectualism of the West and tradition of the East merged into one. Despite the differences in age, culture, social atmosphere and language, they show striking similarities in their attitudes to the various problems of society especially to the problems of women. Shelley and Bharathidasan envisaged a new world which is to be built on liberty, equality and fraternity. No doubt, both the poets have a lot in common, though they differ only in a few of their views.

Though both the poets were lyricists singing of love and liberty they were found to be writing with deep social concern, thereby establishing themselves as revolutionaries and rebels by nature so as to fight for liberty of the individual and society, especially champion the cause of women who continued to be persecuted from times immemorial. Both had great concern for the current social, moral and political issues raising their voice against the social evils with the sole intention of giving proper solutions for all the ills in the society by lashing at institutionalised religious and political organizations. Being revolutionary poets, Shelley was influenced by Godwin, Rousseau and the French Revolution whereas Bharathidasan was influenced by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Bharathi.

Shelley was born with a silver spoon in his mouth on Aug 4, 1792 at Field Place, Warnham, Sussex. But the spoon of silver was taken away from the mouth of Shelley by misfortunes of misunderstandings of his nature and attitude by his parents, the University in which he studied and the society in which he lived. Born as the son of a conventional country

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gentleman, Shelley had been a rebel even in his school days. After schooling, he was sent to University College, Oxford in 1810. There he cultivated friendship with Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who was a skeptic and a cynic. Reportedly his friendship with Hogg strengthened his latent skepticism. However, he was happy there at Oxford. In 1811, he published a pamphlet entitled "The Necessity of Atheism" and got it circulated among all the Oxford dignitaries. In this pamphlet he along with Hogg, vehemently denounced Christianity as a tyrannical force. The pamphlet created a furor and both Shelley and Hogg were expelled from the University. He married Harriet, a sixteen-year-old beauty and Harriet fell short of his expectations and Shelley developed intimacy with Mary Godwin. When Harriet committed suicide, he married Mary Godwin. Shelley was deprived of the guardianship of his two children by Harriet. The Italian climate robbed him of his children by Mary. Personal sorrows darkened his life. He was drowned in a sea while travelling in a ship.

The creative period of Shelley ranged from 1818 to 1822. He showed his promises, capabilities adding new depths and fresh dimensions to the concept of the new world. He is one of the most subjective writers. His poetry ranges through a realm of fantasy, rarely descending to the man of flesh and blood. Free from all taint of representation of the real, it seems some "chorus hymeneal or triumphant chant" – a thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want". His poetry is rather an echo or emanation of his own spirit. In his verse, there is the pulsation of the emotion of love for his fellowmen. The instinct of universal benevolence which is at the basic of his being wings the flight of his poetry. In no poet was the moral sense so well developed as in Shelley; and none has devoted his whole life and rich gifts of language and imagination to the betterment of humanity and the glorification of human dignity, unity, and universal brotherhood. He has to his credit composition of such poetical works as 1. *Queen Mab* (1813), 2. *Alastor* or *The Spirit of Solitude* (1816), 3. *The Revolt of Islam* (1817), 4. *Excellent Lyrics* (1819-1822), 5. *The Witch of Atlas* (1820), 6. *Adonais* (1822), 7. *The Triumph of Life* (1822). Daily experience meant little to him. His ideas came to him not from the world around him but from his own volitions of visions. His poetry is not emotions recollected in tranquility, but it is fervent emotion outpoured in a gush and nothing else. When the actual forces acted upon his consciousness as a cry of pain and frustration escapes his tips and he is overcome with a sense of weakness of soul, wishing to 'lie down like a child and weep away this life of care.' No doubt, Shelley was a spirit that seemed to have been loved. And the reason is that he was perfectly sincere without any thought of self and had the instinct of universal benevolence and possessed a radiant faith in the possibility of perfection, socialism and humanism. Greatly inspired by Godwin's "Political Justice", he did underline the necessity for equality of men and women and also propagated free love. Shelley's wife Harriet encouraged Shelley to write about the evils in society and the rights of women. Mary Shelley, his second wife, had gifts of heart and mind and her feminine sensibility quickened and even widened his love and sympathy towards women. No doubt, they did quicken Shelley's perception of the miserable condition of women.

Being an admirer of Subramania Bharathi, Bharathidasan read with enthusiasm the poetical works of Shelley, thereby forming a Shelleyan Guild and loved to call himself Shelleydasan (admirer of Shelley). Born in 1890 in Puducheri, he was well-versed in his studies. Even though that is not openly evident, there is a possibility of direct relationship between the two poets, Shelley and Bharathidasan. While going through the poems of Bharathidasan, one cannot miss the echoes of the romantic poets, especially those of Shelley. Bharathidasan admired and appreciated the ancient tradition in India, its readiness to receive new ideas from the West, its consciousness of the necessity of radical changes and its hopes for a bright future. He was at once a traditionalist and rebel, a traditionalist in the sense that he believed in the equanimity of Indian mind and a rebel who felt that the obsolete customs should be thrown aside, giving room to the new ones.

In his “Putumaippen” (New Woman), Bharathi has enumerated the qualities to be possessed by every woman. According to him, the new woman does affirm,

“Upright gait, straight look,
Probity fearless to the core,
Lofty pride in waxing wisdom,
These ensure our purity
We never swerve from the right” (Ramakrishnan 51)

Bharathidasan’s women characters embody in them all these qualities and they are created in the mould of the New Woman idealised by Bharathi. Bharathi firmly stressed the point that without domestic freedom, there is no freedom for the Nation. He said thus:

“Nations are made of homes and as long as
you do not have equality fully practised
at home, you cannot expect them
practised in public life. Because it is
one’s life at home that is the basis of
public life” (The Place of Women, 59).

Being an ardent disciple of social reformer Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Bharathidasan created women characters challenging the injustice in society and fighting for their rights. Being the greatest modern Tamil poet after Bharathi, Bharathidasan was a rationalist deeply opposed to all unreasonable forms of orthodoxy which perpetuated violent degrees of inequality among all men and women in society. As revolutionary thinkers, both Shelley and Bharathidasan had to encounter a lot of difficulties and oppositions for all the revolutionary ideas they had. Though belonging to entirely different backgrounds, these two poets could come close on themes which have perennial appeal to artists.

Both Shelley and Bharathidasan are rather undoubtedly revolutionary poets who fought for the rights of women. Any study or analysis of their poetical works will help the readers know how far the two poets have got vexed at the disgraceful treatment given to

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women. They out and out deplored the wrongs done to women. Generally speaking, women have been imprisoned in the shackles of conventions. Throughout their life-cycle, they are both economically and socially dependent on men. This dependence does not enable them to develop their intellect and express their desire to be independent. The custom of marriage centres around the premise that women are inferior to men. They have no say even in the selection of their life-partners. The subordination of women to men and the absence of freedom for women are the striking features of social life for women.

As women are treated worse than slaves, rational thinkers like Shelley and Bharathidasan ponder over the causes for the injustice done to women. They find the existing social structure as the root cause for the miserable state of women in society. The society is organised on a master-servant relationship. The relationship between a husband and wife is also reduced to a master-servant relationship. It is thought that the purpose of women is to gratify men just as the poor is to provide for the rich. It is expected of women to give pleasure to men. If menfolk are not pleased, they take drastic measures. Wife-beating is not only permitted; it is even considered as the husband's right.

Both the poets sympathise with women whose husbands are terror to them. In an early poem, "The Voyage: A Fragment", Shelley makes it clear that man tends to bully his wife because of his sense of superiority:

"he bounds himself to an unhappy woman
Not of those purely and heavenly links that love
Twines round a feeling to freedom dear
But vile gold, cankering the breast it feeds" (P 105)

The idea of man's sense of superiority is pursued more powerfully in "Rosalind and Helen", one of Shelley's most neglected poems probably because it is so overtly feminist. The poem recounts the sorrowful and morbid tales of two women, disappointed in love. Rosalind married a miser. Rosalind's friend Helen married a noble peer who died soon after the marriage. The childhood friends meet after their marriage. They tell each other of their life-stories. In the words of James, "Rosalind's is the experience of battered wives throughout history" (P 69). She recalls to her mind the bitter incidents in her life. It is understood from her words that her husband was a terror. She describes pathetically how her children were happy in the absence of their father but stricken with terror on his arrival:

"He was a tyrant to the weak
And we were such, alas the day"
(Hutchinson 164).

Rosalind can be cited as an example of a passive, patient and submissive wife. Nobody can deny the fact that she is aware of the evil nature of her husband. She describes him thus:

“Hard, Selfish, loving only gold
Yet full of guile
.
He was a coward to the strong;
He was a tyrant to the weak,
On whom his vengeance he would wreak” (P 170).

The husband generally wants to avenge by bullying the weak at home. He is said to have satisfied his thirst for vengeance. Though Rosalind realised the evil nature of her husband, she suffered all in silence. She was not able to come out of the bondage bowing to the cultural moorings and traditions which curbed her freedom. Moreover, she was a dependent on him. So, she had to undergo intolerable physical and emotional sufferings. She had to remain a dutiful wife for many years. Her own words explain how she tried to be a devoted wife by vanquishing her will:

“. . . . weeks and months and years had passed
Through which I firmly did fulfill
My duties, a devoted wife
With the stern step of a vanquished will” (169).

As her children did not get any love from their father, they were least affected by his death. Instead of a great loss, his death seemed to be a relief not only for the children but also for Rosalind. It is pathetic to hear Rosalind describing her relieved feelings and those of her over his death:

“I watched, - and would not thence depart –
My husband’s unlamented comb,
My children knew their sire was gone,
But when I told them, - ‘he is dead’, -
They laughed aloud in frantic glee,
They clapped their hands and leaped about,
Answering each other’s ecstasy
With many a prank and merry about” (CPWS 168).

She describes herself as being “wrapped in the mock of mourning weed” (170). She suffers in her life without any peace. The death of her husband brought a moment of peace. But even this moment of peace is disturbed when his will is read out. The killing lie in the will charges Rosalind as being adulterous. Rosalind realizes that “even the dead have strength to blast and torture” (70). In spite of her faithful devotion to her husband, peace is ever

denied to her. This is the sad story of Rosalind, who had been compelled to renounce her love for a man and to marry the wicked men without the heavenly links of love.

Bharathidasan's "Penkal Vitutali" (freedom of women) also presents a husband as a bully. A dutiful and a devoted wife like Rosalind, having surrendered her will, tries to wake up her husband gently at eight O'clock in the morning.

"O! Dear, it is eight O' clock.
Please get up. Father will chide you.
Get ready soon. Finish your breakfast
and go to attend your work" (PV 3)

The husband responds only with a kick and an abusive tongue. "Why do you disturb me in sleep? You bitch! You dog! Get away" (P 3). One time he falls down from a broken chair. His mother takes this as an opportunity to blame her daughter-in-law vehemently with the expectation that her son would beat his wife. She induces his anger by saying, "your wife sat on the chair like a monkey sitting on the branch of a tree and tore the top of it. All would laugh at the broken chair" (P 4). Her son beats his wife and his mother justifies his act by referring to the convention prevalent in the past. "A wife is liable to commit mistakes. Her husband would kill her or embrace her. Everything depends on his will. I am not telling all these now. Our ancestors have already impressed these notions in their words and actions" (P 4). The tradition equips men with all power to inflict the weaker section. Women have to accept the humiliation silently without even a murmur. They are not supposed to express their displeasure. The life of a battered wife in India is worse than that of her counterpart in England. Shelley's character Rosalind has relief at least in the absence of her husband, whereas an Indian woman is persecuted not only in her husband but also by her in-laws as the social custom encouraged only the joint family system. In another poem, "Nam mater Nilai" (The condition of our women) Bharathidasan sympathises with the wretched state of women at home:

"Earns a husband with a lump-sum
Love she never gets in return;
But the life of a slave,
To stitch a rag in his clothes,
To maintain the house as a servant,
All seven days a week
To renounce self with no rest" (BV -1 P 181)

The brutal act of wife-beating and domestic slavery infuriates both Shelley and Bharathidasan. They give expression to the unjust treatment to women in their works of art with the intention of creating awareness among the people. Women are allowed to play only a

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subservient intellectual role. Shelley's character Rosalind elucidates this plight of woman. She admits her inferior role:

“Nor my vexed soul has leisure yet
To doubt the things men say
That they are other than they seem” (CPWS 172)

The extreme negative attitude to women's literacy has contributed to keeping women, subordinate to man for ages. Bharathidasan's poem, “Cancivi Parvatattin Caral” (The Slope of the Sanjeevi Hill), presents a woman character, Vanci who is determined to get the herbs in the Sanjeevi hills even at the cost of her life. But her fiance, being ignorant and superstitious, discourages her. He shows his irritation at her determination by reminding her that a woman is not supposed to argue but simply to obey man:

“Refuse to obey the words of a man?
Does it become a woman ...?” (BK-2)

The merchant in Bharathidasan's “Karpin Kotonai”, (Test of Chastity) brings home from his mercenary tour another woman as his concubine. His wife is shocked and questions him. He gives an unfeeling reply to her:

“Provide us food to
Prove that a chaste life
You led in my absence”

(Bharathidasan Kavithaikal-II, P 136)

Bharathidasan is infuriated at the idea of chastity meant only for women, not for men. He bewails because “Kannammal agrees even to that” (P 136). Women are expected not to question their husbands. They should neither argue nor protest. Their duty is just to tolerate atrocities to any extreme. Laon's words in Shelley's “The Revolt of Islam”, illustrate the servitude of women:

“Thus Cythna mourned with me the servitude
In which half of human kind were mewed
Victims of lust and haste, the slaves of slaves” (CPWS-70)

Money plays an important role in fixing up marriages. Marriages are arranged with no love. Shelley's “Queen Mab” points out how materialism brought down the values of life. Mainly women are the chief victims of the materialism that got hold of the society:

“Even love is sold, the solace of all woe
is turned to deadliest agony; old age

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Shivers in Selfish beauty's arms
And youth's corrupted impulses prepare
A life of horror from the blighting bane
of commerce, while pestilence that springs
From unenjoying sensualism has filled
All human life with hydra-headed woes" (CPWS-773)

Money has nothing to do with love and marriage. But materialism has made people bargain even in marriage with least concern for love. Bharathidasan's disgust against forced marriage and the role played by money in marriage is clearly implied in his poem "Pennukku Niti" (Justice for woman):

"Silly people come to your place
Tell of their power to the fill.
All vanity! but good at bargaining
So unfeeling are your parents.
Care they never to show you the groom
You are thought a creature
You ought to decide your future."

Bharathidasan's advice to the girl is to decide her marriage not on the basis of money but on love and to protest against enforced marriage. Bharathidasan's poem, "Pen Kuranku-t-Tirumanam", (marriage of a female monkey), pictures a poor man bargaining with a rich man to get his handsome son married to the rich man's daughter. The rich man plays a trick on him by saying that he would give his adopted daughter in marriage to his son. He never realises that the bride referred to is none other than a black female monkey with thick fur. The poor man is unmindful of beauty, love and intelligence, money being his only concern. The role of money in fixing up marriages is a terrifying problem in India than in England. Though Bharathidasan does not discuss the problem of dowry, he discusses the prominent role played by money in love and marriage. Both the poets express their disgust over the enforced marriage. Shelley's poem "Episychidion" is the powerful utterance on the evil of enforced marriage:

"I never was attached to that great sect,
Whose doctrine is, that each one would select,
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
To cold oblivion" (P 496).

Shelley was conscious of many women who were made slaves in marriage and were not allowed to come out of it. For him, men and women must decide their love-making free of conventional, legal and religious constraints, "For God's Sake". He once remarked, "read

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the marriage service before you think of allowing an amicable beloved female to submit to such degradation (Carie 28). Shelley's creation, Lucretia, the wife of Cenci in the play, "Cenci" is also a representation of a battered wife. She elucidates her plight in these words, when she is struck by her husband. She feels sorry that he strikes her,

"Who have borne deeper wrongs. In truth if he
Had killed me, he had done a kinder deed" (285)

We are more convinced of the marriage laws when Lucretia mourns the atrocities of her husband:

"If any one despairs, it should be I
Who loved him once and now must live with him
Till God in pity call for him or me" (287)

Lucretia's words imply that women are denied the rights to get separated. The customs and practices of Indian marriages are worse. Caste, class, dowry and religion have been the major obstacles in marriages. Social, economic and religious differences stand in the way of love-marriages Bharathidasan's "Katal Mel Kumilkal" (Bubbles on the sea) deals with one such problem Ponni, from a royal family, is denied permission to marry her lover for the simple reason that he belongs to a lower class. The king objects to her love and says,

"Belonging to a lower caste
Brings he slander to us
Lady! You long for that inferior" (BK 2)

Vat Porai, in *Katala Katamaiya* (Love or duty) does advise his sister, Killai to forget her loves for Makinan as he is the son of a farmer. He compels her to marry the king. Puratchi Kavi (the Revolutionary Bard) presents Amutavalli, the princess being denied permission to marry a poet. Child marriage was in vogue in India. Bharathidasan denounces child marriage. We have the picture of a child in Mutat-Tirumanan" (foolish marriage), where a child is married to an old man. Bharathidasan discusses another case of child marriage where the child becomes a widow in her childhood itself. The child marriage was mainly responsible for the problems of widows in India. Widows were burnt alive along with the dead husbands. This practice was known as "Sati". A temple would be built in the place where "Sati" took place. The money collected for the erection of the temple filled the pockets of selfish people. But the suffering of a surviving widow is tougher than the brief agony of the fire. Bharathidasan's poem, "Kaimmai Kotumai" (cruelty of widowhood) explains in detail the sufferings of such widows. A mother mourns the sad plight of her widowed daughter:

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“My daughter being a widow
If she keeps flowers on her hair
or Bindi on her forehead.
All would rail words of blame at her
Silks and ornaments she is compelled to renounce
Her entering a house is in auspicious” (118)

The problems of widows and child marriages are peculiarly Indian problems. Bharathidasan’s indignation was great when he saw the narrow outlook of the Indians regarding this. He was pained to see the plight of widows and he unswervingly advocated widow re-marriage. Steeped in Indian culture, Bharathidasan could not laugh at the idea of chastity. He feels that chastity is a virtue common to both men and women. He will not relish chastity being enforced on women alone. In his “Elucciurra Penkal”, (Awakened Women), he says,

“Blame not the sword’s attempt to kill you
Failing to see such a one with your wife
Dared you mock
The chastity of other women” (114).

He satirises Kannammai’s husband in “Karpin Chotanai” as he asks her to prove her chastity by providing food for him and his concubine ignoring the fact that he himself violated his chastity” (P 136). Shelley’s revolutionary woman character Cynthna mourns the oppression of women.

To conclude, both the poets laughed at those who witnessed the wretched condition of women in the society but did nothing to extricate them from their bondage. According to Shelley and Bharathidasan, such people neither criticise nor support the cause of women. The condition of women in India is worse than that of woman in England. English women were better educated and Indian women, even after a century after Shelley, did not have the facilities for education. As both, feel and think, lack of education and economic security are the major causes for the miserable lot of women.

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