

Chapter - VIII

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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We are at our journey's end, and it is time now to collect threads of our thoughts, and look back at our findings, conceptual and empirical.

Ours have been an endeavour of understanding a human problem. The woman, in whatever role we may find and see her, is a human being and if any role and the expectations that it may generate deprives her of dignity as a human being, then the role or the roles should be deemed undesirable. No role that a woman may find herself in or is expected to play, should be dehumanising or demeaning for her person. Look at from this perspective the women's problem has often turned out to be a problem of human rights. I propose to use the phrase 'human rights' in an extended sense with a longer moral import. Recently, 'human rights' has come to be interpreted in the moral sense, besides the juridical, in the Latin American countries. It is the human right of a woman not to be forced into a role that might rob her of her dignity as a human being endowed with freedom of choice along with the responsibilities that such choices may entail.

Our understanding of the woman's state of being either in bondage or freedom has a deep phenomenological dimension. As a human person, the woman has to relate herself to her other or others. It is she who has to discover that. Then the question would arise how would she relate herself to her other or others.

The act of relating herself to others may be partly an act of individual choice, and partly institutional. Marriage, having children, making friends inside and outside marriage are some of the ways in which she relates herself to others. The act of relating might land herself in bondage or enhance her sense of freedom.

The family in which a woman is married is usually taken as domain of her relationships, centering round her partner in marriage. It has sometimes been argued that the family is the curse, the cause of her bondage, and she can have freedom only if she can get away from her expected roles and responsibilities generated by her life in the family. This is envisaged as a possible road to freedom. The argument is somewhat vague since most, if not all, of us are familial creatures, and in that respect men and women, married or not, have roles accompanied by expectations. Do men think of their lives in the family as one of bondage, and look for freedom elsewhere outside it? What is so special about the married women that she should think along that line and seek freedom outside the family? The concept of family is formulated within a culture, and culture is a "product" of a variety of social forces, beliefs, economics, laws of inheritance, religious attitudes, etc. These forces are operative upon men as well as women. But the fact still remains that each society has its own image of the man and the woman. And it is the image of the woman entertained in the social atmosphere expects, and to an extent moulds her in the likeness of that image. It may be true that man has had a longer share in delineating the details of

the image, and it also has been an image to his advantage and emotional security. But can we not ask, is the image of men wholly to the disadvantage of the women? Perhaps no straight forward answer can be given. It may be the case that the woman has come to dislike the image, and she now wishes to replace society's image of herself by an image that she would project for herself. At least quite a few of the feminist persuasions appear and ring like that.

The point, however, is that our bondages are real, and much of it is our own making. Compared to our bondages, freedom is usually conceived in a negative fashion, as something away from and denial of the bondages. This conception of freedom is devoid of content. In our craving for freedom we tend to forget to summon our will to achieve or wrest freedom in a fruitful manner, filling the idea of freedom with content and purpose. As a general situation all of us, men as well as women are in bondage, human bondage as it were. It should never be thought that women alone are in bondage, and men are free. There are cases of freedom that have been creatively achieved, not necessarily by rebellion or agitational talk. Example of women who have achieved them in bondage are not wanting. Virginia Wolf in England, Ashapurna Devi in West Bengal achieved their freedom by their sustained literary activity. What I wish to suggest is that even while a woman feels to be in empirical bondage, she can achieve freedom in her spiritual dimension through indomitable will and creative endeavours. I say this without,

of course, minimising the need of empirical freedom on her part.

Studies in anthropology in respect of woman's empirical dimensions have revealed the fact, and it is all too well-known a fact not to be ignored, that gender and space of the woman demands serious considerations. Since the 1980s and 1990s there has been a phenomenal surge of interest in the body of women. Departing from earlier trends which either posited the body as a tangible, Pre-discursive entity or as a purely representational medium, an increasing number of recent studies (as by Seemanthini Niranjana's **Gender and Space : Feminity, Sexualization and the Female body, Sage, 1999.**) focus on the body as subject. The study, focus and the method may be novel, but the insight is ancient. In one of the Charyapadas, it is said that the doe is her own enemy on account of her meat : **āpanā mānse harinā bairee**. Women are culturally taught be conscious of themselves as bodies of unique features, and to be careful about any possible harm to their bodies. Attention is paid to the "lived body" in the everyday lives of women. There occurs the conjunction of space and gender in the daily practices and discourses of feminity and sexuality. The traditional concept of gender with its connotations of biology is yet to get rid of even by so-called liberated women. It is so deeply phenomenological an affair. Women tend and are thought to define themselves or their lives in terms of the acts, i.e words, body movements, work, rituals. Considerations of spatiality can and do infrom the bodily practices of women within diverse contexts and

settings, both in the alleged situations of bondage as well as freedom. The spatial axis, be it the home or the office, orients bodily practices, designating acts as "proper" and "improper", "moral" and "immoral". The urban and metropolitan space does not change the manner in which women define or realise their personhood. Their movements are choreographed by certain implicit rules governing the use of space. Women, as unmarried girls or as wives, are expected to stay indoors, unless it is really necessary to go out as on a job or school or college. Among women the spouse goddesses like Mangala, Gouri, Laxmi receive worship since they emphasize the harmonious and productive role of married women. These goddess stand for wifely virtue. The identification of women's interest is always with the "inside", with the "safe" legitimate spaces and transgressing these spaces is seen as immoral. Whether a woman is married or unmarried, housewife or a professional person, the fact remains, and perhaps will remain for a longer while, that structuring the space of woman's world is a socio-cultural attempt to regulate female morality. Thus femininity / sexualization are the products of and the medium through which are marked physical, moral and cultural spaces. The body as a biological entity is also mediated through the socio-cultural and moral injunctions and norms that are inseparable from a culture's imaging of the female body. We may refer to menstruation and associated puberty riuates, marriage and procreation only to find the cultural mediation is so complete that women, rural or urban, come to relate as much to the body as to the cultural ideas underlying these events. These define and prescribe the nature

of a woman's role and the social spaces open to her. The dialogic relation between the biological and the socio-spatial appears to be one where the biological substratum is controlled and channelized by incorporating it into cultural idioms and practices. To put differently, female sexuality acquires legitimacy only within certain spaces. The bodily matrix is engaged in drawing the spatial parameters within which women's lives are defined. It is one of the findings of the present research that women live with and in their bodies and contend with what culture does with such bodies. The coordinates of such a matrix of sexualization / spatialization offers a unique point of entry into the culture that pervades the metropolis and polices the movements of women. This is not to say that the mapping of spaces of the domestic - public model is something static. There are continuous shifts and transformations into how these spaces are characterized. The woman, rural and urban, views herself as a body representing encoded social meanings. Conventional feminism is no answer to the phenomenon. What one has to do is to take note of the phenomenology of the female body, and look into the phenomenon how it is shaped by socio-cultural forces, beliefs and ideas like the goddess-woman equation etc. If one attends a metropolitan marriage ceremony one would discover rituals and acts and social stipulations concerning the female body and its associations with social morality.

The empirical part of our study has supported our contentions put forward in the philosophical part. The metropolitan woman enjoys certain privileges and a

comparative degree of freedom that is still denied to her sisters beyond the city. But the metropolitan woman is still the daughter of her mother who believes or believed that the identity of a woman is constituted by her body. Therefore the metropolitan woman still has miles to go to have her share of liberation. The changes that have taken place have been there as a result of necessity, not out of free, conscious choice. In the domain of our study, as elsewhere, freedom involves some price in the form of tension, conflict suffering, etc. Unless the woman resolves to pay the price (as tolerating or absorbing or neutralizing the suffering) she may go on talking about liberation without ever attaining it.

It appears that the married working women in the metropolis of Kolkata, are living a sort of double life, in family and outside. The women whom we had approached with questionnaire through mail or in person, not all of them did care to respond. And even those who responded avoided responding to questions of personal nature. The hesitation in responding to questions of personal nature is rooted in the responders' twotier selfhood. At one tier the woman exists in the inherited psyche made up of beliefs and ways of thinking of culture of quite a few past centuries. This included conventional value judgements handed down to them by their mothers and grandmothers. At the another tier of their existence they are moulded by the circumstances in which they find themselves, i.e., an identity that they have beyond their home and its relationships.

In some cases the new identity was opted and eagerly acquired, while in others the new extra-familial identity was forced upon them, that is, in order to serve the family in a better manner some of the responding women had to take up jobs. Our responders have been a mixed lot, with a diversity of beliefs, ideas and value judgements. But it has been found that a large section of married women prefer to maintain both structural and extra-structural relationships; or to put the matter differently, two identities, as it were, one defined by the family structure, and the other by quasi structural associations beyond the family, in the place of work with friends of opposite sex. It is likely that some of the respondents enjoy the relationship outside their families and wish to protect and maintain it as a sort of zone of freedom. Besides, most of our responders are hardly ever prepared to renounce the structural shelter and security provided by the family. Valuationally, it could also be said that it is the latter which they put on a higher status compared to the former. In short, most of the married women having extra-familial relationships like to have the best of both the worlds. As a result of developing and valuing the extra-familial relationship in a greater degree, marriages in general, might have broken down, but such consequences are not in the usual course of events. There is the feeling that living in marriage is still worth looking for, along with or inspite of the extra-structural relationships, valued for its diversity, novelty and wider friendships.

Lastly, I should like to draw the notice of my readers to the chapter on the Bengal Renaissance and the image of Bengali women in major literature of that period. I attach a special importance to that chapter since the images of Tagore's heroines reflect the changes that brought about the modern Bengal. In terms of the movements of reforms in the rules of marriage, social customs and education, Tagore's heroines have been creatures of their times. A few pointers may be indicated. In Tagore's short-stories and novels, we meet women of character and resolve. Some of them are infused with noble patriotism, transcending the barriers of sectarian religious feelings, a few of them are widows, in search of a new meaning of life in love elsewhere. There is a woman in the group of terrorists who realises that terrorism dehumanises mutual trust and relationships. There is Malati who shines in her studentship in Mathematics and sails abroad for higher studies, and thereby puts her Chauvinistic lover into shame. She is called *Sādhārāna méyé*, an ordinary woman. There is *Labanya*, who is an M.A. in English and teaches in a school, and it is she who decides not to marry the bright and sparkling Amit, for the fact that he is not enough stable in his domestic aspects, and marries eventually the patient and quiet Mohanlal who appears to her more reliable as a partner in life. There is Sohini, a Punjabi lady, married to a Bengali botanist. Her only aim in life, after she became a widow is to keep her husband's research projects go on and 'entices' so to say a bright student of her husband through the daughter. Sohini is a character by herself, who stalls our moral judgements, and it is unthinkable that such a character

was conceived by Tagore in the late thirties of the twentieth century. And finally, there is Chitrangada who tells Arjuna that she does not wish to be either adored as a goddess or cast aside in neglect. Rather she would like to be on his side in the trials and turbulations of life, and it is only then he would come to know her real worth. In a poem called *Sabalā* Tagore makes the woman put forth her manifesto for freedom to win over her fate. Long before the concept of 'Women's lib' was heard on our shores, this poem had generated a consciousness among Bengali women that they were not a lot that could be brushed aside as *abalā* or without determination and resolve.

But on the whole the society has not marched along with literature, and still works with what I have called bifocalism inherited from a distant codifier of social laws. It remains to be seen what the Bengali women make of themselves, shall they go by slogans or emerge as new and responsible persons.