

E. V. RAMASAMY PERIYAR ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Dr. Puja Rai

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy

G.B.M. College, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

Email: pujarai.jnu@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine Periyar's views on the enslavement of women as being a hindrance in the way of the development of the human race. He discussed various factors which led to the enslavement of women such as child marriage, dowry, the divine status of marriage, no provision of remarriage for women, double standards maintained by the society regarding the notion of chastity and adultery, widowhood being considered as an evil, etc. The superstitious beliefs of people associated with their religious dogmas which are not based on a rational understanding of true human nature are the hindrances in the way of attainment of equality and justice in a society. Instead of finding the source of liberation within the religious and social context, he thinks the development of science and technology will wither away the bias and prejudice against women. The relationship between a man and a woman is that of a master and a slave, and the abolition of such practice can be attained by inducing the feeling of self-respect in women. In his respect, it becomes significant to look into the notion of marriage and how marriage subsumes within itself inequality between the sexes and their power relations. This paper is an attempt to look at how power is working everywhere and between every relationship. This paper will also put an effort to understand and evaluate how, according to Periyar, the traditional roles associated with masculinity and femininity are the root causes of the enslavement of women.

Keywords

Power, enslavement, emancipation

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 27.01.2022

Approved: 30.01.2022

Dr. Puja Rai

***E. V. RAMASAMY PERIYAR ON
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT***

Article No.07

RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2022,

Vol. XLVII No. 1,

pp. 052-059

Online available at:

[https://anubooks.com/rjpss-](https://anubooks.com/rjpss-2022-vol-xlvii-no-1/)

[2022-vol-xlvii-no-1/](https://anubooks.com/rjpss-2022-vol-xlvii-no-1/)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2022.v47i01.007)

[rjpss.2022.v47i01.007](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2022.v47i01.007)

Power is an important aspect of human life. It is 'central' to social relations, a 'ground' on which everything else takes place: Between every point of the social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between master and pupil, between everyone who knows and everyone who does not, there exist relations of power.¹ Power is working in everywhere and in every relationship either in implicit or explicit form. Power can be explained in the form of domination, hierarchy, subjugation, etc. Hegel explains the hierarchical aspect through the relationship of master and slave in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There is not a harmonious relationship between master and slave. The master becomes what he is only through slave. Master wants to dominate the slave, similarly, men want to keep control over women.

Power has two aspects- enablement and restraint. Enabling aspect refers to positivity, development; etc whereas the restraining aspect refers to unprogressive, domination, subjugation, etc in social, economic and political terms. Power enables us to recognize our potential and thus can help us in making aware of our rights and capability.

When one focuses on the norms and structure of society, it is clearly visible that power is concentrated in hands of men resulting in the suppression of women. E. V. Ramasamy Periyar (17th Sep 1879- 27th Dec 1973) was a social activist and a politician who very closely felt that the norms of society were created with the intention of enslaving women through restraining their caliber. He strongly believed that women can break the shackles of subjugation only by enabling their potential. He considered the caste system and women enslavement as two major roadblocks in the way of modernity. He propagated the principles of rationalism, self-respect, women's rights and eradication of caste. He was described by the UNESCO as 'the prophet of the new age, the Socrates of South East Asia, father of social reform movement and arch enemy of ignorance, superstitions, meaningless customs and base manners.'²

Periyar throughout his life worked for the upliftment of women. He considered women's liberation as part of the program of his Self-Respect Movement. He started the movement with a certain list of objectives which included the eradication of the caste system, the individuality of women, the right to marriage and remarriage, refusing to undergo the widowhood, right to sexual desire, having control over the womb, etc. He advocated that women should be given equal rights as that of men. He emphasized on the point that women should also play an important role in the development of the country by realizing their rights and power. The orthodox traditions prevalent in the society which aimed at enslaving women within

the institution of arranged marriage have been criticized severely by him. He said, “Any code that advised men to treat their women folk worse than animals is a barbarous code and can be respected only by barbarians.”³

According to Periyar, women are always seen in reference to the institution of marriage. The status of married woman is that of a slave to her husband. Women enjoy this slavish marriage as they have been taught from their childhood by their parents to treat husbands as their masters. They are made to believe that marriage means subordination to males. Throughout history, women are treated as servants, subordinates, housekeepers, etc. Her role is to serve others. He questioned the institution of marriage as:

If the world is to prosper and if humanity should aspire to be happy and progressive, marriage should be made a criminal offense by law...I urge for a change in the system of marriage. It is atrocious to subject women who form 50 percent of the population in the society to such a tyranny.⁴

Periyar has discussed various factors which led to women enslavement such as, child marriage, dowry, double standards related to the notion of chastity, the notion of adultery only applicable to women and not men, remarriage not allowed for women, widowhood considered as an evil, lack of property rights, etc.

Child marriage and dowry- He was critical towards child marriage which was a very common practice during that time. Dowry is another social practice that is still prevalent today was the major concern for him. This whole practice leads to the humiliation and exploitation of the bride’s parents’ wealth leading to the death of the bride in some cases.

Double standard related to the notions of chastity and adultery- In English, the term chastity refers to virginity/purity. The term is applicable to entire humanity in its condition of being pure as it is not specific to either male or female. The term adultery is a serious abuse and denunciation used for women but a man is never accused as an adulterer. Periyar is of the view that this word was created with the intention of enslaving women. They are mere things of enjoyment for men, and they are considered as like any other chattels which can be sold or rented out.

Periyar says that if women want to really get liberated then they should discard the concept of imposed chastity, which is based on birth and they should undertake self-chosen chastity, which prescribes for both sexes.⁵

The word ‘chastity’ and ‘prostitution’ are applied to women unnaturally with the intention of enslaving them. The words, ‘chastity’ and ‘prostitution’ are completely irrelevant and unnecessary for leading a life of equality and independence. These concepts can be necessary for a contract between a man and a woman for

living together. Still viewing these words in relation to women alone seems unnatural and unjust.⁶

He finds fault with the practice of punishing only women for prostitution. Both the words are used to keep women under men's control in order to maintain their authority. The purpose served by these concepts of chastity and prostitution is to keep a check on other (women) or in other words, keep the others under subjection.

Marriage provides a platform for the enslavement of women by providing 'divine' status to marriage. Periyar suggests that one should be clear regarding the purpose of marriage - whether it is love, desire, pleasure, etc. between men and women or it should be simply carried out in the form of a contract that has been made. The concept of re-marriage of women is not acceptable in our society. To snatch this right of re-marriage from a woman goes against rationality, human freedom.

A woman considers her husband as god and herself as the devotee of that god. The term *pati* is used for husband which refers to the quality of dominance and authority which clarifies the meaning of slave in reference to women. The husband is considered as the master whereas the wife is a slave to that master. Periyar rejected the 'glory' attached to the sacrifices of women for the sake of husband. He urged women to come out of those images and role models.

Women and men both are equal, so, there is no point in considering females as inferior to the male. Even a very old man wants to marry a beautiful and young woman after the death of his wife but the same is not the case with a woman. Even a young girl after becoming a widow is constrained to spend her whole life without getting married and forcibly controlling her natural instincts.

According to *sati pratha* which was prevalent in earlier times, a woman was supposed to burn herself with her dead husband. With the efforts of learned men, this heinous system was abolished. The current prohibition on widow remarriage appears to be crueler than that of sati itself. Sati is a torture of a single day; but to live as a widow is a life-long, protracted and unbearable torture. The double standard regarding remarriage of men and women is clearly explicit.

Among the many reasons for the subjugation of women, the most important one is that they lack the right to property. He insisted on the right of women to become the inheritors of parental property. Periyar pleaded with the government to give equal rights to women like men to inherit or possess property as that would make them economically independent. According to him, if the women do not have the right to property that would be against their self-respect. If women achieve the right to property, many of their inconveniences will disappear. So, it is very necessary that women should come forward to agitate for their property rights.

When Periyar saw suppressed condition of helpless and hopeless women, he began to raise his voice against all forms of cruelty and injustice which was done to them. He raised serious questions about the connection between the superstitious beliefs, in equal treatment, coerced sacrifices and harassments inflicted on women, on the one hand, praising women for their motherhood, worshipping women as goddesses, attributing superlative qualities of patience and tolerance on the other hand. All queries against the sufferings of a woman received two answers. One was that it is her fate and the other answer was that it was destined by God and religious rules. Therefore she had no option except to undergo the suffering with endurance. He urged women that they need not be afraid of those holy rules and none could prevent them from living their life with human dignity.⁷

Periyar criticized a woman's life which was dependent on her husband for two square meals, a pair of clothes and shelter. In return the woman was supposed to work at home from morning till night serving the husband with utmost obedience, bearing his tortures and still worshipping him as her god, giving birth to his children and remaining chaste and loyal to him. He openly declared that women should not become a childbearing machines. He considered that the occupation of women in bearing and bringing up children was the main cause of their complete dependence on men. He questioned this form of life and asked that why a women should endure such kind of humiliation. The stories created to stereotype women into these moldings of a proud slave to husband were subjected to inquiry by him.⁸

According to Periyar, the way in which family is constructed is the cause of the suppression of women. The domain of kitchen is fixed for the women whereas the hall for the men. At every stage of her life, she is a slave whether to her father, husband, or son. She is never entitled to be free at any stage of her life. One can find a very clear similarity between the thoughts of Periyar and Simon De Beauvoir regarding the position of women, especially with regard to the institution of marriage. Beauvoirexplains that women are always seen in reference to marriage. She writes,

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution.⁹

Both the sexes are necessary to each other, but there is never a condition of reciprocity between the two. Simon has attacked on the fact that throughout history women have been forced into the repetitive and uncreative life of immanence and the passive acceptance of roles assigned to them by society whereas men have been privileged with expressing transcendence through projects. She studies the role of

wife in reference to having children, tending house and being the sexual receptacles of the male libido. She writes,

To hold and proclaim that a man and a woman, who may not even have chosen each other, are in duty bound to satisfy each other in every way throughout their lives is a monstrosity that necessarily gives rise to hypocrisy, lying, and unhappiness.¹⁰

In order to ensure woman's equality, Beauvoir advocates such changes in social structures such as universal childcare, equality in education, choice of birth control, and legal abortion for women and perhaps most importantly, woman's economic freedom and independence.

Similar to Beauvoir, Periyar asserts to ensure the dignity and equal right of women by introducing self- Respect Marriage' which was a small but a very significant step taken in that direction. He supported marriage with mutual consent and without any role in religious rituals.

- He opposed forced marriages.
- He also opposed religions and laws, which force women to put up with

the brutal behavior of husbands. As he says:

The cruel religions and laws, which force women to put up with the brutal behavior of the husbands for the sake of chastity, must die out. The wickedness of society, which, in the name of chastity forces a woman to suppress her real feelings of love and live with the man who has neither love kindness for her, should also go.¹¹

Along with the issue of marriage, he also focussed on the requirement of equal rights for women in all spheres and the need for limiting the number of children. Society must do away with the notion of masculinity and femininity and there is the foundational necessity of education and training for the fulfillment of all the emancipatory objectives.

All that a man does to pretend to respect women and to work for their freedom is nothing but a conspiracy for cheating women. Even if by chance it becomes possible, one thing is quite sure that women's freedom cannot be achieved through men's effort. He asked women to organize themselves to get liberated by their own efforts. Periyar asserts that,

Equality should start from our home for womenfolk and that too not by their traditional male masters but by their own independent, revolutionary women groups, who have nothing to lose but their chains.

The women should be clear on the point that the present enslavement of women was indeed brought by men. This kind of enslavement is being strengthened by women as she herself traditionally believes in such enslavement. It is women

more than men who are obstacles to women's liberation. Women continue to hold the opinion that their physical constitution is an indication that they are slaves to men. Women should get rid of such kind of inferiority complex and start treating themselves as equal to men.

For both men and women, it is their children who are obstacles in their way of freedom. And it is positively harmful to the autonomy of women. Periyar explicated that 'on account of the hassles involved in childbearing, women are dependent on others and such dependence becomes the basis for the entrenchment of male dominance.'¹² Women should come forward even to refuse to bear children. Periyar argues that the burden of bearing children makes it difficult for women to prove that they can live without men.

Although childbearing has been one of the primary causes of women's enslavement, it has been so, because of the way it has been understood and practiced in our society. Childbearing should not be seen as a hindrance, but can be associated with the empowerment of women as the sole source of procreation. The bearing of child is a natural process and it also leads to the development of the human race. However, in this context, Periyar's concern should not be overlooked that childbearing should be driven by the choice of women.

The role played by Periyar is incommensurable. The uniqueness of his feminist ideology is that it flows from his innate sense of equality and justice. He considers the enslavement of women as being a hindrance in the way of the development of the human race. The superstitious beliefs of people which are not based on a rational understanding of true human nature are the hindrances in the way of attainment of equality and justice in a society. He declared that morality cannot be a one-way traffic. For clapping, we need both hands, similarly for society to be moral we need both men and women. So, why to confine the notion of chastity only to women. If women want to be liberated then they must discard the concept of imposed chastity and the way adultery is used in reference to women. These words are utilized by men to subjugate women. The relationship of men and women through the history of humankind is that of master and slave. Unless woman is going to realize her worth and fight for her respect, this kind of relationship cannot be removed. He asserted that women can attain freedom only through their own effort. He advocated higher education as a means to women's liberation which will strengthen her to break all the shackles which enslave her.

The main aim of Periyar was to put an end to patriarchy resulting in the shift of balance of power through which subordinate agent i.e women becomes the subject rather than just being object. The transition of power makes them realize

their inner potential which was earlier hidden due to undue pressure created by society. They become aware that they are not helpless or powerless.

References

1. Foucault, M. *Power/Knowledge: Interviews and Other Writings*. **Pg. 187.**
2. Kandasamy, Fuzzy and Nectrosopohc. (2005). *Analysis of Periyar's View on Untouchability*, American Research Press. **Pg. 104.** ISBN 978-1-931233-00-, retrieved on 4. 08.2018.
3. Prakash, Arumugam, (2018). "Social Reformer: E.V.R. Periyar", www.uni-giessen-de/gk1415/periyar, retrieved on 22.09.18.
4. Veeramani, K. *Periyar Feminism*. **Pg. 300.**
5. Quoted in Chandrababu, Prof. B. S. and Thilagavathi, L. *Women: Her History and Her Struggle for Emancipation*. **Pg. 300.**
6. (2018). www.bihar.humanists.net/periyar, retrieved on 26.08.2018.
7. (2018). www.new.modernrationalist.com/relevance, retrieved on 20.08.18.
8. Ibid.
9. Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. **Pg. 425.**
10. Ibid. **Pg. 479.**
11. (2018). www.bihar.humanists.net/periyar, retrieved on 02.08.18.
12. Periyar, E. V. Ramasamy. *Women Enslaved*. **Pg. 46.**