THE BEEHIVE: FEMINISM CONTRASTED WITH THE ZENANA: BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Translated by Basanta Koomar Roy.

The strife and the struggles of the battle are over. Come, beauteous woman, come to wash me clean, to heal my wounds, to comfort and bless me with your soothing presence. Come beauteous woman, come with your golden pitcher.

The mart is over. I have left the crowd and built my cottage in the village. Come, noble woman, come with a celestial smile and a vermilion line on the parting of your hair, to bless and grace the lonesome home. Come noble woman, come with your jar of sacred water.

The sun shines sultry at noon, and an unknown wayfarer is at our door. Come, blissful woman, come with your pitcher of nectar and with the pure music of your bridal bracelet, to welcome and bless the unknown guest. Come, blissful woman, come with your pitcher of nectar.

The night is dark, and the home is quiet. Come, devout woman, come, dressed in white, with the sacrificial water, and in dishevelled hair light the candle at the altar; and then open the gates of your heart in secret prayer. Come, devout woman, come with your sacrificial water.

Now, the time of parting is at hand. Come, loving woman, come with your tears. Let your tearful look shower blessing on my way away from here. Let the anxious touch of your blessed hand hallow the last moments of my earthly existence. Come, sorrowful woman, come with your tears.
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No doubt when the woman of the Western world sees the small rooms with crude furniture and old-fashioned pictures in our zenanas, she imagines that the men of the Orient have made slaves of Hindu women. But she forgets that we all live together the same way. We read Spencer, Ruskin and Mill; we edit magazines and write books; but we rest on a mattress on the floor, and we use an earthen oil-lamp for study. We buy jewels for our wives when we have the money, and in warm nights fan ourselves with a palm-leaf fan.

We have no sofas or upholstered chairs, yet we do not feel miserable for not having them. Surely without them we are quite capable of loving and being loved. The Western people love furniture, entertainments and the general luxuries of life so much that numbers of them do not care to have wives or husbands, and often if married no children. With them, comfort takes preference over love. Whereas home and love are the supreme things in our life, and it is for this that quite often we sacrifice comfort.

Our women make our homes smile with sweetness, tenderness and love. . . . . We are happy and count ourselves blessed indeed with these priestesses of our household.

When I am asked of Feminism in Europe I at once think of deserted beehives. In Europe homes are disappearing and hotels are increasing in number. When we notice that men are happy with their horses, dogs and guns, and their clubs for smoking and gambling, we feel quite safe in concluding that woman’s hives are being gradually broken up. In the past the man-bee

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used to gather honey outside, and store it in the hive, where the queen-bee ruled supreme. Now the bee prefers to rent a cell, and live by himself, so that he alone may drink all the honey in the evening, which he gathers during the daytime. Consequently, the queen-bee is obliged to come out into the world of competition to gather honey in order to live. She is not yet accustomed to the changed conditions of life and society. The result is uneasiness and buzzing. . . . . . It is called feminism.

The present-day civilization of Europe is imperceptibly, but surely extending the arid zone in its social life. The hives everywhere are empty. The superabundance of luxuries is smothering the soul of the home—the home that is the very abode of love, tenderness and beneficence, all most essential for the healthy development of the human heart.

Judging as an alien, I feel that in proportion as European civilization progresses, so woman is being rendered increasingly unhappy. Woman acts in society as does the centripetal force in the planets. But in Europe today this centripetal force of woman’s energy fails to counterbalance the centrifugal force of distracted society. Men are seeking shelter in far corners of the earth to avoid the crushing struggle for existence, due mainly to wants artificially created. In Europe the man-bee is more and more unwilling to burden himself with a family, consequently the queen-bee’s occupation is decreasing. Young women often wait long for a husband, and the wife suffers from love-sickness. The son early leaves his mother’s home, and even though training, tradition and nature are opposed to it, the woman in the West must increasingly often go out and work and struggle for existence. The home is forgotten!

Social discord always follows the abandonment of the home ideal. Feminism springs up by the deserted hive. The women in many of the plays of Ibsen show impatience with the old state of affairs, while the men favor them. This leads one to think of the inconsistent position of woman in the present-day European society. There man is loath to build a home for woman, and at the same time is stubborn in refusing her equal rights to enter the arena of fruitful work. At the first thought, the number of women in the Nihilistic armies of Russia may seem appalling, but mature reflection convinces one of the fact that the time is about ripe for militancy among the women of Europe.

Strength is the watchword of European society today. There is no place for the weak, male or female. That is why women are
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getting ashamed of their femininity, and are striving to prove the strength of both their body and mind...

I HAVE in the fulness of thought come to the conclusion that in the life of man there is not the richness that characterizes the life of woman. There is unity in woman’s language, dress, deportment and duty. The chief cause of this is that Nature, through centuries, has fixed her realm of activity. Until today no change, no revolution, no transformation of ideals, of civilization has drawn women from their path of continuity. They have served, loved and comforted, and have done nothing else. The skill and beauty of these functions have been charmingly expressed in their form, language, and demeanor. The sphere of their activity and nature has been blended, as the flower and its perfume. Nothing but harmony has prevailed in them.

There is a great deal of unevenness in the life of man. The marks of his passage through the various changes and functions of life are noticeable in their form and nature. The abnormal elevation of the forehead, the ugly protuberance of the nose, the ungraceful development of the jaws, all are common in man, but not in woman. Had man followed the same course all through ages; had he been trained to perform the same function, there might have grown a mold for him, and a harmony might have been evolved between his nature and his functions. In this case he would not have had to think and struggle so hard to perform his duty. Everything would have gone on very smoothly and beautifully. He would have developed his nature, and his mind would not have been tossed from the path of duty upon the least provocation.

MOTHER Nature has molded woman as in a cast. Man has no such original tie, so he has not evolved around a central idea to his fulness. His diverse, untamed passions and emotions have stood in the way of his harmonious development. As the bondage of meter is the cause of the beauty of poetry, so the bondage of the meter of fixed law is the cause of the all-round fulness and beauty of woman. Man is like disconnected and uncouth prose, without harmony or beauty. That is why poets have always compared women with song, poetry, flower and river, but have never thought of comparing man with any of these. Woman, like most beautiful things in Nature, is connected, well-developed and well restrained. No irrelevant thought, no doubt, and no academic discussion had formerly broken the rhythm of a woman’s life.
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But the hive is overturned and the bees are scattered!
Not through warfare, not by violence can we recover the home. Love alone will bring Woman, the Comforter back to make fragrant and peaceful our lives. I believe that to love is to worship. Every kind of love is part of the great force that expresses itself through the human heart. Love is the temporary realization of the bliss of becoming a part of the vast current of life. In the physical world gravitation attracts the large and the small alike. Similarly, in the realm of the spirit, there is a universal attraction of joy. It is by virtue of this attraction that we perceive beauty in Nature and love within ourselves. The limitless bliss that is in the heart of Nature plays upon our hearts. If we look upon the love in our hearts independently of that in the universe, it becomes meaningless.

Love, not struggle, must animate Woman, the Comforter.

O woman, you are not merely the handiwork of God, but also of men; these are ever endowing you with beauty from their hearts.
Poets are weaving for you a web with threads of golden imagery; painters are giving your form ever new immortality.
The sea gives the pearls, the mines their gold, the summer gardens their flowers to deck you, to cover you, to make you more precious.
The desire of men's hearts has shed its glory over your youth.
You are one half woman and one half dream.