

Globalisation and Modern Indian Feminism

“Gender is straightjacket for the soul”

- Laurie Penny, 2014

For forty thousand years of human history, men and women have been rigidly categorized and classified into pre-set gender roles and sex classes, all in the name of biology. Humans are segregated on the basis of sex and subsequent social roles, made suspicious of one another and taught to comply with norms of masculinity and femininity. However, gender identity is work, performance work to be exact! It is a job every child is involuntarily signed up for right from the word go. In this performance of a lifetime, you are either a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’, each character having its own nuances, rules, regulations, duties and obligations. This process of gender conditioning begins at birth, and divides us all our lives; and it is in the troughs of this gender conditioning where the seed of sexism grows. Sexism affects us all- man, woman, child. it makes everyone unhappy. For some its because we refuse to conform to society’s pre-set roles and for the rest it is this refusal that is unsettling. With this report, I aim to analyze the connection between these very issues and the phenomenon of globalization, eventually using ‘Boys Don’t Cry’, a short film released as part of the #VogueEmpower campaign launched by Vogue India to study the debate between women empowerment and ‘westernization’ in India.

Over the past few centuries, every part of this world has at some point in time, seen an unrest in its social fabric. An unrest brought about when a group of women decide to stand up, break free and put an end to the performance of ‘traditional femininity’. However, all through history, these movements remained sporadic, isolated and unorganized. Then, at the close of the 19th century, the world saw one of its first united, almost militantly organized ‘feminist’ movement- the Suffragettes and the Suffragists. Here was a group of women standing together, demanding the right to vote, demanding the right to be recognized as first class citizens of the society in which they lived. Soon, more and more women around the world began demanding what was rightfully theirs- the right to education, right to medical care, right to own and inherit property, etc. and calling themselves ‘feminists’. Feminism is basically a range of movements and ideologies that share the common goal of defining, establishing and achieving equal economic, political and cultural rights for women around the world. One of the most basic foundation of modern feminism lies in its ability to unite women and men all over the world and its ‘global’ perspective. What makes this possible, is the increasing globalization of the world we live in.

Different people define globalization differently and for many the meaning of this term has been highly coloured and shaped by media representation of its opposition. But as Peter Marber (2005) rightly defines, ‘globalization is a term that encompasses all cross-border interactions, whether economic, political, or cultural’. Globalization, as a term captures the perception that there is a deepening and speeding up of world-interconnectedness in all aspects of life. There is a ‘global shift’; a world being moulded into a shared economic and political arena. (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and

Perraton., 1999) As can be seen from the above discussions, there are three pillars of globalization- economic, political and cultural: (1) Economic globalization refers to the presence of transnational organizations, international flows of goods and money and growing global economic integration. (2) Political globalization is a term used to talk about the concept of blurring nation states, growing international cooperation in the areas of policy making, law, order and human rights, and the formation of various international agencies and global forums. (3) Cultural globalization though highly debated, is defined as ‘the emergence of a specific set of values and beliefs that are largely shared around the planet’ (Castells, 2009). Though each aspect of globalization is based on its own set of theories, discourse and practices, neither can be seen and studied completely objectively from the other.

Just like with any other aspect of life and any other set of thoughts, beliefs and values, feminism too is highly dependent and highly driven by all the three pillars of globalization. Traditional western feminism has always been criticized for being partial to the plight of the ‘white, middle-class, educated’ woman, as a result of which, the 20th century saw a creation of multiple ethnically specific and multicultural feminist movements. One such fairly creation is the ‘modern feminist movement’ of India. Though Indian society has been grappling with feminism right from the time of its colonization, where women were for the first time made forerunners in the fight for independence, to the time when it got its first female head of state- Indira Gandhi, it has never seen a more united, more rigorous, more restless cry for equality and empowerment. This seemingly sudden and radical change can be attributed greatly to the LPG- Liberalization, globalization and privatization policy of 1991, where for the first time since its independence, India wholeheartedly opened its gates to foreign trade and global economic integration.

As a result of the LPG policy, there was a surge not only in Indian exports and imports, but also in the number of multinationals that now saw India as a lucrative foreign market. Major players across product categories like Nestle, McDonalds, Coke, PepsiCo, L’Oreal, Nike, etc. saw an opportunity and took it. With these new products came the ideologies behind them. Every brand brought with it its own campaign and its own set of values and beliefs that soon began shaping the thought of the ‘Indian youth’. At the same time, with a growth in economic prosperity, Indian media went through a phase of revolution. Ideologies, public opinion and value systems that had remained predominantly western, now became accessible through mass media. With greater cultural and political exposure than ever before, the feminist movement began developing a new, more informed, more holistic, more lasting feminist identity. Armed with a new understanding of the issues that plagued them and backed by a host of international women’s organizations, the United Nations and multiple global feminist groups, the women of India set out to challenge the patriarchy they had fallen prey to for so long, and for the first time, demanded substantial changes in the national and state policy frameworks. As a result, the early 1990’s saw a host of amendments to existing laws and policies, and creation of new laws for the protection, welfare and upliftment of the Indian women. Sadly, owing to the sheer size and diversity of the country, the complex structure of governance and

the presence of an ingrained system of bureaucracy and corruption, the execution of policies and welfare schemes have always fallen short of what is truly required to make a substantial change.

But what the movement lacked in political support, it gained in India's growing integration into the global economy. As a result of economic prosperity, there was a rise in per capita income, quality of life improved, there was widespread urbanization and migration of people to tier-1 cities and most importantly- greater rate of literacy. Another important impact of this new wave of globalization was the transformation of Indian media and a shift in its cultural identity. Over the next few years, different forms of media- print, audio-visual, digital and social, all became integral tools in this fight for equality. In a country where the 21st century saw more than 60% of its population belonging to Gen-Y, social media soon became the prime means to disseminate and mould public opinion. The year 2012 was a great year for 'social media feminism', as it is popularly called. It was the year when standup comedy found its place in Indian society and some of the most popular comedy groups and celebrities began using their ability to influence public opinion to do just that.

Owing to greater economic and political development, the flow of new innovations, products and ideologies has always been tipped in the favour of the 'western world'. As a result, globalization, especially cultural globalization has always been viewed as a concept of 'westernization' and 'cultural homogenization'. Anti-globalists and advocates against 'cultural hegemony' argue that globalization is the force that erodes the values, beliefs and social systems of their society and highlights (rather creates) issues that never existed before. Major third world, developing and most Muslim nations around the world still suffer from the most basic forms of sexism and patriarchy. Men are heralded as the 'protectors', the 'bread-earners' and the 'decision makers', whereas women are expected to be the quite mannered, docile, submissive keepers of home and family life, and happily so. For centuries this has been the norm. For centuries women have been treated like second class citizens, and have been okay with it. But today, as they become aware of their rights and stand up against these 'norms', there is social upheaval like never before. Religious clerics, gatekeepers of 'society and culture', educated policy makers even (both men and women alike), in these nations argue that whatever the social norm and cultural system, it has worked for their nations for centuries, without any visible impacts. Boys go out to play, while girls stay in and learn the art of holding their tongue. Young men go to college, while young women ready themselves for marriage and childbirth. Men go to work, while women stay back and wait. And if anyone tries to break away from these norms, they deserve to be punished. So when as a result of growing international cooperation in the field of gender equality and changing economic flows, the 'western ideals' of women empowerment and upliftment infiltrate these closely guarded societies, 'globalization' and 'westernization' are labelled the perpetrators that must be prosecuted.

One such closely guarded society, built on an intricate foundation of multiple religious belief systems and rigid cultural norms saw itself rattled when in October 2014, Vogue India (the Indian edition of Vogue, a global fashion and lifestyle

magazine) launched its social campaign for women empowerment #VogueEmpower to celebrate its seventh anniversary in India. As stated by representatives at Vogue, the campaign is their attempt to raise awareness through multi-media platforms and offline activities. Their message is simple: it starts with you. This campaign is a perfect example of a transnational company localizing its messages and efforts with respect to the issues most prevalent in the host country (in this case, India). 2014-15 was a period in Indian feminism where it was realized that patriarchy cannot be done away with without active involvement of the 'Indian man' and thus began the conscious inclusion of men in this fight for equality. As part of its #VogueEmpower campaign, Vogue released a host of videos highlighting the issues of gender conditioning and patriarchal systems in India. Vogue launched its campaign with the short film 'Boys Don't Cry'. The short film talks about how at every stage in their life, boys are taught not to cry. As the film unfolds we see boys at different stages- from newborn infants to elementary school kids to teens to college students, all being given one message: Boys don't cry! The end however, is a plot twist when we see a man, visibly about to cry till the camera zooms out and we see that he has hurt a woman quite badly. That's when it makes sense, the film is a take on the issue of domestic violence. The film ends with the message: We have always taught our boys 'real men' don't cry. Perhaps its time we taught them that 'real men' don't make others cry. When the film was released, it garnered mixed reviews, most of them being negative. It was popular opinion that the film linked two seemingly unrelated facets of masculinity, labeling one as responsible for the other; ' it seems to imply that because we teach men not to cry, they make women cry''. While commentators arguing against the film went on to critique the fact that though the film begins by talking about an issue that troubles 'Indian men', it ends with another 'women's issue' and like always the 'femi-nazis' of Indian society are up in arms against the men, the advocates for the film bring back focus to the film's main message- this call for equality and upliftment is not just about the men and the women. It is about how we as a society have normalized 'gender conditioning' and learnt to accept any and all social norms imposed on us, however regressive and oppressive they may be. Just as with any social change with its foundations in 'non-Indian' or 'western' ideals, this too was greatly opposed. Once again gatekeepers of 'Indian' culture and tradition spoke out against these views and labelled the video as another attempt by a 'foreign' company and 'western' media to corrupt the youth and disrupt the fabric of social harmony in India.

While the video eventually failed to make any real impact, it did succeed in pioneering an open debate on the issues of patriarchy and gender conditioning that had been marginalized in Indian feminist theory for far too long. The film had one single message: Start with the boys. It sought to tell us that women empowerment is not only the woman's burden to bear. Its not her prerogative alone. Though not really suppressed or oppressed, Indian men are subjected to their share of sexism and are one of the biggest collateral damage of this system of patriarchy that governs Indian society. The film forced people to think (whether voluntarily or not) of how together as a society, they had been subconsciously feeding into this system and of its

seemingly unconnected though far reaching impacts. This whole campaign by Vogue and particularly the short film managed to successfully highlight not only the gaps in Indian feminist theory that need to be filled, but also brought to attention the need to address this war against 'westernization'. In its own way, it opened the floor to discussions about the relevance of 'western' ideals of gender identity and equality and the need and benefits of integrating the Indian with the global feminist movement.

Globalization is a gendered phenomenon. It affects men and women differently and continually produces new and different modes of gender power and disadvantage. (Hawkesworth, 2006) Though over the years the forces of globalization have proven themselves instrumental in development of global feminist movement, they have their own set of negative effects. Global feminist movements have time and again regarded 'globalization' as a negative word because it has brought great harm to many women--by facilitating the systematic exploitation of women as a source of cheap domestic and migrant labor, and accelerating the international operation of organized crime, drastically increasing the trade in women and girls for various forms of commercial sexual exploitation. For these reasons, globalization has often been largely demonized and perceived as a force only to be opposed. However, globalization has stealthily changed the balance and distribution of power.

For the global feminist movement, globalization has brought to life the unprecedented ability to mobilize international sentiment and solidarity at a moments notice. Not only has globalization furthered the cause of international and transnational justice for crimes against women, but increasing connectivity has also amplified the call for greater representation of women across the globe. This has lead to an active exchange of ideas: for affirmative action at national and international levels, and for concerted international campaigns. At its core, globalization is a powerful revolution that is neither inherently good nor bad. It is simply a catalyst that can magnify both good and bad, depending on how it is used, by whom and to what end. (Neuwirth J, 2003) "As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world", said Virginia Woolf, and rightly so. Women's issues are global, the fight for equality though diverse, is global. In the end, with all its risks and benefits, globalization is an ever present, integral and inseparable part of feminism and feminist theories and discourses.

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