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### Does Gender Matter When One Writes?

When I was a teenager, I used to talk more about humanity than gender. I preferred not to see men and women in two different polarities and not to see differences between them. Then I became an adult and grew up enough to see those differences. I had to face the tremendous difficulties of life, and struggle a lot for everything. It was not because of men, it was because of traditional bias, patriarchal social design, impracticable worn-out laws, and the very low implementation level of the so-called reformed laws for women in Nepal. A medical doctor, whose husband also is a doctor, once said to me, "we women have to work three times as much to count our work as equal to that of men." Women, whether they are doctors, engineers, professors, writers, philosophers, social workers, etc..., are given less credit and their devotions and contributions are less accepted by family, society, and country because they are women. Their loyalty and accountability are pushed aside and moustaches (gray or black, or brown or white) go ahead. The voyage of men is pre-designed, preferred, more accepted, and made of velvet and not of thorns and rocks.

For women, there are two options: either to accept and follow the traditional path or make a new one. Our mothers and foremothers tolerated a lot and sacrificed for the sake of race, religion, ethics, morality...and above all followed the harsh inhuman rules—they surrendered. When I became conscious of the conditions and sufferings of my foremothers and predecessors, I felt that traditional path was a hard one to follow. Yet it was difficult to find a new path, and at the same time I realized with big eyes gender matters when we write. I joined my hands with the hands of other women to fight for the cause of women's rights. At present we have many social and political activists in various fields in Nepal who always raise their voices for the sake of women's rights. Writers may go or may not go to the street for demonstrations with placards in their hands, or black strips over their mouths or wrists, or sit in the street for hunger strikes, but I think they must write and add their voices, if not for the whole of their lifetime at least for some fraction of it.

I believe if there is a voice by the women, for the women, to the women in all the fields/areas, including literature, there will be a genuine democracy. Otherwise democracy will play the role of a puppet show, dummy, or scarecrow, and cannot work as the free voice of creation or creativity for all. Democracy is the voice of and for self-reliance and identity.

Are you conscious of the moustaches when you visit parliament, government offices, business offices, academic areas, technical workshops, and conferences/symposia? I become conscious of it often. I would like to thank the IWP organizers for the number of female participants in the program.

If something or anything happens to women, it is not only because of women, it is because of men as well. It is a matter of great misfortune for us that the social structure, the law, and the economic policy and the politics of the country have not been able to treat men and women equally. Of course the sweet words of the authorities are not playing the role of

actions in Nepal. There is always a man behind a woman in her every success and failure. But women's own activities have no less importance.

If anybody asks me "What is feminism in literature?" I would like to reply as such: "It is to raise the voice, and act as well, against any such elements or systems that hinder the freedom of women, women's human rights, and women's identity." We need such spirit in literature, along with bravery and courage. We can build the movement through literature, music, art, and politics. But I think literature should not lose its value as art and craft at this moment. So I loved the writings of Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Brontë when I was young. I appreciate people who are widely read. We have heard about Toni Morrison and Eudora Welty. There are other women leaders who have emerged elsewhere in the world and adopted party and politics, perhaps to fight against all kinds of atrocities on earth in the last half of the twentieth century. Among them, some governed their countries in Southeast Asia. In Nepal, women faced the struggle against discrimination in aggressive, stoic, and proactive ways. In my case, I and my sister, as we are both writers, write for the rights of women and have been taking part in the series of movements in Nepal. Our book, *Two Sisters*, can be seen as a symbol for the movement, and it caused a blast of excitement among intellectuals. I think women in the world have been searching for "a room of one's own" for centuries.

We cannot be proud of the lack of participation of women in professional fields, the shortage of facilities and activities designed for them, their individual economic status, and the authorities' treatment towards them. In such a situation, how can I be silent about gender issues in my writing? Other women writers may be conscious of it or not, but some part of their writing speaks about gender issues. It is so because they are a part of it. Although in many aspects I don't find differences between me as a woman and some of my male friends as men as human beings, I do find much difference between us in the nature of our struggles, our ways of dealing with joys and sufferings, and of course our biology. Automatically, it comes out in our writing, the only thing is whether we should give importance to it or not. The question "Does gender matter when one writes?" has much to do with art and its utilization. The use of art to advance the female half of humanity is as important as the preservation and proliferation of art for the sake of art. A writer is free to make any topic an issue or not to make any issue at all. Writers are free to express their feelings in different ways, to choose different themes and use different styles. They create meaning based on their own individual values. No one forces them to do this or that against their own will. Writers are at liberty to conceptualize, compose, and communicate. Art is connected to the routines of day to day human life. What is the harm if gender matters when one writes? But the writing has to maintain its connection to art—I don't like gratuitous pornographic descriptions and pure propaganda in my literature.

In this twenty-first century, we are living very close to each other on earth because of the advancement of science and technology. Literature can play a very important role by bringing awareness to all kinds of men and women on various issues. Many times I have spoken the cries and agonies of women in my literature, to make concerned people listen to them, on the issues of human trafficking, domestic violence, rape, etc... Even if I don't plan to do it, it oozes out automatically. It's because of empathy or sympathy: I am a part of every success and failure, ecstasy and depression, joy and suffering of all the women in the world. The spirit of writing on the gender issues of women is increasing in Southeast Asia. It may

be because of consciousness, women's networking, advocacy, and mass media. I am pleased with the voice of women for the sake of women expressed in their writings as well.

People use literature to appeal to, revolt against, or counsel other people. They revolt in literature in two different ways, i.e. either with a creative motive or a destructive one. There is always the notion of good and bad, right and wrong, black and white. It depends on the individual and cultural differences. Women are the symbol of creativity. I want to see myself and other writers busy ourselves in creating a new horizon of peace and co-existence in which we don't suffocate ourselves and others.

There are many obstacles that writers must overcome to reach the readers. Poverty, ignorance, lack of education, proper employment opportunities, dependence, etc... have heavily laid their effects on the women of the Third World. Literacy is low and for many people it is difficult to be able to afford to buy books. People are more interested in other things, such as mass media and sports. The distribution system also needs to be developed further. In this condition, how can the literary work bring about social change? A writer who has talent in reaching the readers and dealing with the issues can bring changes in the conceptual level and the activities of women specifically and people in general, according to his or her aspiration. I must be optimistic about it.

Using our writing, we can bring changes to the social construct and its culture-bound conventions, roles, and behavior for and among women and men and boys and girls. For a long time, our writings have reflected an individual's male and female status and issues related to that status. In a male-dominated society like ours, women are always treated as second-class citizens of the country. It's a very serious issue in our writing. I am not so much concerned about the biological differences between men and women. I am much more concerned about gender as a socially acquired characteristic, which includes psychological, social, and cultural characteristics, such as ideas about masculinity and femininity. I don't want to believe the ideas about gender that are culturally and socially determined, because they always want to minimize us as women and place us on the periphery. I wonder if the pen has greater power than the sword.

One type of gender among other types, distinguished by linguistics, is grammatical gender. We have been using the pronouns "he" and "she." I wonder if there can be a single pronoun to signify both man and woman. We, the writers, can bring change in the use of grammar and invent new pronouns that do not create so much difference between men and women.

Gender usually refers to socially/culturally constructed characteristics, which are then attributed to the different biological sexes; gender is femininity and masculinity. "Who needs what?" has been decided by a few people, not by all and not by all women in general. We cannot discard the biological differences between the two different sexes, but we can bring changes to social and cultural constructs through our writing, instantly or after many years. It depends on how the people/readers perceive and react and whether or not they see a particular change as being beneficial. I am reminded of a story I wrote a year ago. In that story the main character (a female) is an expert in martial arts. She is involved with an extraordinary man who instead of being her lover, turns out to be a broker trafficking women. She is able to use her skills to save herself from being exploited.

I agree that certain products are classified as being male- or female-oriented, except within sub-categories where gender is apparent, e.g. men's fragrances. I have made use of fragrance in my recently written (on the way back to Iowa City from Wisconsin this weekend) story. I wonder how fragrances can play a role in determining what we see as masculine and what we see as feminine. A wife may accept or reject her husband because of his habit of smoking, smoking can stand-in for masculinity, and its smell can be interpreted according to Pavlov's theory of association. So many things come together with gender issues.

Knowingly or unknowingly, I prefer to devote one-third of my writing to gender issues.

- It's very natural and spontaneous for me because I am a woman who is victimized by the law, discrimination, and violence.
- I want to generalize my feelings and my ideas to other women.
- I want to share my experiences.
- I can make people aware of the present situation of women in countries in the Third World, like Nepal.
- In literature, I can advocate through the medium of convincing words.
- I will be so happy if my writing helps women/girls get out of their difficult circumstances.

I can do many things through literature and I enjoy it because literature is my life and literature is my world.

The gender issues I usually deal with in my writing are:

- victims of various kinds of violence,
- human trafficking, with a focus on the trafficking of girls/women,
- and among women, the need for leadership, awareness, and so on.

In my country, there is discrimination everywhere, and it has persisted for a long time. The social conditions that make a woman different from a man in the same society and country are:

- persisting laws such as
  - the lack of equal parental rights,
  - the lack of provision for the citizenship rights of the children by the signature of their mother,
  - and the lack of tenant rights so that women can sell or transfer their property;
- the concept of social acceptance;
- the lack of women's access to education;
- and the lack of employment opportunities for women and wage discrimination.

There are a lot of gender issue-related topics that can be dealt with in stories, novels, and poems. I have dealt with only a few in my writing and much still has to be done. I think we can do much better if we collaborate.

Now I want to talk about how I deal with gender issues in my writing.

- When I see the various difficult circumstances and conditions of women/girls in the family, community, society, and country at large, I want to combat those circumstances for the sake of the women, individually by writing literature, and through organizations by creating objectives and obtaining feedback, etc, etc..., and also by running various awareness activities for the victimized and innocent women of my country.
- Regarding style, I like humor and satire nowadays more than before. I also like simple expressions that have meanings and implications, but which are not too obscure.
- I bring gender issues into my writing by observing situations in which women feel motivated, by getting inspiration from my own writing in one genre and transferring those ideas to another genre, and by listening to the news and reading papers, magazines, and books, as well as by collecting my own individual experience of being a woman.

It has always been a great struggle to be a woman and an even greater struggle to be a woman writer at every step from writing to publishing. Many women writers who shoulder double or triple responsibilities have been continuously writing in the Third World, and perhaps globally as well. Mostly women are as sincere in their writing as they are in their attitude. A woman writer never likes to write in a male-directed voice. Great voices dealing with gender issues have yet to be written by women and for women which will enhance democracy and bring about a new structure in every aspect of human life.