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## The Wound That Equality Cannot Heal

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By Acharya Prashant



Feminism, in its original impulse, was a refusal. A refusal to accept that a woman's worth could be settled by her body, her compliance, her usefulness to the purposes of others. That refusal was not merely political; it was, in its best moments, a refusal to accept that a human being could be exhausted by her roles, that the woman standing inside all those assigned functions was not also something more. Whatever one thinks of the movement's later directions, that original impulse was something real.

And yet something has not followed from that naming. In the century since the refusal was first articulated, laws have changed, doors have opened, and the vocabulary of equality has entered every political conversation. What has not changed at the same pace is something harder to legislate and harder to measure: the way a woman sees herself when no one else is watching, what she finds at the centre of her self-esteem, what happens to her sense of worth when her body changes or a particular kind of attention is withdrawn. The wound that produced the movement turns out to be deeper than the movement has so far been willing to go.

India's Women's Reservation Act, passed near-unanimously by Parliament in September 2023 as the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, has in recent days returned to the centre of parliamentary attention. The 131st Amendment Bill and the accompanying Delimitation Bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha this week, seek to accelerate the 2023 Act's implementation by anchoring the next delimitation to the 2011 census rather than the census still underway. When the Act takes effect, a third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies will be reserved for women. The debate has returned to newspaper pages and television studios, and across party lines the argument proceeds with familiar certainty: more women in legislatures will mean better governance, greater representation, a more just republic. The logic is clean and the intention is sound. Yet something in this certainty deserves examination rather than applause.

Representation matters, and so does legislation. India's performance on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, where it ranks 131st out of 148 countries in the 2025 edition, is not a number that recommends complacency. The country's female labour force participation, which at around 35 percent remains the lowest in South Asia, is a serious structural problem that legal instruments can certainly address. These facts matter, and none of them are being disputed here.

What is being asked is a different question, one that runs beneath the question of seats: whether the woman who occupies those seats has changed her relationship with herself, or only changed her position in a transaction that was always conducted on someone else's terms. Whether she has left the building, or simply moved to a better floor of it.

## The Wound Is Real

Patriarchy is not a myth, and it is not, as some prefer to believe, merely a Western import dressed in activist vocabulary. It is a force that has shaped each global, its consequences documented in the lives of women across every century. India's own classical

literature includes women poets whose verses survive in the Rigveda, composed three thousand years ago; the same civilisation produced the Manu Smriti, which prescribed a woman's permanent subjection, first to her father, then to her husband, then to her son. A tradition capable of both heights and depths is not being honest with itself if it remembers only the heights.

What patriarchy does to a woman is particular, and worth stating precisely. It assigns her a value anchored entirely in her body: her body's labour, her body's reproductive capacity, her body's availability for male pleasure and male display. Open any major Indian newspaper's matrimonial section. The entry for a prospective bride will specify her complexion, height, weight, and domestic accomplishments, in roughly that order. The entry for a prospective groom will specify his income, profession, and property. The exchange being negotiated is not between two people; it is between a body's display value and a household's economic position. This advertisement runs today, placed with complete sincerity by educated, modern families. The patriarchal pricing of a woman has not disappeared; it has simply been standardised.

Think of what often happens when a woman enters a room. She knows, in a way she did not consciously learn and cannot consciously unlearn, whose eyes are on her and what those eyes are measuring. The knowledge is not external; it has been installed so deeply that it runs as a continuous interior assessment, preceding any external one. She did not choose this voice. It arrived before she had the vocabulary to question it, and it will keep running, offering its verdicts on her body and her desirability, long after she has read every book on patriarchy and agreed with every word. The gaze she protests in the world is the gaze she has already absorbed into herself. The oppression she can name in a seminar is the oppression she conducts privately, against herself, before the seminar begins.

A young woman spoke about this in one of our recent sessions. She was a media studies graduate who had been, in her own words, a loud feminist. She knew the theory of the male gaze; she had written papers on it and argued it in seminars and debates. Still, privately, she was comparing her body to every woman who entered a room, tracking her weight fluctuations against her self-worth, and calculating whether the man she cared for was sufficiently absorbed by her physical appearance. The awareness, she said, had done nothing. She had the vocabulary of liberation and the experience of a cage.

This is the real depth of the wound: that it can be installed so deep that the woman who diagnoses it in the world carries no awareness of the concept, no legislation, and no seat in any assembly, and crucially, the movement built to

oppose patriarchy has, for the most part, never looked here, because looking here would require the kind of inward examination that ideological movements are constitutionally unable to perform. It is easier to count the empty seats in the legislature than to examine the occupied seat behind the mirror.

Misogyny, in this light, is not only what a man does to a woman. It is equally the attitude a woman can hold toward herself, toward her own body, toward her own worth. A woman who measures her confidence against her weight, derives her sense of adequacy from male attention, and treats another woman as a competitor in the marketplace of physical appeal is a misogynist in the fullest functional sense, whatever banner she marches under. She is not an exception. She is the predictable product of a system that taught her, from her earliest self-assessments, to see herself as the world sees women.

### **The Cure That Confirms the Disease**

Here is where most of what calls itself feminism makes its decisive error. Having correctly identified the wound, it proposes a horizontal cure: move the woman from this position to that one, from the domestic sphere to the professional, from the periphery of power to its centre, from subordination to equality. The slave, if this logic holds, is freed by becoming the master.

But note what remains constant in this exchange. The body remains the primary reality, gender the primary identity, the transaction still conducted in the currency of power, visibility, and social position. The woman who fought her way to the boardroom has changed her address in the same building. She has not left the building.

Gender equality, for all the energy expended in its pursuit, is a very ordinary objective. It asks the wrong question. Men have held political power, economic power, and institutional authority for centuries; look at what they have done with it. To aspire toward parity with that record is not ambition. It is a request to be permitted the same errors.

The evidence already exists, and India does not need to look abroad for it. Three decades after the 73rd and 74th Amendments reserved a third of panchayat seats for women, the phenomenon known candidly in our villages as *sarpanch-pati* is now a commonplace of Indian political life: the woman wins the seat, the husband runs the office. The seat moved. The interior arrangement did not. Rwanda's parliament, for its part, is over sixty-one percent women, the highest proportion in the world; rates of gender-based violence there remain among the highest on the continent, with surveys finding that roughly a third of women aged 15 to 49 report having experienced psychological violence. Scandinavian countries lead every global index on gender parity, rates of body image distress, disordered

eating, and internalised appearance anxiety among young women in those countries do not appear meaningfully lower than elsewhere in Europe. The seats changed, the wound did not.

Consider the algebra of the debate. Those who argue that women should be subordinate to men, and those who argue that women should be equal to men, share a crucial unexamined assumption: that we know what a woman is, and what a man is, well enough to make comparative claims. What is A, and what is B? Is A equal to B, or greater, or lesser? The argument proceeds with intense conviction on all sides, and no one pauses to note that the variables remain undefined. Both sides are solving an equation in which neither term has been established. The one who insists A is greater than B, and the one who insists A equals B, are engaged in the same confusion, from different corners of it.

What unifies nearly every strand of contemporary feminism, however divergent in its prescriptions, is the unquestioned premise that being female is the primary fact about oneself, that this has been a source of suffering, and that the suffering justifies the self-definition. A reactive identity is not a free identity. It is defined entirely by what it opposes, which means it cannot outlive its opposition, and more to the point, cannot see around it.

This becomes visible in feminism's own internal contradictions. Fourth-wave feminism has produced figures who insist that choosing to be a homemaker devoted entirely to her husband is itself a feminist act, because it is a woman's choice. It has also produced figures who insist on the exact opposite. Tradition is claimed as feminist; so is its rejection, so is domesticity, so is career, so is modesty, so is display. The only criterion is that the woman doing any of these declare them her free choice. The word "choice" is doing enormous work here, and no one is examining the one who is choosing, or what she is choosing from, or whether the entire range of choices on offer was assembled by the very culture she is supposedly liberated from.

Rights without wisdom compound the problem rather than dissolving it. A woman's deeper self-understanding remains unchanged, her identification with the female body and its biological imperatives intact, and expanded rights give that unexamined self more room to act, not more freedom to be otherwise. The gains may be real as far as they go, but they are simply not the destination they are presented as.

One can be a feminist and a misogynist simultaneously. One can protest patriarchy publicly while enacting it privately, with great sincerity and complete unawareness. The most vocal critics of body objectification in the lecture hall can spend the rest of the day comparing their reflections, obsessing over appearance, and the worth against the attention of precisely the gaze they acade. pocrisy in the ordinary sense; it

is the structural consequence of addressing an ideology without examining the one who holds it.

When a woman who has spent years protesting patriarchy is still, in her private life, governed by the male gaze she protests, something precise has happened: she is biologically a woman and ideologically a rebel, but the rebellion has not touched the ground from which the original wound grew. She carries two identities now instead of one. The second does not free her from the first; it only adds weight.

### **What No Reservation Can Reserve**

The Women's Reservation Act will soon reach implementation. More women will enter legislatures, which is preferable to the alternative. But the question being avoided in all this discussion is more uncomfortable: has anything changed in the relationship between a woman and her own sense of self?

The hardest evidence against the adequacy of external liberation is not political. It lives in the private comparison that happens when another woman enters a room, in the anxiety that follows a change in body weight, in the devastation that arrives when someone whose admiration you wanted withholds it. None of this yields to legislation or to awareness of patriarchy as a social structure. It yields only to something far more demanding, and far less comfortable: the question of who is looking, and from where, and why what is seen never quite satisfies.

Patriarchy survives not primarily because men enforce it, though they do. It survives because the belief that makes it functional has been installed in women themselves, in their comparisons, in the quiet self-measurements that happen before anyone else has arrived on the scene. Consider a small scene from real life, which I had observed recently during my visit to Raipur. Late evening, a couple of young women were walking by a lake, with a group of young men trailing them for a while. Finally, one of the women turned around and addressed the men directly, not with anger but with something more disorienting: "Why are you following behind for so long? Come walk alongside." The men, startled, turned and left. Most women would have continued walking in the shadow of the stalkers, even though, in that particular moment and place, redressal wasn't difficult. What makes them walk powerlessly is not only the men behind them but a belief about themselves that no external reform truly addresses.

A woman who has found something worth attending to within herself has, in a practical sense, nothing to fear from such a gaze. But this requires something harder than protest. It requires that she first achieve what the gaze has always prevented: the

capacity to see herself clearly, from within, on her own terms. A man who has only looked at a woman from outside cannot know what she actually is. And neither, as long as she is looking at herself through his eyes, can she.

That is what internalised oppression looks like from the inside: it feels like the natural order of things.

The missing dimension in almost every feminist conversation is this: without an inquiry into who the woman actually is, beneath the body and the roles and the reactions, feminism as a social movement will keep reproducing the structure it opposes. Patriarchy without self-knowledge is, at its core, the rule of the unexamined ego over the bodies and lives of others. Feminism without the same inward inquiry is the same ego in a different uniform, fighting for a different position on the same terrain. The two can coexist in the same person, the same movement, the same generation, because they share the same unexamined foundation: the belief that the body's fortunes are the person's fortunes, and that changing those fortunes from outside is what liberation means. Where that belief goes unexamined, all the external victories remain provisional.

At this point one should add a necessary clarification. This is not addressed to the woman whose immediate safety is in question. A woman being beaten needs a restraining order before an inquiry into the ego; a girl denied schooling needs a school. But this article speaks more to the woman who already has safety, education, legal protection, and the full vocabulary of liberation, and still finds the wound intact. It is precisely because the external battle has been substantially won for many women that the internal question can no longer be deferred.

India's own saint tradition carries examples that the mainstream discourse on women's liberation has largely ignored. Saint Lalleshwari, the fourteenth-century Kashmiri poet-saint, renounced conventional dress entirely and walked free of the social scripts that governed women's bodies and women's worth. Akka Mahadevi, the twelfth-century Veerashaiva poet, left a marriage imposed on her and walked out with nothing, composing verses of such clarity that they have survived nine centuries. Neither of them was making a statement about clothing or rights in any modern sense. The point was not what they wore or did not wear; it was that the body's terms had ceased to govern them. The approval or disapproval of the world around them had become entirely irrelevant, not as a performance of indifference but as a consequence of having found something that made the world's assessment beside the point. And it was precisely this ~~that~~ that allowed them to see and name the suffering of other women. ~~one~~ one can genuinely help another

only when one is no longer drowning alongside her. That is not a feminist position. It is not an anti-feminist position either. It is prior to both, and it is what both have consistently failed to reach.

There is a word for what Lalleshwari and Akka Mahadevi were, and it is not *naariwadi*, not feminist in the sense of one whose primary orientation is toward the female identity and its grievances. The word is *chetanawadi*: one oriented toward self-inquiry itself, for whom the question of gender is secondary to the question of who is actually there beneath it. The distinction matters because it names precisely where the feminist project stops and where the real work begins. A movement organised around gender identity, however justified its grievances, cannot by its own logic dissolve the very identity it is organised around. Only the inquiry that precedes identity can do that.

That is the only axis along which freedom actually moves: not the horizontal shift from one social position to another, not the improvement of terms within a transaction that remains fundamentally unchanged, but a departure from the premise that social position is what one fundamentally is. This does not fit within the frameworks that electoral politics or identity movements know how to handle. But it is, precisely and uncomfortably, the question that any serious engagement with the woman's freedom must eventually reach, if it is to be something more than a better-furnished version of the cage it set out to oppose.

The first woman was shaped by patriarchy's demand that she be pleasing and compliant. The second defined herself entirely by her rebellion against the first, wearing the ideology of liberation while carrying the cage in her own psychology. Neither of them has yet found what they were both, in their different ways, looking for. Whether anyone will depends on a question that no parliament has ever tabled and no movement has known how to sit with: who, beneath the woman, is actually present?

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