

**Enlightenment Unveiled: A Feminist Perspective on the Path to Nirvana in Buddhism****Dr. Pardeep Kaur***Research Associate**Guru Gobind Singh Chair**Punjabi University, Patiala*

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In the contemporary scenario, materialistic and intellectual changes have given humans multifarious concepts. It has given individualism, freedom, formal equality, rejection of traditions, faith in new scientific and technology progress, human's perfectibility and so on. These changes have been called with the term 'Modernity' and these changes have also given birth to feminist thought; even Feminism is known as the daughter of modernization. Under the influence of modernization, women have been aware towards their rights. As such women had started struggling to attain equality between the sexes. Before the birth of the word 'Feminism', this thought has based on movements like women's rights, women's freedom, women's movements and so on. All these groups are concerned with the issues of gender difference as well as advocate equality for women and campaigns for women's rights.

Feminism term is also based on such issues. According to New Encyclopedia of Britannica, "Women's liberation movement also called feminist movement, social movement that seeks equal rights for women, giving them equal status with men and freedom to decide their own carriers and life partners."<sup>i</sup> So Feminism is such a doctrine which declares the equality of the sexes and advocates equal social, political, and economic rights for women. Feminism has a long period of struggle which has divided into three waves. In all these periods feminist thought has given numerous concepts to destroy the discrimination of sex. The first wave of movement was aimed at challenging the lack of rights for women in the public sphere. The right to vote, own property and obtain an education were vital demands in the first movement. "Second Wave Feminism refers to the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s, when protest again centred around women's inequality, although this time not only in terms of women's lack of equal political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality and work."<sup>ii</sup> Apart from this, the third wave has also a pivotal role in making a better environment for women. It is also known as post-feminism. This wave has discussed gender and sex; sex is concerned with male and female (body difference); gender difference is created by society, culture and so on. It can be said that these waves are mixed, they are not different.

"All histories of feminism properly begin with the appearance of Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792."<sup>iii</sup> She has fought for women's education, equality between husband-wife etc. She whispered that marriage is like legal prostitution. Even she claimed that a woman cannot be perfect till that time when she has no freedom from patriarchal society and the dominance of males. As such famous male feminist thinker John Stuart Mill wrote the book 'The Subjection of women' in 1869, through this he has written about women's dominating life inside the house and workplaces. He whispered that marriage is the main consequence of the slavery of women. It is famous with the title of 'Women's Bible.' Virginia Woolf gave unique thought in her writing 'A Room of One's Own' 1929, she said women

should be in their own room, and with that she can write better.<sup>iv</sup> Simone De Beauvoir has given a new concept to feminism through her book 'The Second Sex', which has published in 1952 in English. Simone is the first feminist thinker who has tried to understand women's lives from the perspective of culture. She said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society, it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine."<sup>v</sup> Owing to male dominance and a patriarchal society, women are represented as weak sex and as things to satisfy men's desires. Culture has defined females as weak sex. As such Simone said, "The child is persuaded that more is demanded of boys because of their superiority; the pride of his virility is breathed into him in order to encourage him in this difficult path; this abstract notion takes on a concrete form for him: it is embodied in the penis; he does not experience pride spontaneously in his little indolent sex organ; but he feels it through the attitude of those around him."<sup>vi</sup> Simone said a women's body is not enough to define her, this reality should be considered through actions and within a society also. Thus Simone coined the word gender, which became pivotal in the feminist movement. According to Vijayanti Arun Belsore, "The gender perspective is a major step and turning point in the development of the feminist movement. It helped to establish that the ground of inequality between men and women is not a biological difference. But diversity is not the ground of inequality because equality does not mean uniformity."<sup>vii</sup> Betty Friedan, has written different thoughts from her contemporary thinkers in her book 'The Feminine Mystique' in 1965. She outlined the 'disease with no name', these diseases are unhappiness and loss, a product of seclusion in the home and a life centered on children and husbands. In reality, these dilemmas have not been heard. Such works have made woman as baby woman and she entirely depend on man.

After these thoughts, feminist thinkers tried to elaborate the women's writings, as before this, once Virginia Woolf has stated about women's writings. But it was entirely established by poststructuralist feminist thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. These thinkers have adapted a new thought of philosophy and language to understand women's lives. Luce Irigaray has whispered about women's condition, "Woman is traditionally a use value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their work and of their need/desire by subjects: workers, merchants, and consumers. Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce."<sup>viii</sup> In such conditions, these feminist thinkers have tried to say that women should be represent themselves, women should be writing, even women should be write with freedom. Irigaray has defined mystical beauty of women's body; she said if women's will be writing than their writings will be mystical, full of feelings and egoless.

She said, "Woman speak is produced from woman's libido. This is fundamentally different from men's and so too, therefore, is their language. Where female sexuality is unfixed and decentred, since a woman has sex organs just about everywhere, male sexuality is fixed and centred on the penis. His language is rational, linear, and comprehensible; hers is rational, non-linear and incomprehensible to men. Unlike women speak, however, *écriture féminine* is a feminine discourse, not a female language, and can therefore be written by both men and

women.”<sup>ix</sup> Helene Cixous said women’s libido is enriched with numerous feelings. A woman has to be feeling proud because she has unique traits of love and creation. Women’s thinking is also salient like her traits and body, as such women’s writing is also differ than men’s. She whispered for women, “She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history, first at two levels that cannot be separated.”<sup>x</sup> Through all these thoughts feminism has given a better environment to women for upliftment.

As above discussed, it can be said that the feminist movement tried to reject old faiths and give new interpretations to individuals, but when we are trying to understand these concepts with religion, then religions are given different ways to get freedom. Feminism talked about world-level freedom which is concerned with equality. Sometimes feminist approaches have given the meaning of equality as dependency. According to religions, freedom is entirely related to intellect and inner/personal views. In this paper, while throwing light on the aim of Buddhist faith, *nirvāṇa*, the attainment of *nirvāṇa* by women has been considered. About this, some views have been expressed about the ability of a woman to claim the right to *nirvāṇa* in the observations of Buddha and an attempt has been made to describe the efforts made by great women in this regard as mentioned in the literature of the Buddhist faith.

In the Buddhist philosophy, *nirvāṇa* is the ultimate goal of life. The meaning of *nirvāṇa* is to become free from the suffering. Every individual is surrounded by the suffering. As Mahatma Buddha has stated in the first noble truth, that the world is full of suffering. In second noble truth, he said sufferings are caused if we do not apply the right vision. It is quite obvious that we invite suffering. The chain of suffering can be ceased if we eliminate ignorance by practising the right acts. This noble path is the right path as the aim of our life. It leads us towards *nirvāṇa*.

In the teaching of Mahatma Buddha, there is no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and gender whether he or she can get *nirvāṇa* if he or she can practice the right path in his or her life. In his philosophy, Mahatma Buddha has shown the path of life to all human beings irrespective of caste, gender, region and religion. *Moksha* (Sanskrit term), *Kaivalya*, *Mukti* are the synonyms of *nirvāṇa*. In every religion, the ultimate end of life always goes to freedom from the bondage of the sufferings. Mahatma Buddha was sure of this, whether he was a man or is enlightened woman, could eliminate the bondage.

The main object of the Buddhist faith, *nirvāṇa*, has been described as a conjunct of two words – ‘*Ni*’ and ‘*Vana*’. ‘*Ni*’ means ‘No’ and ‘*Vana*’ means suffering, craving, etc. In this way, *nirvāṇa* means freedom from all desires. According to some scholars, the meaning of the word *nirvāṇa* is ‘to be extinguished or calmed down’. The meaning of ‘Being calmed down’ or getting extinguished is the calming down of suffering, evil, craving, ego, etc. By overcoming all these evils, a person reaches a state (of mind) where there is no distinction between sorrow and joy, right and wrong, good and bad. As a matter of fact, *nirvāṇa* is the path of freedom and purity, whereby one gets free of the cycles of births and deaths.

This attainment is that of the greatest bliss, greatest truth, greatest philosophy and true experience. In *Dhamapada*, true experience (*nirvāṇa*) has been praised as *Amritpada* (Immortal state).<sup>xi</sup> There is no greater happiness than the bliss, bloom, and peace which is experienced in

this state. According to *Dhamapada*, there is no greater fire than attachment, no evil greater than jealousy and no misery greater than that of five skandhas (form, pain, name, proclivities and knowledge) and there is no greater happiness than peace.<sup>xii</sup>

To bring home the significance of *nirvāṇa*, Mahatma Buddha has exhorted about the real nature of misery, common miseries and the way to avoid misery. The basis of man's miseries is ignorance and proclivities (deeds of the past and present), by which desire is caused in the mind. Becoming aware of these miseries, it has been exhorted to tread the path of *nirvāṇa* – modesty, meditation, prajya (eight-fold dharma) to rise above the miserable state. This is the inner experience and feeling of man. In the Buddhist faith, a person who has attained this stage is called an 'Arhāntā'. In this stage, after controlling the mind, one passes through *Sotāpatti* (listener), *Sakadāgāmi* (devotion), *Anāgāmi* (no return) stages and attains *Arhāntā*. According to *Dhamapada*, one can attain *nirvāṇa* not by outer forms, but by inner discipline and control.<sup>xiii</sup> For every human being, whether a man or a woman, the difference between his or her outer distinctness and inner power cannot be perceived. Therefore, if a human being, (man or woman) desires to attain *nirvāṇa*, he or she can attain this stage without any discrimination because it depends on inner spiritual development. One's outer deeds and ways can be checked but it is impossible to check the inner development. This spiritual development can be called a secret experience. This experience can be had by a person at any place and at any time. According to Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "A Growing number of women, and also some men, feel a need to identify enlightenment in feminine mode. I reject the notion, however, that enlightenment can be categorized or identified with gender at all. To set up a male/female dualism concerning the ultimate human experience seems superficial and limiting. It is also logically untenable. Enlightenment is awareness and not a form at all. It is consciousness free of delusions and free of unknowing. How can such awareness be male or female?"<sup>xiv</sup>

According to Buddhism, women are equal to men as regards attaining knowledge. Mahatma Buddha has said that any person (man or woman) who has the wheel of *dharma*, *Smriti* in the form of a sheet, *dharma* as the charioteer, and the vehicle of thorough vision, whether he is a man or a woman, he/she can reach *nirvāṇa* riding this chariot.<sup>xv</sup> That is to say, the way of *nirvāṇa* is the one in which there is no gender distinction between man and woman. Only firm determination is required. Rather he treated a woman equally rightful to attain *Arhāntāpada*. In Mahatma Buddha's view, every person has the capability to spiritual attainment.<sup>xvi</sup> For this attainment, neither age, nor time, nor sex, nor social standing has any importance. The followers of Mahatma Buddha had risen above the consideration of cast or creed, and the distinction of high and low and were adherents of their faith single-mindedly. Some good illustrations of this are, *bhikhu* Upali a barber, Khajutra was a maid, a snake charmer, who had spent his time roaming about in the lanes and Sunita was a sweeper, etc.

In the Buddhist faith, men and women were enlightened and had the right to enlighten others. It is for this reason that for the propagation of the Buddhist faith there is the mention of women's association. Women treaded the path of truth and attained the position of Great Preachers. These women are known as *bhikkhunis* (nuns) or *upasikas* (followers). A *bhikkhuni* renounced worldly comforts for living in the *sangha* and attains the object of real life through meditation. An 'upasika', who is living in family as well as believing in three *ratnas* (gems) (Buddha, *dharma* and *sangha*) to become the follower of Buddha's faith.

The first aspect is with regard to *bhikhuni*, who is living in the *sangha* to attain *nirvāṇa*. Mahatma Buddha described the virtues and vices of a *bhikhuni* and by imbibing which virtues can she attain *nirvāṇa* and doing which vices she goes to hell.<sup>xvii</sup> By imbibing true virtues and following the path of truth, she can achieve the goal of her faith. Talking to Visakha, Mahatma Buddha expresses the view that a virtuous woman or man who adopting the path of truth and following the eight fold dharma, they can attain heaven<sup>xviii</sup> and in the second part of *Angutara Nikaya*, Mahatma Buddha says that by imbibing good virtues, *bhikhu-bhikhuni* can gain in two ways : one, the attainment of *Arhāntā* in this life and secondly, at the end of this life span, the status of not coming back (*Anāgāmi*).<sup>xix</sup> It comes to the fore out of this discussion, that the *bhikhunis* can attain *nirvāṇa*. This view is confirmed by '*Therigatha*'. In this scripture the *bhikhunis* have explained their experiences as to how their miseries were removed and they were able to enjoy the bliss of *nirvāṇa*.

It is generally believed about the women joining the *sangha* that, they fed up with their miserable life and joined the *sangha*. Just as Mahaprajapati Gautami, after the death of her husband and in the same way other women on the death of their children, parents and the grief over the passing away of their husband joined the *sangha*. But on the other hand, there were some other women also, who, duly shouldering the household of responsibilities, considering themselves equal to men and came out of the stranglehold of the social customs and rituals to make free themselves. Thirdly, there were some women, who were not for fear of miseries, but because of their inner quest. They got enrolled themselves in the *sangha* so that through *nirvāṇa* they could get rid of the cycles of births and deaths. "Sumedha, she inspite of the pleading and requests of her parents turned her back on the wedding-bells and retired from the world. Sumana craved to forsake the world but had to wait till the death of her grandmother(Ayyaka). Annatara their had a natural aptitude for the celibate life, from her very childhood. She took the permission of her husband and joined the Order. Mutta and Punna dawned yellow-robos as soon as they were twenty years old."<sup>xx</sup> These women joined the *sangha* to attain the wealth of enlightenment because of the opportunity provided by Mahatma Buddha, fulfilling their desires and spent a blissful life.

The other aspect is about those women who became *upasikas* (following the faith living in family). Mahatma Buddha says that a person who living in the family and following the principles of five precepts (*panchsheel*) that can attain *nirvāṇa*.<sup>xxi</sup> In the same way in a *Jataka Katha*, according to Mahatma Buddha, which *upasiks* or *upasikas* (male or female follower of the faith) remain under the shelter of three ratnas (gems) (Buddha, *dhama* and *sangha*), they does not go to hell and can get rid of all the miseries here itself.<sup>xxii</sup> Even Mahatma Buddha never hesitated to give exhortation to the women living in family. His main exhortation to the *bhikhus* and *bhikhunis* living in the *sangha* was to know the truth and inspire others to know the truth, so that those leading a family life, they can make their life easier. During Buddha's life time, any woman could approach him at any time. The importance given to a *bhikhuni* in the Buddhist faith was the same as that given to an *upasika*. The *upasikas* living in family played a very important role in the propagation or development of the Buddhist faith. Therefore, it would not be wrong in any way to mention Visakha's name.

Treading the path of an *upasika*, many women were living in the family and led a disciplined life to know the Truth. According to Mahatma Buddha, along with *bhikhunis*, more than five

hundred *upasikas* would attain *nirvāṇa* in this world and would not come back from the other world. The mention of some of such *upasikas* is found in the Buddhist literature. *upasika* Nanda Mata<sup>xxiii</sup> had controlled her mind and got to know the reality of misery, and led the life of truth through her remembrance. At the time of the demise of her husband and son she had not felt any grief and she looked at every happening in silence as if she had ceased to have any attachment. As such Sonadina Nalanda, “She was a female devotee who lived at Nalanda and served the bhikkhus with the four requisites. She observed the rules of moral conduct and *uposatha* with perfection. She meditated over the four noble truth and gained *Sotāpatti*.”<sup>xxiv</sup> In the same way, was Samana daughter of Anathpindak. Daily 2000 *bhikkhus* came to her father’s house to take their meals and serving them was her greatest joy. At the time of death of Samana, she was dedicated her father as brother. “Buddha explained that, as she was a *sakadāgāmi* and he was a *sotāpāṇna* her addressing him as brother was quite in order. In the religious world she obtained higher stage than him. So she was senior to her father from the religious side.”<sup>xxv</sup> Another such *upasika* was Sujata, who attained the stage of *Arhānt* while living at home. Mahatma Buddha favoured the idea that man and woman, while living at home, through the observance of five precepts (*panchsheel*), could attain the highest goal (*nirvāṇa*). According to the Buddhist faith, *nirvāṇa* (complete spiritual liberation) is the ultimate truth and words are unable to describe this highest truth. This mystical stage of truth/experience/peace can be described by man only through examples. The experiences of women have been compiled in the scripture called ‘*Therigatha*’. One of these spiritual women, *bhikhuni* Utpalvarna, had said, ‘the darkness of my worldly desires and ignorance has been fully destroyed.’ According to Jainta, ‘the cycle of my births and deaths has ended.’ *Bhikhuni* Vimal got rid of all the evils, attained peace and *nirvāṇa*. *Bhikhuni* Sundrinanda said that she became aware of the truth of the body, observed discipline and attained *nirvāṇa*. According to *bhikhuni* Mahaprajapati Gautami, she got enlightened about the real form of misery and with the practice of eight-fold path (*ashtanga*), her desires came to an end. She was fully confident that with the practice of Dharma, she had got rid of the cycle of births and deaths. Experiences of seventy-three women, who had attained *nirvāṇa*, have been included in ‘*Therigatha*’.

Along with the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, the time of attaining *nirvāṇa* and the place have also been mentioned in the ‘*Therigatha*’, just as Patachara gives the spectacle of moving the wick of the lamp with a needle she reached the state of *nirvāṇa*. In the same way Anupama following the teachings of *dharma*, sitting on her seat, she attained the third boon (*Anāgāmi*). The most important aspect in the Buddhist faith in the context of women is that Mahatma Buddha himself became aware of the way to *nirvāṇa* because of a woman. When Mahatma Buddha had been absorbed in meditation without partaking of anything in order to attain enlightenment, a dancing woman, who happened to pass by, uttered these words, ‘Don’t loosen the chords of the sitar so much that there is no tune, nor tighten so much to reach the breaking point’. An understanding dawned on him that leading a disciplined life, ‘truth can be found.’ In *Anguttara Nikaya*, Mahatma Buddha had said to Papimar, ‘I shall not attain *Mahaparinirvāṇa* till my *bhikkhus*, *bhikhunis*, *upasiks*, *upasikas* do not get enlightened and become worthy of attaining *nirvāṇa*, living the life of *dharma*, and practicing *dharma*.<sup>xxvi</sup>

As a conclusion, feminism, as above discussion; it is a movement for women rights. Feminism particularly talks about women’s freedom. It can be said that freedom is concerned with

intellect and inner/personal views. If we talk about Mahatma Buddha, he was given such rights to women in sixth century. Actually, feeling of such freedom is very strong that can be making independent and free from all slavery. Important is that, this freedom is not express any gender-based identity; even this concept is beyond of difference of man and woman. Apart from this, modern feminist thinkers have highlighted thoughts on women's body as well as greatness of women's writings. Luce Irigaray whispered, "Women need to be able to represent themselves to themselves (but in way quite different from men) in order to constitute themselves as truly social beings who can form positive relationships with each other."<sup>xxvii</sup> As such Luce Irigaray has given priority to women's body and her feelings related with delivery of child and feeding; she said women should be write her mystical experience of baby delivering. Another feminist writer Helene Cixous said, "I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement."<sup>xxviii</sup> If women will be writing by themselves, they can be make identity in this patriarchal society. Moreover, it can be say that which rights have got by women's in 19<sup>th</sup> century that all rights Mahatma Buddha had already given to women in 6<sup>th</sup> century. It can be said in essence that in the Buddhist faith, women can attain *nirvāṇa* like men. For the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, sex, caste and time have no significance. For its attainment, one has to control one's mind. Regarding women as the glory of *dharma*, Buddha considered them capable of getting spiritual enlightenment, attaining *nirvāṇa* and preaching the gospel of the faith. The women too, making good use of the opportunity given by him, played an important role in propagating the Buddhist faith and spreading it far and wide.

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