

WOMEN, SOCIALISM AND LIBERATION

I do not call myself a feminist. I do not want to be put in a box and labelled - I detest labels. For me the term 'feminism' assumes a separation, a class apart, that isolates me from the other half of the human race. *"We allow our ignorance to prevail upon us and make us think we can survive alone, alone in patches, alone in groups, alone in races, even alone in genders."*¹ Maya Angelou's words are so true. It is both arrogance and ignorance that makes us feel that we are superior and we use cast, class, ethnic origins, gender and the colour of our skin to set us apart.

If I have to be categorised - I would like to call myself a humanist, one who respects the rights of all and believes in the fundamental right of each and every person to determine the course of their lives.

I was brought up to feel neither superior nor inferior to any one else. I had the will, the aptitude and the environment to be whatever I wanted. The will and the aptitude were in large part due to my parents and the influence of Dr. Lohia who was a constant guest in our home. As for the environment, I was lucky to be born in a free India that was surging with a nationalist vitality, a new found pride and political activism that after independence was channelled into the rebuilding of a nation. I was born in a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular Democratic Republic and that was a boon - but more of that later.

I was discouraged from pitying those less fortunate - compassion, yes; empowering them to strive for a better quality of life, most certainly; emancipating them from the shackles of what Dr. Lohia called *"the peculiar bend their spirit has received.... (that) they so cling to life that they prefer to live it on the lowest levels of misery rather than risk it in some great effort"*² to strive for a better existence - became my vocation. For *"pity breeds vengefulness and cruelty"*³ Pity breeds stigma and stigma breeds discrimination. Pity breeds hate.

Along with several other groups, women fall squarely into this category of *"the saddest on earth"*⁴. The majority of my gender would rather suffer the torment of abusive husbands than break free and live in peace. They use the perennial argument that *'at least there is a man in the household and this is a blessing'* - even if that blessing beats

¹ Maya Angelou born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928, is an American auto-biographer and poet who has been called "America's most visible black female auto-biographer" by scholar Joanne M. Braxton.

² Lohia, *The Cast System, Second Edition 1976*, page 1, *The Two Segregations of Cast and Sex*, 1953 January.

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844-1900.

⁴ Lohia, *The Cast System, Second Edition 1976*, page 1, *The Two Segregations of Cast and Sex*, 1953 January.

you black and blue - to justify their inaction and continue to wallow in their misery.

I am no Sati Savatri. I will not bow down to arrogance and abuse. I fight all forms of discrimination and will never allow an injustice to go unaddressed. My husband and I share household responsibilities and chores and I feel no guilt when he (rarely) decides to cook me a meal. Yet I do not suppress my instincts to make our house a home, to pamper my husband and family when they need it, to cook (something I enjoy and find relaxing) and garden. In fact over the years I have tried to instill these qualities in the men in my family and my colleagues.

On the other hand, I am also not one of those feminists that burn bras and shouts louder than men to prove that the female gender is superior. I am neither the kind to try to beat men at their own game - to be a better CEO or Military Commander, a better capitalist or a boxer is not my ambition. I value my feminity and want to protect it from erosion by overzealous feminists. When Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency to perpetuate herself in power, and when she was called the 'only man in the cabinet'; I was ashamed that she and I belonged to the same gender. What I would like to do is infuse my male counterparts with some feminine attributes. We as women should not try to beat the men at their game, but set new rules for the game that are based on humanity and justice for all.

The feminine qualities of procreation, nurturing and the preservation of life are essential for humankind to continue to coexist on this planet and more importantly, for this planet to keep on nurturing life.

We are supposedly the only species blessed with **sentience**⁵, the ability to feel or perceive subjectively, and possessing a 'personhood' - the essential quality that separates humankind from machines or animals.

Sex without love, without the emotional and spiritual bond, is no different from the act of urinating or defecating. You do it when the urge comes over you and it is almost an action of reflex. The woman has more need of the spiritual and emotional bonds to indulge in sex than men, but unfortunately, in today's world, the new 'feminist' feels that she should discard these instincts for the bare, crude and vulgar display of sexuality that has until now been primarily the male domain.

⁵ In eastern philosophy, sentience is a metaphysical quality of all things that requires our respect and care. In science fiction, sentience is "personhood": the essential quality that separates humankind from machines or animals. Sentience is used in the study of consciousness to describe the ability to have sensations or experiences, known to some Western academic philosophers as "qualia". As accessed on 18th Feb. 2010: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentience>

The biological role of sex is procreation, but the spiritual and emotional capacities of the human race takes sex to a higher plane. The free giving of ones self to ones partner/lover; the knowing of each crevice, mole and defect in the other as if it were ones own; when the ends of ones body are smudged and infused into the other until you are one – that union should be our goal.. The ultimate **Ardanareshwar**⁶ when Shiva (the creator of the universes) merged himself with Parvati (the sustaining energy) in an eternal, inseparable bond. The two figures fused as one symbolising the union of ‘Purush’ (power) and ‘Prakriti’ (nature/creation), of masculine and feminine energies. Such a coming together would celebrate sex and permeate humankind, both male and female with the feminine values that we are so desperately in need off to day and this will keep in check the masculine qualities of aggression, competition and ego. *“Instead of getting hard ourselves and trying to compete, women should try and give their best qualities to men - bring them softness, teach them how to cry.”*⁷

The way women flaunt their sexuality in the west (and we in India are now aping them) is nauseating. It is used as a ticket to furthering careers, satisfying base sexual urges and promoting consumer products. A naked women or man that is unaware of their nakedness is far more spiritually beautiful and erotic, than one that flaunts parts of their body with deliberately plunging necklines and low waisted pants – this borders on public pornography.

The relationship between man and woman, between two lovers, is the most precious and the most sublime. It gives meaning to life and enables one to transcend it – defeats even death. It enriches and invigorates and adds beauty to the world. We must respect this and not allow any ism, be it feminism or Marxism, to destroy this. Above all we must *“remember not to cause hurt or pain or be course, for the relationship between man and woman is of a delicate texture”*⁸

But do not think I am a prude; that I am arguing for one single faithful partner in life. Exploration is important and necessary, but should be undertaken with utmost caution and reverence. As Dr. said *“the issue of what is virtue and what is sin can no longer be shirked. I believe that spirituality is absolute but morality is relative, and each age and even individual must discover a specific morality”*⁹. Our youth need to interact more and in a non-judgemental environment. I shrink every time I see the segregation of men and women at weddings and even

⁶ The ‘Ardhanareshwar’ avatar of Shiva is an epitome of duality. According to Indian Mythology, Shiva merged with Parvati and the two figures fused as one known as ‘Ardhanareshwar’ or ‘half-man-half woman’. The ‘Ardhanareshwar’ figure is believed to confer family harmony, conjugal love and unison.

⁷ [Joan Baez](#) born 1941, American Singer and Song Writer

⁸ [Lohia](#), *The Cast System, Second Edition 1976*, page 9, The Two Segregations of Cast and Sex, 1953 January.

⁹ [Lohia](#), *The Cast System, Second Edition 1976*, page 6, The Two Segregations of Cast and Sex, 1953 January.

political functions in Kerala (a matriarchal society) where even husband and wife do not see fit to sit side by side. Are we so afraid that our primeval urges cannot be controlled or that if we sit together we will somehow taint the other? How can our children grow up to be normal in such an environment? How can our daughters know the difference between real love and sexual attraction; how can our sons distinguish between rape and the act of love? How can our children have normal relationships with the opposite sex and search for their partner? If even the most innocent and limited contact between the sexes is wrought with social stigma where is the room for experimentation and the possibility of mistakes, as there can be no perfection without mistakes. *"Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes."*¹⁰

Dr. never treated me as a child or a girl. He never sat me on his knee or acted in a manner that was condescending or patronising. He always listened to what I had to say and answered with utmost seriousness. When I wanted to pierce my ears, I remember Dr. Lohia explaining to me that these were symbols of slavery. I went ahead and did it anyway - then at the age of 10 perhaps it was vanity that drove me - but now at 50 I still wear my ear and nose rings and toe rings, not only for adornment - but as a reminder of the many who are still slaves.

When I was young, my parents treated my brother and me the same, but as I grew older I was counselled not to stay out late or walk after dark alone while my brother was allowed these privileges. I fought bitterly at the time, but now in hindsight realise that my parents were responding to the hazards of the time and not really discriminating against me. There were practical reasons for the discrimination. My anger therefore should have been against the society we live in, the arrogance and cruel behaviour of the male gender.

However, such 'practical' reasoning that my parents indulged in, is a dangerous trend. If this logic is taken further, girls will be locked up or put in *purda* to protect them from violent men! It should really be the other way around - don't we lock up rabid dogs to protect ourselves, instead of locking our doors?

But what has Socialism to do with all this? For us women, the concept of democratic socialism are essential core values. Both India and the United States are democracies - but what a world of difference there is between the two! There the word Socialist is a dirty word riddled with Communist connotations and shades of authoritarianism. And when

¹⁰ [Mahatma Gandhi](#), Indian political and spiritual leader (1869 - 1948)

Mrs. Gandhi included the word Socialist in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution; it was for reasons of camouflaging 'centralised control' under the guise of democracy.

But in India the Socialist movement has a unique history and individual meaning. The Socialism that Lohia preached and lived, was a way of life, a set of constantly evolving principles based on justice and equity for all irrespective of caste, class, creed, gender or age; but the most important and distinguishing factor of this 'brand' of Socialism, was the right to self determination through political mechanisms of both direct and indirect participation - the right to voice dissent and challenge injustice and discrimination of all kinds. For us women, all those who are marginalised, the groups that live on the fringes of our societies and especially children - these concepts make all the difference to our existence as they determine the way democracy is practiced. We, the women of India need to resurrect the true meaning of Democratic Socialism and infuse it with our unique feminine qualities.

I am what I am for many reasons, but also because I was born in free India and have lived through a magical time in India's history. I have led workers movements and fought for the rights of children, women and prisoners of conscience. I continue to be vigilant and oppose any attack on our democracy and will struggle to achieve decentralisation of power and resources that enable every man, woman and child to participate in governance and determine their lives. I say this because this is our most precious gift and it is now being threatened by fascist (corporate globalisation) forces and the *Mutaliks* of the world. It is this 'gift' of democracy that enables dissent and free speech and allows us to be free. As women, we must protect this 'gift' given to us by the founders of our nation, as, just imagine how more arduous it would be if we were to live in a country governed by Hindu fundamentalists or Neo-Liberal Capitalists. Imagine the plight of us women!

My mother wrote a play just before she died called Sita. In this play, Ravanna is the hero, not Rama. My mother felt that Ravanna was the superior human being as he was capable of love. He was willing to risk his kingdom for Sita, whereas Rama sacrificed Sita for his kingdom. *"Religion, politics, business and publicity are all conspiring to preserve the slime that goes by the name of culture. This conspiracy of the status-quo is terrific in its power to spell infamy and death."*¹¹

The answer is that we as women must learn to be honest and brave even if we are to suffer the *"infamy of our honesty"*¹². This is the price we have *"to pay for clearing away the slime so that the waters may*

¹¹ Lohia, *The Cast System, Second Edition 1976*, page 9, The Two Segregations of Cast and Sex, 1953 January.

¹² Lohia, *The Cast System, Second Edition 1976*, page 9, The Two Segregations of Cast and Sex, 1953 January.

flow freely again¹³". But we must do this through mutual love, and respect and with a generous heart - things that we are forgetting how to do. This is the role of a woman - the all inclusive human being.

Nandana Reddy *is a political and social activist working on issues of democratic decentralisation, human rights, civil liberties and children's right to self determination. She was born into a socialist family and was closely associated with Dr. Lohia who was a frequent guest in their house.*

¹³ **Lohia**, *The Cast System, Second Edition 1976*, page 9, The Two Segregations of Cast and Sex, 1953 January.