

Book Review

Beard M. 2017. *Women and Power: A Manifesto*. ISBN 978-1631494758
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‘*Women and Power: A Manifesto*’ written by Dame Winifred Mary Beard is the best seller work that discusses the dual essays on the transformation of women in terms of power from classical to modern era. The work begins with a preface that described her mothers’ generation, who was born even before women have the right to vote. The prescribed book depicts the transformative phase of women using illustrations and narrations from classical texts. The first part of the book ‘*The public voice of women*’ begins with the historical drama by Homer, namely *Odyssey* which marked the beginning of western literature that through its character Penelope that speech as a business of men and household for women (Beard, 2017). The protagonist grows up with the conviction that female species are meant to be silenced and their voice should not be heard in public. It is the written evidence in *Odyssey* that showed the mindset of the society that men are entitled to take control of public conversation where women need to be silent. That is ‘*speech*’ is men’s ‘*business*’ and women does not *belong* in there.

A critical expression on the western culture that did not considered women seriously and often suppressed their opinion through ages and continue to use power on them can be seen in this work. Here the author connects this with the contemporary societal *treatment* towards women, by mentioning cartoonist Riana Duncan’s representation of the sexist atmosphere of the committee or the boardroom. The opinion of woman is often ignored during meetings as depicted by the cartoonist and this shows that even though there has been decadal growth for society, the gendered experience of women continues to be same. Even if women bring in a substantial suggestion to the table, it is not expected from them to accomplish that task, rather, it is assumed that men in the office would be routinely able to do that. Mary describes another instance in the ancient Roman empire, in a court trial, a women defended herself and was named *androgyné* as she had a man’s nature behind the appearance of a woman. Here by the phrase man’s nature, it is predestined that, men are naturally expected to be authoritative, powerful, warrior, and therefore the women who exhibited the same traits are mocked as being men and *speech* was expected to be the business of men. In the early traditions of the classic world also, there were only two situations when women were portrayed as loud, first, as victims and second, for prayer. Women are allowed to speak and defend for themselves and not for men and the society as it was considered inappropriate when women had to defend men.

In the early phase of literary works, women were ‘*muted*’ in characters that reflected the then society’s social system with lack of voting rights, lack of economic independence. A woman who speaks in public was not even considered as a woman itself, hence public speaking was shut at woman for a long time. As cited by the author, there are many instances in the book which portrayed the situations where women got eliminated intentionally from the public discourse that is, the prejudices,

assumptions and system itself was biased towards them. Women coming into the forefront of decision-making was considered an encroachment into the male dominated territory which can be seen in present society too. There were 'ways' of showcasing what women are not meant to hold – especially, power. The only difference across different cultures was that they appear in different forms, but, inflict the impact in more or less same manner- that is, sidelining or devaluing the role of women in leadership. Mary further cited the example of Margeret Thatcher who even took a voice training to lower her voice, to add the tone of authority which was lacked in her voice as told by her advisers (pg.30). This reflected many layers of patriarchal notions that highlighted the necessity to try to be '*like*' men to face the public and left out being an outsider. At this point, the significance of identifying dominant male discourse in society and rectifying the '*faults and fractures*' in the existing systemic structure was stressed by the author.

In the second part of the book '*women in power*', the author questions the pre-conceived notions of misogyny and cultural underpinnings that aimed at women and excluded them in politics and crucial workplace roles. The basic notion of the term '*powerful*' is still vested with men or associated with men. Here, the author decoded the cultural as well as political aspects of women's status in society. Even though it is *still* a minority, there is *presence* of women across the world in multiple roles in positions, we need more women in positions of power for bringing substantial change in political and economic sphere. Women are still considered as an outsider in terms of power and it is inaccessible.

In the classical works, there are cultural symbols of opposition to women's power. There are classical literary examples of normalising gendered violence against women in the book that excluded them from the power which was culturally rooted. This is being repeated in the contemporary era also, if we closely observe. There are attempts to fit and put women in a male template and in turn there are counter fights by women to not fit in those prescribed gaze. Author proposes a striking statement that- *if women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, then power must be redefined and not women!* (Beard, 2017). Mary criticises the idea of bringing women in parliament just with the so-called societal intention to implement policies and schemes for '*women's interests*' alone which is again unfair. Here the author concludes by suggesting that whether it is in economy, social justice, and technology, women's expertise must be taken into consideration for social change - internally and externally (Beard, 2017). The best example given in the book for this was the recent important political movement of our times '*Black Lives Matter*' movements started by three women. It had the power to bring a change in society, but they did not receive the deserved recognition as mentioned by the author (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi).

In the beginning of the book, the author mentioned how proud her mother was when Margeret Thatcher got elected as a female prime minister. The author also realised that as women climb the hierarchy of power, they had to face many obstacles. Here the reviewer's compares the instance of glass ceiling existing in all organisational setup that works in two ways. In one-way women get opportunity and they enter the major decision-making mechanisms by breaking the hindrances, and in other way, there are power dynamics that acts as a barrier to the growth of women. Mary observes, '*When it comes to silencing women, western culture has had thousands of years of practice*' reflects the long roads of patriarchal lineage, hierarchical arrangements, societal attitudes and invisible barriers reflecting power that totally

affected the life of women (Beard, 2017). The early classical literary works has been mentioned and comprehensively observed to compare them with the current socio-political events in the book. Mary, as a classicist through her lecture series turned print edition '*Women and power: A Manifesto*' has addressed the narratives in classical literatures from early centuries to the recent political-cultural events to bring different experiences of power on women. The dimensions of power being at the centre and the women's lives around it as described by the author, generates critical and insightful perspective among the readers that further allows to delve further into the early literary works mentioning women and their association with power.

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