

WOMAN AS

ARTIST

Rukmini Devi

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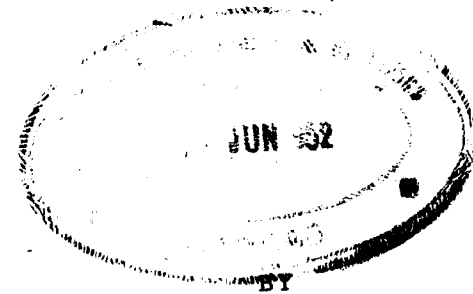
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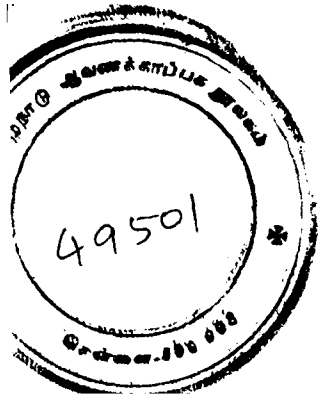
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RUKMINI DEVI



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OSOPHICAL PUBLISHING HOUSE
DYAR, MADRAS 20, INDIA



WOMAN AS ARTIST

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AT a time, when unhappiness and vulgarity have spread everywhere in the world, there seems also to come with great force a new understanding of woman's work in the world, a realization of the wonderful work women can do ; are indeed dedicated to do. For those who are anxious to embody the spirit of womanhood in its purest form, and to work in the world especially for the helping of women, there are certain qualities that stand out as indispensable, qualities which are common to both sexes, yet which, in their compassion and radiance, seem to me to be in a special measure feminine.

First and foremost, for an ideal expression of the highest possible conception of womanhood, surely there must be an all-permeating refinement, an exquisite grace and compassion.

These will insure perfect freedom from all taint of vulgarity or of crudeness. I cannot think of any quality more important in life than the refinement which is grace and tenderness; and real womanhood embodies these in all their perfection. I think that every woman is by nature refined, and that this refinement is always present in some measure no matter how crude and vulgar the external form may sometimes seem to be. No woman can ever forget her inherent motherhood, her power to protect, her power to understand; and perhaps in those women who have least enjoyed the advantages of so-called education, these qualities are most outstanding. They shine exquisitely against the dark background of despair and misery which are so often the lot of women. By refinement I mean, of course, real purity, not just the external conventions which falsely go by the name.)

Innate as this refinement is, the study and practice of such arts as dancing, music, painting, can distinctly help in its development. They can fructify the seed that is already there. And since everyone is an artist in

some measure, especially every woman, one or another of the arts should be perceived to be a natural expression of the soul. It seems to me that without the expression of the arts in life, in the very home itself, there can be no real refinement and of course no real civilization. The arts should form part of the upbringing of every child; for they are as important as, perhaps even more important than, most of the subjects of the ordinary school curriculum. The present unhappiness in the world is, I think, in no small measure due to the fact that the arts have little place in the lives of most people.

But we must be careful that each art is as pure and as beautiful as it can be. There is much in these modern times which is called art, but which I regard as its antithesis, the antithesis of beauty and of refinement. according to my own particular conception of art, its expression, whether in dancing, in music, in painting, or in any other form, will, if it be true art, lift the individual above himself. He will become inspired with its beauty, with its rhythm, with its message and its meaning. Cleverness alone is not art.

There must be beauty. There must be both aspiration and inspiration. Every art should be an expression of the beauty of life, of the grandeur and the grace in life.

Some modern art is, of course, beautiful, but unfortunately much is distinctly ugly, degrading civilization instead of ennobling it. There is a craze at present to give expression to the arts at the cost of beauty of form and line, and of that subtle quality which all true art possesses—the power to evoke an appreciation in which dwells the spirit of reverence. Furthermore, a work of art, no matter in what medium, must be an expression of the nobility of the artist and composer, who in his composition seeks to catch some lofty dream for expression in this outer world. I think that art, among other things, embodies an intimation in some form or other of the larger life; and because of this, I feel that real art is self-evident as to its beauty and appeal.

In these modern days, with art as it is so often expressed, there have to be elaborate explanations as to why any particular expression is really art. Where there is need of

elaborate explanation there is not, in my opinion, true art. The beautiful things in nature are self-evident as to their beauty. One cannot help admiring the stars, the flowers and the trees. There is no need for anyone to try to explain why they should be appreciated, and in what ways they are beautiful. That which is beautiful needs no explanation and no defence, even though the instructed individual may help us to perceive subtleties of beauty which may not be entirely evident on the surface. Neither the truly great, nor the works of artistic genius, need defence. Analysis, what one might call vivisection, destroys the flashing vision of the highest, be it in terms of dancing or music, painting or sculpture. All beautiful things bring their own message of beauty, and where there is no message of beauty, there is no art. The truest argument of beauty is the witness of the soul rather than of the mind.

The spirit of womanhood is the spirit of the artist. Such is the power of the artist in woman that she can destroy or elevate. It is well known that civilization owes its greatness or its smallness to the influence of

woman. Her influence in the home, her influence on the man, her influence in her surroundings, is of the greatest importance for the forward march of civilization. If there is war, if there is unhappiness, if there is ugliness in the world, to a great extent it is due to the fact that the highest in womanhood has not yet been released into the world. It is not true to the spirit of the highest in woman to be sensual or crude. Therefore it is, that when one sees a woman who is coarse in nature, it is more terrible than the coarseness in anything else. In India, womanhood in the past had been raised to the highest ideal. Motherhood was worshipped. There is no temple where there is a God without a Goddess. The greatest Deity is conceived as a man and woman, and never as a man alone. As one looks to the Fatherhood of God one also looks to the Motherhood of God.

(The next most important quality in woman is compassion; and woman as artist can express the divine compassion of the true mother. It is not possible for every woman to be an artist in the ordinary sense of the word; to dance, to sing or to paint. But it is

necessary that in her walk, in her speech and in her actions she should be the very embodiment of beauty and grace. The study of beauty and the study of the arts helps in the development of this quality of compassion. To be a true artist one has to aspire to express fine emotions. Without emotion of the highest kind there can be no true art on the physical plane. And if the emotion is stirred through the arts, which it is bound to be, and if that emotion because of the arts is lifted into the highest realms, then are born true understanding and true compassion. Is there a greater artist than the artist who has deep understanding, who can bring happiness to the world? Is there a greater woman than she who mothers her nation, either as mother in the home, or the mother who is a statesman, the mother who is a true educationist, the mother who works for the poor, or the mother who expresses her tenderness to the young including the animal kingdom? I see women in modern life who take up different professions, carrying the personal motherhood which they express in their home to the greater motherhood which

they express to their country, to all the nations of the world. Such compassion that stirs a woman's soul to forget the smallness of life, to become truly great in her understanding, whether she is a physical mother or not, such compassion creates the greatest artist, who is the mother, and such motherhood is the very soul and essence of womanhood.

Looking down the vistas of civilization and noting all the most wonderful forms of art which have given grace and glory to humanity, we perceive that almost all of them are the outcome of the inspiration of woman. I think it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the soul of a woman is behind most of the magnificent creations of artists from time immemorial. She is the supreme inspirer of the arts. She is the very essence and fragrance of life. Supremely can she bring joy and ecstasy into physical and spiritual life, grace into the work of painter or musician or dancer; and more often than not she is the very vision of beauty which the sculptor sees in the potencies of his marble. I am afraid that in these days the priestess office of woman is

more often dishonoured than honoured. Woman is not the artist she should be, and must be if the world is to grow. And in modern ideas of marriage and of sex we perceive woman's failure to rise to the fulfilment of her mission tragically exhibited. Not that man does not share the responsibility, but in these great sacraments the failure of women is more disastrous than the failure of men. It is here that the quality of reverence is so vital. As I have said, sex is one of the greatest sacraments, one of the holiest things of life, and through it can come great inspiration, and great heights of ecstasy, and genius may be reached. It is a mysterious and sacred power which, in the Indian scriptures, as in others, finds beautiful and wonderful expression. It is supremely a matter for reverence. But when it becomes as ordinary a subject of conversation as the weather, or as eating and drinking, or the fashions, then does it become humbled into the dust. Sex and its expression reflect Divinity in its mighty power and unfathomable magic and reminds us of the fact that we ourselves are divine, that in us dwells the power of God. Irreverence and vulgarity

in relation to sex are nothing short of blasphemy and degradation.

Fortunately, among Indian women for the most part, there is a culture and a refinement in these directions which, so far as I have observed, are unequalled anywhere else in spite of the unhappy social conditions that exist in our land; though I am bound to admit that there are disquieting signs of crudities gaining access to Eastern refinements. What can be more horrible than the talk, so prevalent in the world today, of "sex appeal"? What can be more horrible than for women to imagine that their highest value lies in such appeal? As yet this degradation has hardly touched Indian life. May it never do so, for it degrades us to levels lower than that of animals, for animals lead beautiful and natural lives. There is a simple trueness of relationship between the sexes in the animal kingdom, and an exquisite attitude toward the young ones, which does not seem to persist among many members of the human kingdom. If we descend to the level of animals, at least let us emulate their grace and their simplicity. But if we desire to be human beings in a

beautiful way, we should combine the simplicity of the animal with what should be nobility and the splendid reverence of the human.

Of course, the whole problem of womanhood and the restoration of womanhood to its sublime functions depends in no small measure upon right education. Without right education, without beauty and refinement in the home, woman cannot regain that pre-eminence in the world's life which is so necessary to the world's peace, happiness and prosperity. She needs an education which shall inspire men and women to respect one another, to be free and equal, each in his or her own unique way. Education should not merely mean the attainment of degrees or a worldly sophistication. Nor should it merely be to the end of earning a livelihood. Education should give freedom to each individual for the release of the glories of his and her soul, freedom to be wonderful, freedom to be beautiful and true. Real freedom is that which gives courage to pursue and attain these ends, to achieve the highest. Freedom as it is known in the world today is hardly freedom at all. So often it is

but an excuse for licentiousness and irresponsibility, for tyranny and cruelty. It is this wrong conception of freedom and the accompanying wrong education which has trampled womanhood under foot and has brought down that which is highest in woman into the very mire of life.

I hope a day will come soon, when education will give real freedom both to men and to women, so that men may "do and women may be". How soon would India achieve her full freedom, not merely her political freedom, if in Indian womanhood were reborn the ancient spirit of Indian women of the past. I can see an India where there is no dearth of ideals, a day when womanhood cannot be degraded through the ugliness and sensualities that exist. I can see the time when the Arts shall have such a high place and influence that it will never be possible to bring down the most wonderful thing in life to the everyday ugly conceptions; where refinement will help to make every action and every word kind and refined.

The highest art is to transmute what is ugly and make it beautiful. And the greatest

transmuter is woman. Only as women triumph over the frustration of their womanhood, only as women become free, only as women regain their power as artists and inspirers, only as women express all that is truest and most beautiful in womanhood, will men themselves regain their own manhood and nobility, and all the world will emerge from darkness and unhappiness.

THE WOMAN OF THE NEW AGE

The usual idea of woman relates to her activities and functions; little thought is given to her qualities. In the world at large today there is only a slight understanding of the spirit of woman.

We find this understanding, however, in ancient culture and religion. In Christianity there is a wonderful meaning in the idea of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is the pure idea of woman as the Mother. This idea gives rise to reverence. In ancient Greece the religious attitude towards motherhood was strengthened by an added reverence for beauty. Worship is a moulding power, and

it actually helped to shape the beautiful Greek body.

In India the idea of woman has been most basic and inclusive. There the spirit of woman has been recognized for thousands of years as an unseen reality, a power of Divinity, which expresses itself in motherhood, beauty, the home, and in the cooperative home spirit and culture which underlies the entire social order. Indian civilization has been essentially feminine in this sense.

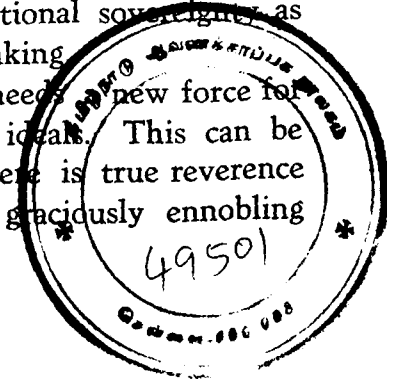
Past cultures, but particularly the Indian, have been permeated by a high feeling for the spirit of woman as a divine influence rising above the material aspect of things. This conception is beautifully illustrated by the Greek myth of the birth of Aphrodite from the sea, and by the phrase, "Star of the Sea", used by Catholic Christians.

This conception is a fundamental theme of the Vedas. One of the characteristic facts of the Upanishads is that they include, and in part grew out of, conversations between a forest sage and a woman.

But the real reason for looking into the great cultures of the past for this idea of

woman is to emphasize the boundless importance which it has for the future. The woman of the New Age must once more become the mother and moulder of statesmen. More than this, she must have the opportunity to make her complete practical and spiritual contribution to society by again taking part in the highest affairs of state. It is worthy of note that within a few months after the freeing of India on August 15, 1947, women were elected to some of the most important political posts. Americans, however, are shocked at the idea of a woman ever becoming President of the United States! Yet there is no real reason why political life should always be a hurly-burly in which only men are expected to take part. As long as this condition lasts, the world will remain divided and wars will continue. The universal conception of the home, where all are united, must replace national sovereignty as the basis of political thinking.

The modern world needs a new force for the revitalizing of its ideals. This can be released only where there is true reverence for life and for the graciously ennobling



qualities with which the spirit of woman can nourish and humanize the entire social order. It is not theory but a law of Nature which the Manu stated when he said that where woman is honoured, there society flourishes.

What the sophisticated world outside India has largely lost and most needs is the spiritualizing atmosphere of beauty and simple dignity which comes from a sensitive appreciation of woman and the home. We are insensitive to this atmosphere or its power because we are so caught up in an intellectual sharpening of the struggle for existence.

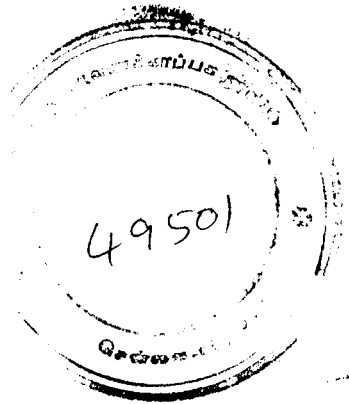
Consider modern advertizing. Hardly an article is offered for sale without being associated in some way with feminine beauty. It is like baiting a trap. The real keynote of commerce is not beauty but exploitation. When the influence of woman is thus commercialized, the rightful and wholesome power of feminine beauty, which is a reflection of divine grace itself, is lost in glamour, sensation and sex appeal. The whole process is a degradation of woman.

Modern civilization is full of problems because of our way of thinking. Our real problem is not life as such, nor things in themselves, but our habit of making problems out of them. Problem-making is our true problem.

The key to the solution of these problems lies in bridging the artificial gaps we have created everywhere between actuality and ideals, thinking and feeling, life and form, man and woman. The bridge itself is a new understanding of the spirit of woman. By crossing over this we shall enter into a new era of civilization—one that is happier, more refined, more complete.

The practical power of strong beautiful motherhood in moulding civilization can best be realized by considering what happens to a child when this influence is lacking. The path from childish innocence to youthful delinquency and adult criminality would no longer be as easy or common as it is now, if the sacred idea and influence of woman were lifted above the present jungle of entanglements born of materialism, exploitation, and false values. The point we can start from

does not have to be invented or merely imagined. It is a fact of Nature that for every normal woman her child is, in a very real sense, the Christ child.



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