

# THIRD EYE EDITION

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## **What do women want?**

21 May 2013 at 22:30

Last week, during a brief lull between the mad rush to push through six pages to print, I aimlessly surfed the net. Phones were ringing all around me and male voices were barking out short, staccato orders. Perhaps out of a subconscious desire flee from the pulsating urgency of the workplace, I types out the name Edward Hopper for a google search. Hopper is one of the most famous American naturalist painters and loneliness is the dominant theme of his art. Born out of the need for being alone, I clicked into one of my favourite Hopper paintings. In 11 am, a young woman sits on a sofa beside the window of a comfortably furnished room. Early morning sunshine is streaming through in golden shafts. The woman's brown hair curtains her face. She is hunched forward, her limbs tensed, as if in waiting. There is a kind of latent unease about her posture, as if the room she inhabits is an unfamiliar hotel room and she is in transit. There is a mysterious quality about her, a vulnerability that makes you warm up to her. Exposed and in a state of undress, she is sunk deep in thought. For a moment you want to toast her as the brave new woman emerging from centuries of patriarchal control, a mistress of her own destiny, living life on the edge, on her own terms, daring to do things her mother had only dreamt of. Yet, the next moment, you cannot but worry for her. She is straddled between two worlds, one dying, one struggling to be born. It is as if she does not know what to do with her freedom and sits irresolute, uncertain, curiously incomplete.

That anonymous woman in Hopper's painting triggered off a whole new chain of thoughts about what women want today. I feel women want to be like men. Women are nowadays not authentically women, but an limitation of man. If men smoke cigarettes, women have to do the same. If they wear pants, the women has to be similarly attired. They have to be in the driver's seat, in the boardroom, in the pub. If men can sow their wild oats, they reason, why can't we? As Osho says, this is not liberation, but a far deeper slavery – far deeper because the first slavery was imposed by men; this second slavery is created by the women themselves. When somebody else imposes a slavery on you, you can rebel against it, but if you impose a slavery on yourself in the name of liberation, there is no possibility of rebellion because it is easier to fight others than oneself.

I remember a few lines from a young poet Charmayne D' Souza who succinctly sums up the dilemma of today's woman. It's hard to feel I'm a woman/ I do none of the things/ a woman does./ But then,/ neither do I think/ I do the things/ a man does./ So, really, perhaps/ what I am/ is peculiar/ only to me,/ a luxury, I decide to be kept only for myself.

As far back as in 1936 Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Congress leader and socialist, wrote that no woman can call herself free who cannot own and control her body and whose sacred function of motherhood can be used as an instrument for enslaving her. Privileged urban women have achieved some measure of liberation. But educated women with vaulting ambition are engaged in a battle between the head and the heart. The heart's yearning for security, nurturing young lives, creating a home, having a man by one's side is at odds against the head aiming for power, economic independence, the freedom to chart out one's own life. And in denying her heart, woman has lost out on her capacity for tenderness and grace. Because she is fighting this duality within her, her relations with men are fraught with acrimony. She seeks only pleasure in a relationship and therefore happiness eludes her,

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because happiness has something to do with struggling and enduring and accomplishing. Men do not know how to handle this new woman. She does not want to bear him children, because they will ruin her figure and stymie her career. She cannot stand his family because she is overly sensitive about her private space. She will not wait for him when he comes home from work because she is busy impressing her boss. She will not say yes to him because she takes it as a sign of submission and weakness. She is not willing to give, but more than willing to receive. She expects her man to be romantic, passionate when at every turn she emasculates him with her aggression. She demands to be loved, to be understood, to be pampered, to be courted with candlelight dinners, diamonds and exotic vacations, with gentle endearments and unwavering faithfulness when she is not ready to even mend his socks or cook him a meal.

Sipping a lime soda at Beatrix, a city restaurant, I glanced at a cartoon under the glass top table. A woman was standing next to a wishing well. She was intoning her wish: "No cleaning, no housework, no cooking." There was a puff of smoke and voila ... in place the woman there stood a man! And that is exactly my point. The new woman is a man. No wonder her boyfriend, her lover, her husband's having such a tough time with her. If she demands to be treated as an equal, if she drinks, smokes and dresses just like him, why is he expected to be gallant and protective of her? If she argues like an equal, why does she use her old arsenal of tears and emotional blackmail?

And because she has chosen to live only for herself, the woman of today is vapidly and nauseatingly narcissistic. She is out there in the market places little back dress, the perfectly matching accessories, streaking her hair, massaging her body, pampering her skin, running on the treadmill for a wash-board abdomen, trying out the latest diet, totally absorbed in external beauty and a slave of passing fads.

Don't you think it's time for her to look inward, to regain her gentleness and femininity, her ability to nurture and make sacrifices? Otherwise, I'm afraid, she will win the battle but, lose the war. She has to get the anger and rebellion out of her system. Some years ago, during a phase of being influenced by Gloria Steinem and Erica Jong, I penned a bitter poem directed at the oppressive male. I would like to share it with you, to sum up what we women have been through and to ponder over the direction we must take.

*Listen to me, I am bruised by memories.*

*The names you call me resound in my ears*

*Houri, strumpet, witch, nymph, geisha, devadas!*

*Born from a rib, banished from Paradise*

*You put my Jesus on the cross*

*I have born and lost a hundred sons*

*I have been burnt at the stake, my husband's pyre*

*Disrobed before courtiers*

*Banished because of a washerman's words*

*Sundered by Zeus, in the guise of a swan*

*Strangled on the strength of Iago's testimony*

*So what if I bit the forbidden fruit,*

*Opened the box, caused a ten years' war, loved Yakut the slave*

*Enticed Lakshmana and tried to poison Krishna?*

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*I have healed multitudes in Crimea, Kolkata  
Argued to save a pound of flesh  
Sacrificed my infant to save a royal line  
Fought in Greece to give my brother a decent burial  
You have put me atop swan, lotus, lion  
Made me trample my consort  
My tongue drips blood, serpents crawl in my hair  
My smile frozen in your canvas, my body trapped in stone  
Remember, I have given you a home  
My arms sheltered your fears, desires  
I have wielded scroll and sceptre, quill and sword  
Why then do you say  
I am the last thing civilized by man?*

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