

IMPACT OF FEMINISM ON INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL

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Abstract: The present paper deals with the attempt to explore the various issues of woman while trying to attain self realization and their possible solution. Today many female writes have explored the questions of existence of woman at various stages and levels. It also throws light on the impact of feminism, its persistent growth and development in relevance to women writers. As it was is only feminist criticism which made possible to the world that there is a tradition of feminine creative writings which has its own existence. Economically it gives a scope to women that they are free from gender concept and on the basis of sex, they are no more inferior to their counterpart male, thus it awakes, social, economic, intellectual and psychological freedom.

The term feminism today has become a global phenomenon thus taking various countries in its swiipe. It has kindled great interest among people all over the world. The Feminist movement has greatly affected change in western as well as Indian society, including women's suffrage; greater access to education; more equitable pay with men; and the right to own property. Different scholars have defined feminism in definitions of feminism has been made by Morris. He writes in Literature and Feminism: An introduction, Thus:

----- Feminism is a political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) the gender difference is foundation of a structural inequality between women and men by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) That the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences.

Key Words: Feminism, women liberation, cultural evils, predicament of women, feminist movement, woman's desire

Feminism as a movement might have originated in the west, in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. It attempts to analyse the reason for the dimension of women's oppression, and to achieve women's liberation. Ever since antiquity, their half of the total population of the world form male oppression. Hence Feminism is neither a fad nor a logical extension of the civil rights movement.

With the deterioration in the status of women India and the subsequent efforts made during the freedom struggle to pave the way for women's equal opportunity to education and equal social status, some issues evoked by the western women were bound to be taken up by their Indian counterpart. Hence to talk about feminism in Indian social and literary context should not be considered a pointless exercise because some issues which were raised by the western feminist critics are largely relevant to our society also in some way.

Unlike feminism in west, Indian feminism has different story to tell. Going back to the history of feminist writing in India, one can perceive that with the collision of European literary and cultural association during the British regime there emerged a new awareness among Indian women folk especially in the class which had its access to English education and influenced by the western culture. Some women specially the city dwellers reacted with their sensitivity to the contemporary social and cultural evils. In this way, the enthusiasm for reform in the prevailing social and cultural conditions has been an essential part of Indian writing in English, as a critic writes, "The Indian novel, we may say, has emerged not simply as a pure literary exercise, but as an artistic response to the socio-political situation existing in the country."¹

This expression is applicable to the works of early women writers. In Indian society the status and predicament of women has been yet another inspirational force for the Indian women novelists. In spite of the fact that women can contribute to social regeneration, she often becomes a victim of social prejudice and male chauvinism. Nevertheless Gandhi's clarion call to participate actively in the freedom movement made Indian women conscious of the much needed liberation and equality of opportunity in social, personal, cultural and political life. Identifying the capability of women to unite with their counterparts in their struggle against ignorance, superstition and backwardness, Indian English novelists in general and women novelists in particular began to treat women as legitimate subjects for their intentional social writings.

The early women novelists tried to convey the stern realities of woman's life through their writings. The most prominent were Krupa Sattianda (1862-1894) Rokey Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922) who wrote sarcastically about the then prevailing system of society. They displayed Indianness through their characters. They attempted to reconstruct Indian womanhood, which has been characterized as ideally warm, gentle and submissive. Shantha Krishnaswamy comments on the general lot of women thus, "She is a creature who as a child is sold off to strangers for a bridal price, or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family, or who as a widow, in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sita-Savitri', as an immortal."²

Rokey Sakhawat Hossain, a feminist, portrays tipsy turvey fantasy world in her novel Sultana's Dream in which men are kept behind 'Purdah' and they take the same status of women and the narrator has a caustic laugh at them.

Besides the sphere of fiction writing, women gave an expression to their thoughts in the realm of poetry also. Toru Duff (1866-1877), the first woman poet in English deals only with the archetype of Indian womanhood like Sita and Savitri. She creates these pictures in English language. On the other hand Sarojini Naidu, who was writing even before the freedom struggle now talked politics but as a poet. In her poetry she did not depict any particular image of women but even then her poetry added a feminine voice to the chorus of freedom struggle and achieved an immortal place for expressing feminine sensibility both in poetry and in politics.

Nevertheless in the post - Independence period, the ideal image of women like the traditional Sita or Savitri was gradually replaced by the realistic one with the introduction of liberal education. It not only brought significant changes in the middle class life style, but also raised a consciousness of freedom in the minds of women. This led to an intense desire for a freedom that was not easy to come by. In this period woman's quest for an identity of her own commenced in the real sense. Realising the injustice heaped on them, women began to raise their voice in protest. Further with the birth of Women's Liberation Movement in early 70s in the west, women realised their marginalization in a high degree. Elite women confined to major cities were initially drawn to bring home to the women in diverse section of society how they were subjected to humiliating treatment. The spark that was triggered off by the freedom movement, now started spreading by the self-aware women of new generation. But there was no over-right revolution, still impetus was given to a woman's desire. The image of the archetypal woman still loomed large on the horizon in spite of the fast growth of women's education.

Feminism in Indian literature, particularly in Indian English writing is a by-product of western feminist movement. Without the significant role played by Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Drabble and many others, this could not have been possible. The Indian woman caught in the flux of tradition and modernity bearing the burden of past and the aspirations of the future is the crux of feminism a, in Indian literature. Man-woman relationships, on the whole evolved through centuries on a set pattern, i.e., man to rule and woman to obey. This old pattern of relationships now stand challenged, this owes to the feminist movement.

Influenced by the greatness of the audience and fascinated by the global claim a handsome number of Indian novelists then rendered their creativity. They announced a new wave of feminism across the world. Their influence on India resulted in a new breed of feminists. Indian writers present this changed perception of women in their works. Women in their works are depicted as veering away from debasement

of self abnegation. The emotional and psychic consequence of the search for self-identity by women characters can be seen in the earliest phase of Indian English writings in writers like R. K. Narayan. He deals with the theme of emancipation of women in his novels like The Dark Room, The Guide and The Painter of Signs. Savitri, Rosie and Daisy, the respective heroines of these novels are women who adopt the western ideals of self-fulfillment and autonomy, daring to be different in a traditionally patriarchal society. Similar strains of feminist thinking can also be noticed in the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa, Jal Nimbkar, Arun Joshi and Tara Au Baig.

As there was a shift in the sensibility of the society accordingly there is a shift in the insight of the writer, hence the image of women is changing. This change is prominent in the works of all these women writers. During recent year a galaxy of Indian English Women writers has begun with the self imposed task of representing themselves in a style away from the stereotyping of women in the fiction of male writers like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and many others. They tend to represent women in more life-like colours without making her a demi-goddess or a docile creature. As G.H. Lewes writes it more precisely, "The Advent of female literature promises women's view of life, women's experience; in other words, a new element, make what distinctions you please in the social world, it still remains true that men and women have different organizations, consequently different experience."³

However, History shows that the Indian society is patriarchal and the whole representation is genderized so much so that women are graded second class citizens by their sex, examples are galore; a Sita or a Draupadi's suffering is exemplary. Women are exposed to murders, rape, torture and a variety of other crimes. In this respect the Indo- English Women writers have themselves been exposed to the stresses and strains to which the average Indian woman is subjected. They show a serious concern for the spiritual and emotional malaise of modern life with the objectives to bring forth a real image of women of our country as A.G. Khan writes : "From a woman writer we want a glimpse of the female psyche to which the male has no access to the agony and trauma of oppressed women....."⁴

A study of post independence Indian Women writings shows that women writers of modern time are seriously engaged in the task of recreating the image of women. They believe in New Humanism and seem to contribute to a new morality. They suppose woman is not to be taken as a "Sex object and glamour girl fed of fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into a passive role that requires no individual identity....."⁵ rather she should be regarded as man's equal and honoured partner. In fact the woman that these novelists present is not a mere imitation of western women but she is an average Indian woman whose roots are in Indian culture and to preserve her identity as a wife, as a mother, as a daughter and as an individual being too. In Indian culture family is the primary unit of an individual's life and one of the basic units to sustain the larger social set up. Hence there is a vital difference between the aspirations and urges of Women in western countries and in India. In our country a woman's main objective is to achieve dignity and regard as a human being in a male dominated society.

All these issues could be brought out and explored to the core only by women novelists rather than their male counterparts. Hence our women novelists are concerned with the treatment of women as normal human beings and therefore a woman must be allowed even their imperfections and should be judged in their totality. They find fault with the social system that labels them as inferior or superior. The modern women writers are fighting against the female norms of life like sexuality, dichotomy between career and claims of family etc. They want their protagonists to design their lives according to their own.

With the emergence of women writers there started a new trend in literature also, though all the works by females are not essentially feminist writing. However writers like Kamla Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy and many others present women as caught in their hard struggle to break through the pattern of sensuality and sexuality and to discover themselves as human beings. In fact their works are the chronicles of the realities of today's woman's life who is standing on the cross roads of tradition and modernity, in a period of transition.

Kamla Markandaya, endowed with amazing talents, has given a series of novels to Commonwealth Fiction. She portrays women from a wide spectrum of society-from rural side as well as from towns and

cities. She emphasizes on the socio-economic realities of Indian Society and their impact on women. She unusually shows the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to.

Another significant writer is Nayantara Sahgal who portrays women mostly from the upper strata and often against a political backdrop. In most of her novels the heroines are aware of the injustice done to them. Sahgal projects a new angle at the concept of virtue in women. However, she is determined to live with self-respect.

Another significant name among the contemporary Indian women novelists is that of Anita Desai whose female characters are more life-like in the sense that they possess emotions, sentiments that are part of universal nature. In fact in her novels the emphasis is placed on the psychological aspects and not on the sociological features of the contemporary society.

Uma Vasudev's women can be called truly liberated. They are not worried about the middle class attitude, views opinions which render them destitute and confine them within the four walls of their homes. Raji Narsimhan also depicted liberated women characters who are able to live individually without any dependence on men.

Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India. Her novels are furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the importation of tradition. She has portrayed her protagonists as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and yearning to be a part of the political and Intellectual movements of the day.

However, all women writer are not feminists, some of them deal with other themes also. There are bold exponents like Kamla Das, who want women to have all the privileges enjoyed by men, even in the matters of extra - marital affairs.

Shashi Deshpandey's representation of things is widely different from that of Desai, Sahgal or Markandaya. Her novels reveal her deep insight into the plight of Indian women, who are smothered and fettered in a male-dominated society. She highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in the male dominated society. Her women are not passive sufferers but they revolt against the established customs and try to search their own identity in the hostile world of male chauvinism. She herself says, "I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human being"⁶

Arundhati Roy, a shining star in the firmament of literature deals with feminism and gender discrimination in a conservative patriarchal domination in her astonishing novel The God of Small Things where women have a very little share in the total happiness of the family; where they are seldom allowed to take education and where men always dominate over women, the possessed over the non-possessed, the powerful over the weak and the touchable over the untouchable.

Another significant woman writer in this line is Shobha De who also shares the similar views on the matter although she has a milder approach. She is a writer whose concern for women's emancipation is strong but it is more covert than overt. Shobha De deals with lesbianism. The female characters in her fiction make frantic efforts to contest their marginalized position in society; she herself admits the complexity informing women's position in India. She says, "The whole question of the position of females in India is so wonderfully confused that it's impossible to take any one stand on it."⁷

However, on account of the ongoing analysis it can be concluded that the impact of feminism has certainly affected the nature of hetero sexual relationships in western and other societies. While these impacts have generally been seen as positive, there have been some negative consequences too.

Hence, Feminism in India cannot be considered as a singular theoretical orientation. Time and again, it has undergone gradual changes in relation to historical and cultural realities. Thus, the Indian feminist had to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India.

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