

Women Look through Life's Prism: Indian Feminist Movement

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Abstract

“There is always a connection between a writer’s life and his literary work”, Jasbir Jain observes in her work on Nayantara Sahgal but it may need a little elaboration, there is always a connection between the writer’s work and his age. A writer belongs to an age; his work may be for ages. There have always been many factors responsible for the making of writer. It is also pertinent to mention that a writer’s life as much directly leads him to his course of writing, as Ford Madox wrote in, *It was the Nightingale*:

The first thing that you have to consider when writing a novel is your story and then your story and then your story. If you wish to feel more dignified you may call it your subject. (Ford Madox ,Ford: 1933, 211)

Every text has its context and to understand a text, the study of the context has much significance. The fiction world of Indian panorama imbibes the themes of the freedom movement, the oppression of the Harijans, the exploitation of peasants, the subjugation of woman, the tensions of joint family.

Woman’s subjugation, ‘more subtle and deep-seated causes of woman’s oppression, continued victimization, legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic rights of women, aroused consciousness of equal human value in sensitive writers and particularly women writers. This consciousness turns into a movement all over the world against the inequities prevailing in the society.

In this paper detailed analysis of the feminist views and how these novelists look through the prism of life to show feminine sensibility at work when the novelists present life-size women with throbbing pulse, yearning for love and recognition, longing for self-expression and individual fulfillment. The analysis attempts to reveal how much they have succeeded in representing their feminine sensibility and deep insight and understanding in the portrayal of women characters at length and what tendencies they adopt and how their individual perception differs from that of other feminist thinkers and writers.

Keywords: Feminine Sensibility, Self-Expression, Women Emancipation, Recognition, Equality, Sexual Dominion, Discrimination

Analysis

What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized, nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of “interior colonization” has been achieved. It is one which tends to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform certainly more enduring. However, muted its present appearance may be sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power.

(Kate Millet, Sexual Politics.25)

There may not be an overall –unanimity on the emergence of feminists thought but there is no doubt in calling, Mary Wollstoncraft (1750-1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) as the earliest crusaders of women’s emancipation. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Mill’s work, the subjection of women were the most controversial and aroused wide and violent response and hostility. Mill’s views on liberty of women drew wide criticism. He wrote: That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes- the legal subordination of one sex to the other- is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (p. 3)

Nayantara Sahgal’s views are similar to those of J.S. Mill that women’s position is not natural but the result of political oppression by men and need to be changed through a movement against male domination. Her comments and views deserve a reference here particularly as recounted to Jasbir Jain by the novelist in an interview: I think of politics not as is leading the country or anything likes but politics as the use of power and also the abuse of power. In our context it happens at so many levels- the domestic level- misuse of power between husband and wife, parents and children, between lovers- the way one human being wields power over another, that too is politics. So a political would be an awareness of the use of power whether it is directly in politics or reflected in domestic life or other aspects of it. The husband- wife relationship that too, is a political relationship. For instance in *Storm in Chandigarh*, Inder saying “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me”, that’s a political power of a kind. It also functions through religion. This episode in *Rich Like us*, that man is wielding religion, supposedly quoting the shastras saying sati is a good thing. Power at the village level can be religious fundamentalism. It can be wielded in many different ways, and all of it is political. (p.186)

Feminism holds that there is something wrong with society’s treatment of women. It attempts to analyze the reasons for and dimensions of women’s oppression, and to achieve women’s liberation. To some, liberation is defined as social equality with men, while others feel that this narrow definition reflects the class bias of what is described variously as bourgeois feminism, career feminism, main stream feminism or liberal feminism. There are several views of feminists differing on the ideological grounds.

The conservatives believe in the inherent unequal abilities of men and women and they emphasize that the main task of the state is to ensure that an individual performs his or her proper social function. They argue that social differentiation between the sexes is not unjust, since justice not only allows but also requires us to treat unequal unequally. Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Fichte (*The science of Rights*), Nietzsche (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*), Freud and Steven Goldberg are writers with conservative view points.

Liberal feminists believe in libertarian for women as the freedom to determine their own social role and to compete with men on terms that are as equal as possible. Marxist feminists view the oppression of woman as historically and currently a direct result of the institution of private property. Engels writes, “Within the family the husband is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat”. They see the oppression of women as a function of the larger socio-economic system.

Radical feminist writers like TiGrace Atkinson and Shulamith Firestone deny the liberal claim that the basis of women’s oppression consists in their lack of political or civil rights. Similarly they reject the classical Marxist view that basically women are oppressed because they live in a class society. They hold that the roots of women’s oppression are biological. The origin of women’s subjection lies in the fact that as result of the weakness caused by child bearing, women become dependent on men for physical survival. They believe in biological revival for women’s liberation. Firestone writes:

The heart of women's oppression is her childbearing roles. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it; what they become as adults and the sorts of relationships they are able to form determine the society they will ultimately build. (p.72)

Thus looking at these various feminist viewpoints it may be remarked that the feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization and unjust treatment of women though the hostile power of oppression may differ in accordance to the ideologies or the vision adopted. What is significant is the need to profound changes in traditional social structures, family structures, and power of women, fundamental attitudes and personal relationships, leading to a just social order.

Indian feminist writers present three images of woman: assertive i.e. progressive, submissive and compromising. Assertive i.e. progressive image is the advanced image of woman who is conscious of her identity, submissive image of woman is the traditional image of woman and the compromising image is the image of woman who seeks to change the status remaining with in some parameters without breaking from tradition.

In the Vedic period, Indian women enjoyed a relatively comfortable position; gradually violence against them began to be practiced: the doors of educational, economic, social political and cultural opportunities were closed to them. Even their personal freedom in respect of movement, diet, dress, marriage etc. came to be curtailed. Every effort was made to make them weak and docile. Women also began to be enslaved and prostituted. All this brought them to the level of chattel or cattle. They became commodities which could be tailored to perform different functions. Thus, violence against them came to have a social sanction. N. Jayapalan observes: During the early period Manu laid down the Hindu code. His laws insist that a woman must consider her husband as a god. She should be kept in dependency by her husband: the ideal woman is one who does not strive to break these bonds of control; the salvation and happiness of a woman resolve round her virtue and chastity as a daughter, a wife and a widow. Wife beating got religious and social sanction with Matsya Puran authorizing the husband to beat his 'erring' wife with rope or a split bamboo. Violence against women further increased when the young girls began to be forced to serve as Devadasis in the temples. (p.94)

In Medieval period, Purdah system was imposed on women, which in turn was again violence against women. Sati, child marriage infanticide, polygamy, forced marriage and rapes took strong roots in the society. Even today in Indian society at least 35 forms of brutalities and violence are going on viz. foeticide, infanticide, check on diet, medical neglect, deprivation of educational opportunities, child marriage, rapes, sexual abuse of the girl child, forced marriage prostitution, sexual harassment's, pregnancies at small intervals, wife-battering, wife-burning, cursing widows, witch hunting and neglect of the old women.

The emergence of reform movement or organizations in nineteenth century marks the beginning of a new era in Indian society. Brahms Samaj, Prathna Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Movement. The Ramakrishna Mission and Independence movement continually provided strength to all sensitive persons to fight against the customs, institutions and traditions which made woman feeble and docile. During the last three decades the writers especially women writers, the aforesaid task has been taken up, to make this process of change smooth and really meaningful. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out:

A discernible recent shift in feminist politics form the representation of women's

victimization to that of their resistance. This is based on the belief that women's resistance to oppression is not only truer to the facts of their situation, but that its recognition offers more emancipatory possibilities for women's struggles. (p.153)

The stand revealed by Rajeshwari SunderRajan is quite apt for any fiction writer exposing harsh realities. Since a fictional writer is not a labeled social thinker, a reformer or a political activist, hence Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande recognizing their task as a writer adopt a very soft stand to bring about awareness among any sensitive reader. They well understand that woman's liberation is possible "only when she acquires agentive capabilities to deal with one's own oppression".

Undoubtedly resistance itself involves political and social motif behind it but in a smooth sense. The three novelists under study fairly recognize the fact that "Fiction is not beautiful prose. A writer should engage politically and socially". (Gita Hariharan: Interview, News Hour, Star News, 11Oct, 2001).

About the function of a (Indian) writer, Nayantara Sahgal writes in Indian Writer and the English Language:

"To be relevant to his culture a writer's imaginationhas to be able to create the men and woman and situations of the Indian environment and the Indian reality. If a writer can do this, make people feel with him, stimulate thinking, and inspire action because of what he writes then he is fulfilling his function".(5)

Nayantara fulfills her function as a responsible writer. She depicts the social reality just for a fiction writer and she fulfills what is required of a novel as has been pointed out. Joan Rockwell also has similar views on fiction writing. He says:

Fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary function part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element in social change. It plays a part in the... conduct of politics and in general gives symbols and modes of life...in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values, and personal and interpersonal behavior.(Fact in Fiction,4)

No good fiction writer can fail to portray the reality in his or her work. Walter Allen's Views are relevant here expressed in History as Protest: Salman Rushdie's Midnight Children ed. by Prem Kumari Marshal: Contemporary novels are the mirror of the age but a very special kind of mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, coursing of its blood, and the unconscious prompting and conflicts which sway it. (96)

Shashi Deshpande portrays the reality, the woman plight as it is revealed to her, she deals graphically with the problems that confront a middle-class educated woman in patriarchal Hindu society. Her feminist ideology is not "the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the cause of all troubles. (Deshpande interviewed by Vanmala)

Tendencies adopted by Shashi Deshpande reflect her Indian origin deeply rooted and prospectus of gradual change plausible in existential conditions. There can be difference of opinions on the presentation of compromising tendency of woman characters by the novelist; one may call it surrender or relentless compulsion of compromise and other may call it enlightenment of self-potential but undoubtedly it is certain that woman protagonists do assert their presence, identity and existence as human in the novels. They also reveal the plight and confining restrictions of domesticity. Rosemarie Tong observes: A woman may say that she diets, exercise, and dresses for herself, but in reality she is probably shaping and adorning her flesh for men. A woman has little or no say about when, where now or by whom her body will be used.(187)

Similar to the two novelists at study, Anita Desai adopted tendency of presenting women's problems with such an understanding that she is assessed as a feminist. Mrilani Solanki observes: As a consummate artist Anita Desai shows tremendous potential and vitality. In her writings she not only offers an expose of human life in its shocking shallowness or outward show, but also provides, down deep, a philosophical probe or basis to sustain our life, she emerges neither as a downright pessimist nor an incorrigible optimist, all among, her earnest endeavour is to hold a mirror to life, and in the process, to unravel the mystery of human experience. (p.85).

Anita Desai's presentation of marriage as misalliance and cause of woman's alienation and sufferings differs from any radical feminist's belief. She holds both man and woman responsible for that but her presentation of husband wife relationship is real and praiseworthy. Situations delineated are similar to Bernard Shaw's views in his Prefaces: Man and wife do not, as a rule, live together; they only breakfast together, dine together and sleep in the same room. In most cases the woman knows nothing of the man's working life and he knows nothing of her working life he calls it her home life. (p.11)

Anita Desai explores the world of woman, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology. She sets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married woman tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. She is concerned with the psychological problem faced by the protagonists. Her serious concern is the "journey with in " her characters, the central characters mostly being women. The recurring theme in her novels is the trauma of existence in a hostile, male-dominated society that is conservative and taboo-ridden. She portrays the inner conflicts of her characters and also underlines their individuality and quest for freedom. She looks strength, vitality, and potential with in the women's self. She admits in her interview with Jasbir Jain: Personally, no I don't think any body's exile from society can solve any problem. I think basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from lack of society and a lack of belonging that is why exile has never been my theme. (P.61-69)

Anita Desai as a writer believes that a writer has to be an observant person. A writer generally tends to pick up the tiny details that others might fail to notice. To recall her opinion on the art of writing: A writer does not create a novel by observing a set of theories- he follows flashes of individual vision. (An Interview with Anita Desai,100)

Shashi Deshpande's views are not different from those of Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal over woman's issue. She says: Until women get over the handicaps imposed by society, outside and inner conditioning, the human race will not have realized its full potential. (p.128)

One significant feature common to all the three novelists is portrayal of female protagonists from middle class background. Almost all heroines of these novelists belong decidedly too urban, educated middle class. Reason for this selection is best answered by Shashi Deshpande: The point is I always begin with characters-even the themes emerge from the characters-and naturally the characters will belong to the class I know best....(p.121).

The other significant feature, is they realize as a writer, that the “growth of literature can be determined on the criteria of its contribution to the articulation of the central concerns of its source society, its contribution to enrichment of the language if uses, of meaning and new possibilities of consciousness”. (p.8)

Mrs. Desai’s comments on the aspects and selection of protagonists in her novels: “I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made a stand against, the general, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great no”, who fight the current and struggle against it, know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Desai Interviewed, The Times of India, 13).

Desai believes that literature should deal with most enduring matters, less temporary and less temporal than politics and further her opposition to the art of delineating contemporaneity or documenting socio-economic reality is contrary to her views expressed while talking to Jasbir Jain that she doesn’t think any body’s exile from society can solve any problem. When a character’s exile from society can’t solve his problem then to what extent a writer’s closing vistas for delineating contemporaneity or socio-economic reality can serve his purpose of writing. There is an answer to that she seeks to fathom unlike any other writer the inner aspect of the characters. She appears not to be concerned with the society or with social forces directly but her predominant concern are individual psyche and its interaction with social values. While the other Indian Novelists in English “have been content to record and document” (Desai, Quest 43), she is solely interested in the psychological aspect of the characters. In her review of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*, she shows her discontent for the novelists who prefer the “outer” aspect of an individual to the “inner” aspect and prefers the social to the psychological novels. (India Today,149).

Anita Desai’s views expressed in interviews, on her purpose of writing, on her themes, on what hold the primacy of place in her writhing- Situation or character, on how she plans her novels will help in understanding her works at length. Her purpose of writing is to discover- for herself- and then describe and convey the truth. Truth is synonymous with Art, not with Reality. There is no discrepancy between the terms Truth and Art. Reality is merely the one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean. Art the remaining nine-tenths of it that lie below surface. (Kakatiya Journal of English Studies,pp.1-6)

That is why it is more nearly Truth than Reality itself. Art does not merely; reflect Reality-it enlarges it. Anita Desai Comments on what she must do as writer. “My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things.” She hopes to seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of Reality below the surface and plumbing the depths then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world.

To portray Truth is not her concern as a novelist according to her. It is the subject of a historian or a biographer. Literature should convey the truth far more vividly, forcefully and memorably than any number of factually corrected documents, exhaustively detailed histories or excellently documented biographies e.g. there is more to be learnt about Victorian England in one novel of Dickens than from all histories of that period put together, and more about the human psyche in one novel of Dostoevsky’s than in all psycho- analytical studies of the twentieth century put together. Anita Desai believes that this is precisely because an artist knows how to, or at least sincerely strives to , select from the vast amount of material he has to hand in that so called Reality and present it vividly and significantly. Reading them, one regains one’s pride in one’s profession, one’s respect for it, and acquires fresh zeal to pursue one’s ideals.

On her themes she is of the view that her novels don’t have themes at least not till they are finished, published, and read. While writing, she follows her instinct, she follows flashes of insight, she veers away from

and even fights anything that threatens to distort or destroy that insight, and somehow comes to an end and looks back to see the pattern of foot prints on the sand.

Regarding her views on story, action and drama it can be remarked that they must emanate directly from character, born of their dreams, wills and actions. A story must not be imposed from outside lest it might destroy their life, reduces them to a string of jerking puppets on a stage whatever action there is, must be part of the integral whole composed of the human psyche, the human situation, the outer and inner rhythms.

She holds contrary views on fiction writing as compared to some of the recent novelists like Roman Basu and Chaman Nahal who believe that unless fiction concerns itself with social reality and possesses specific humanism, it cannot be considered a significant work of art. Roman Basu in *Indian Novel with Social Purpose* observes: Fiction is a human document. For me, unless it has some bearing on real life it cannot be taken as a work of creation. (7)

Chaman Nahal is of the firm opinion that a novel must possess 'Synchronic relevance' and it must concern itself with "a specific community, a specific class, and a specific society". He says: The main point is that an artist should be able to associate himself with an identifiable community or what Raymond Williams has called 'a knowable community.' (p.110)

The two approaches, namely of Anita Desai's and Chaman Nahal's or Romesh Basu's hold water; as literature should exhibit what goes unnoticed whether it is outer world or inner world.

Conclusion

All Indian women are virtuous, loyal, and chaste and strivers and aspirers, towards freedom, towards goodness and towards compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity. It is man who corrupts woman and dichotomy of traditional moth-eaten beliefs which treat a dumb woman honourable and virtue has been the noble ethical principle in the hands of men. Women are considered as property, not persons.

If chastity is so important and so well worth preserving it would be easier to safeguard it by keeping men in seclusion not women. Nayantara Sahgal also emphasizes that women need men biologically at the same time. She says. "No doubt we need lovers but not a constant presence, a constant dependence on man". What she is trying through her work is to change people, to reach people and change their way of "thinking, Attitudes, and emotions"- and also to dismantle the image of "modern Sati" who remains, suffer and immolate her.

According to Nayantara the woman in general and the educated new Indian woman in particular have been on paradoxical position. She has been the key person, the master figure in the family; and yet she has lived the life of slavery, subjugation, suffering, suppression. However, now she has started becoming conscious of her rights and responsibilities, her distress, and destination.

Shashi Deshpande affirms that her characters take their own ways and that her "writing has to do with woman as they are". (Deshpande interviewed p.108) She does not portray her woman characters stronger than they actually are in real life. Woman as presented by her is an incomplete self, a particle being. Her woman character is in need of someone to shelter her, be it her father, brother or husband. This makes a demarcation between Nayantara's views where she says women need men to meet out biological needs. Her female protagonists compromise with their counter parts after realization that it is not wrong with male but there is wrong in the social structure. Her views on woman's subordination position are similar to those of Maitreyi

Mukhopadhyaya: It should be emphasized that the poor status of women,. Their oppression and exploitation, cannot be examined as an isolated problem in Indian society. Although the status of women constitutes a problem in most societies in rigidly hierarchical and inequitable social structure which exists in India, the relative inferiority and superiority of various roles is much more clearly defined. The inequality and subordination of women is an instrument or function of the social structure.” (p.82)

Shashi Deshpande’s women characters are tolerant, obedient and submissive. Certainly they are portrayed ordinary middle class women in Indian Society, but at the same time a feminist awakening and resistance is visible and notable in their feelings and conduct. They are not aggressive, rebellions but tolerant silent, modest assertive but not subdued in any sense. Even in silence Indian women, as presented by Shashi Deshpande , asserts the issues indispensable for the liberation of woman issues relating to her education, financial independence and that control over her sexuality and the moral choice.

Shashi Deshpande’s approach is more pragmatic than Anita Desai’s and Nayantara Sahgal’s in the portrayal of her female characters. Her female protagonists are traditional as can be seen in Meena Showadkar’s statement: Traditionally, the Indian woman accepted the frame work of the family with a blind faith, and rarely showed a rebellious trend. She continued to be docile, self-sacrificing patient, loving and capable of suffering....they suffer, submit and adjust themselves to circumstances. This aspect of the woman’s life has been portrayed by the women writers with sensitivity and instinctive understanding.”(Shirwadakar, p. 118.)

But the shift and change delineated in them by Shashi Deshpande is gradual, asserting their individuality with strong attitude and a sense of freedom and conviction. They are vitalized with a sense of humanistic existence before they compromise. Her female protagonist does not return to her husband’s home fearing that “in a traditional society, any woman who leaves her home is considered immoral,” but realizing her own potential to adjust and accommodate in the existing circumstances and simultaneously asserting her own existence as a human being having voice, courage standing and sustenance, realizing if an educated woman is sunk in such torpor, society suffers more.

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