

SIGNIFICANCE AND POSSIBILITIES OF WOMEN'S ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH LITERATURE

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Abstract: Literature is a very effective means for the expression and shaping of the inner consciousness of all human beings. Engagement with literature gives a distinctive identity to both readers and writers of literature. Unfair social traditions have marginalized women in the literary domain. Hence, their contributions to the literature of the various languages have not been as extensive as expected from the demographic half of the society. Women writers who have created great literary classics despite their social and familial constraints have not always received the due appreciation from critics, peers and society at large. This paper analyzes the significance of literature as a tool for self-expression and empowerment for women. It makes an argument for actively promoting women's literature through the establishment of institutions, centres and associations that aim at connecting women to literature in active ways. It also makes a plea for creating systematic repositories of all past and present literary writings by women in different languages so as to facilitate research on their literary, sociological and psychological aspects. Such research would be of interdisciplinary value and enrich the field of gender studies.

Index Terms - Women's Literature, Literature, Gender Studies

I. Introduction:

Among all arts, literature is probably the most powerful and influential medium of expression for people. It has always been a barometer for measuring the level of development of a civilization. In any human communication, recoding of words is a central aspect of the process of speaking and being heard. Literature is one of the most powerful forms of communication in which every word speaks. When we read a text, we are able to read not just the meanings of words but also the echo of the consciousness of the author. Literature has the power to lead the reader and the writer to a feeling of oneness with the creation. Literature uplifts human consciousness and helps a person connect to the self and the outside realm in a subtle way. It gives an authentic voice to a person's self. Impact of literature on the different aspects of human personality and social development has been immense. The reading-writing process inherent in any literary activity qualitatively transforms an individual. Writing or reading literature can also be a cathartic experience. It can help humans to release their pent-up emotions and feel relieved from the stress such emotions generate.

II. Role of Literature in a Woman's Life:

Women express themselves creatively in a myriad of ways. The expression is at the core of human existence. One always wishes to express and share, because it leads to joy, catharsis, clarity and introspection. Expression in the form of literary writing is one of the best means to learn. Therefore, writing and literature assume great significance in the journey of inner growth of women

everywhere. Women write various forms of literature because they consider writing as a form of action, like other kinds of social actions, for expressing their identity and for self-empowerment. For them, the activity of writing becomes an outlet for expansion and liberation from various internal and external constraints. Writing supports women in the process of crystallizing their identity. It encourages them to feel empowered and confident in their private or public domains. (Rekha, 2015)

An influential American feminist writer Audre Lorde highlights the role of speaking out through literature in a woman's life in the following words in her famous essay titled "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" that she wrote after being diagnosed with cancer: "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood." (Lorde, 1978) In this essay, she urges women that they must share and speak about their feelings and ideas even if they are experiencing a sense of fear about it. By expressing their feelings and ideas, women are able to connect with other women who share their vision in spite of the other differences they might have. Women's purposive engagement with literature thus enriches and transforms the spiritual and intellectual domains of their existence and expands their consciousness. By reading women's literature, we acquire a glimpse of the women's inner voice.

Experiences of women are generally shaped by gendered realities. Their writings emerge from and represent distinctive gender-based conditions. They possess features and content which are special. As women have generally existed at the margins of the mainstream literary world, they have always nurtured a different kind of relationship with language and literature in comparison to men. This relationship is complex and dynamic. Women's literature, therefore, comes off as different in nature compared to the literature written by men because it reflects women's deep desire to be heard and to act. For women, language and literature exist not just as a means of expressing beauty but also as a tool for fighting gender inequality and injustice.

In spite of the discouraging and disempowering conditions, and in spite of their under-representation in the literary sphere, women's contribution to the literature of different languages has been notable. All forms of art, including literature, have been enriched by such expressions since ancient times. Names like Jane Austin, Virginia Woolf, Agatha Christie, Georg Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Mary Shelly, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, J. K. Rowling, Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker, and Doris Lessing etc. have made stellar contributions to English literature transcending their own time and space context. (Sage, 1999) Indian women writers like Sarojini Naidu, Mahasweta Devi, Mahadevi Verma, Ashapura Devi, Krishna Sobti, Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Bharati Mukherjee, Indira Goswami, Sudha Murthy and several others have brought new recognition to India's women through their prose and poetry. (Tharu & Lalita, 1997) (Souza, 2003)

III. Marginalization of Women in the Literary Domain:

Though the significance of writing of literature by women is now universally recognized, it is also evident that, in comparison to the other gender, women have articulated and created much less in the literary domain than what their number and experiences would justify. An overwhelming number of women are unable to realize their potential for self-exploration fully due to structural and other constraints imposed by the prevalent value systems, family obligations, nature of the educational and professional institutions and their own internal psychological conditioning. Women very rarely find the environment of their social, professional or personal life encouraging for the unfolding of their creative and critical abilities. This situation results in the inculcation of an ingrained fear that makes women opt not to

express themselves in life, including in the spheres of art and literature. Very rarely are they able to give justice to their inner choices and experience the joy of self-expression.

Women's identity as creators of literature has received only marginal and condescending attention from all concerned – academia, historians of literature, literary organizations or the readers. The due recognition for a woman writer does not come forth easily, leading to further diminishing of her self-confidence to create. This fundamentally compromises her self-identity. As a commentator writes: "Women's books, plays, and works of art were denied critical attention because they dealt with "unimportant" issues such as birth, death, marriage, sex, and friendship as opposed to "important" issues such as hunting, travel, war, finance, and sports." (Barreca)

Women themselves have been seen as the only protagonists of their own interest and rights with regard to literature. Mary Wollstonecraft's landmark book *A Vindication on the Rights of Women* published in 1792 is a landmark work that inspired many women to publish their literary works and start a new discourse of criticism and appreciation of women's literary writings. (Wollstonecraft, 2001) As Katha Pollitt writes in the introduction to the critical edition of this book, "Mary Wollstonecraft was not the first writer to call for women to receive a real, challenging education... But she was the first to connect the education of women to the transformation of women's social position, of relations between the sexes, and even of society itself. She was the first to argue that women's intellectual equality would and should have actual consequences. The winds of change sweep through her pages." (Wollstonecraft, 2001)

IV. Efforts Needed for Promoting Women's Literature:

Building platforms for women's involvement in literature and literary arts is of great importance. Organizing convenient institutional spaces and environment for connecting women to literature purposively would go a long way in unlocking women's creative potential as readers and writers. The experience of literary reading and writing by women would transform and empower them in various spheres of their lived existence.

While one does come across several efforts aimed at women's empowerment in social, economic or legal sectors, organizations meant specifically for encouraging literary activities and creation by women are unknown. Likewise, how much do we know about university departments, literary organizations and NGOs in India facilitating studies on women-related writings or encouraging women to write? This gap needs to be filled through the establishment of institutions and organizations that try to connect women to literature and art. Such organizations and institutions shall be of value for both women's causes and for the enrichment of literature. They would be able to provide a platform and an environment to women for a mentored reading-writing process. This would support them to explore, experience and write literature.

An important aspect of fostering a positive relationship between women and literature is the examination of the complex and multidimensional character of literature on and by women in order to have an accurate understanding of women's identities, society and the relationship of the two. A systematic analysis of women's perspectives expressed through the literature on and by women is essential for the much-needed holistic understanding of both literature and culture. Such efforts are quite inadequate in our academic studies today. There is limited awareness and recognition of the literary contributions of women due to an insufficient compilation, editing, classification and dissemination of such writings. Various research institutions have not taken full care of the need for documentation and analysis of writings by women.

Therefore, the literary organizations and research centres should focus on compiling repositories of women's writings and take up further works based on the categorization, periodization, comparison and interpretation of the same. They should consciously strive to allow articulation, dialogue and accommodation of different perspectives on women as expressed through their literature. The entire continuum of ideas and interpretations on women's literature as well as the relationship between women and literature should find space in such studies. As women's voices transcend narrow and formal literary frameworks, the organizations devoted to women's literature should also adopt a trans-disciplinary orientation and seek not to be dominated by the conventional ways of transmitting and analyzing knowledge.

V. Conclusion:

Due to the patriarchal nature of most societies, women have not expressed themselves freely and sufficiently through art and literature. However, due to the spread of awareness about women's rights and equality in different spheres, we have seen a remarkable change in the kind and volume of writings by women in different languages. Women's literature has now acquired its own distinct identity and place in the contemporary literary sphere, including in the literature departments of universities. The study of the history of women's writings has emerged as a new interdisciplinary academic area. To accelerate the process of writing and study of women's literature, a lot of efforts are still required from society and academia. Hence, voluntary organizations and academic centres that connect women to literature in active ways and mentor their reading-writing process would be quite helpful in this regard. Besides, a lot of work in terms of creating accessible and comparable repositories of women's literature produced through the centuries is required to be carried out to achieve the goal of active engagement of women with language and literature.

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