



REVELATION OF FEMINISM BY INDO-ANGLIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS

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ABSTRACT

The condition of the Indian women through the ages and the rules of Manu in holding women under bondage on the plea that a woman is from birth to death dependent upon men, has worked upon the women's psyche to the extent of turning them, at first, into mute servile creatures who could not even articulate their views or express their emotions in any way, and later, into reactionary aggressive feminist. As the doors of education opened for women, they become more conscious of their rights. But as more and more women started working outside, they began facing other kinds of complications. The Indian society is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Here a female is considered a peripheral member of the family, both in her parents' house as well as husbands. Throughout her lifetime, she is unable to decide her roots and this leads to her insecurity. So, present paper will try to display the heartiest efforts of Indo-Anglian Women Novelists who are tirelessly reflecting true plight of Indian women in their works.

Keywords: Feminism, independent, patriarchal, Quest, traditional, dominated, emancipation, prerogative, customs, marginalized, repressed, spectrum etc.

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According to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary,

"Feminism means the belief that women should be allowed the same rights as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state."¹

If we explain the meaning of the word, Feminism, it is a mode of literary and cultural discussion and reassessment that is inspired by modern Feminist thought by some eminent female writers or figures. It has developed since 1970 and it is an arena of debate about the relations between literature and socio-cultural subordination borne by women as

writers, readers, public figure or fictional characters within a male dominated or patriarchal social order.

Feminism is often described as a struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. It has also come to mean a movement in support of the principle; the women should have the same rights and opportunities-legal, political, social and economic as men. It is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, personal and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A reference to it in the treatise *Half the Sky* reads:

"By feminism we mean, both, the awareness' of women's position in society as one of disadvantage or inequality compared with that of men, and also a desire to remove those disadvantages".²

Feminists try to identify the deep-rooted causes leading to oppression of women and Endeavour to remove them. They try to bring about a change in the social milieu in which women are accepted as equals, in all respects to men, in the equal sharing ,of rights , opportunities and. responsibilities in the process of evolution of human society. Some restrict their demands to equality in matters relating to education and work with emphasis on financial independence. There are others, among the feminists, who call for a metamorphosis of the entire society with a view to completely removing the tradition bound deep-rooted beliefs in the moral superiority of man over woman. Their purpose is to eradicate the persisting gender discrimination in all its manifestations. Gender discrimination is not new. Its root can be found in dated back to mid-400 BC when Plato writes:

"Let us take first the virtue of a man-he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefits his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman's virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described :her duty is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband."³

Again, Socrates (470B C) says: "*Women once made equal to man becomes his superior.*"⁴ It is sad to hear that such great philosophers have gender bias in their superb mind. We are living in the 21st century and claim to be most updated and cultured human beings. Still women have been bound up in chains of social traditions and dogmas. They have no rights which are enjoyed by their male-counterparts. It is surprising fact that a male is born of a woman and later he becomes sometimes exploiter of his root. Really it is pathetic that till now a woman is considered as a commodity to satisfy the hunger and lust of man.

"..... I met a man, loved him. Call

Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
...who are you?, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I.....
....., he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath....."⁵

Generally it has been observed that literary field is dominated by male authors. They present the world through a male point of view where the woman's vision or attitude is neglected or wrongly presented or have not displayed as should have been in a patriarchal critical establishment. So, a need is felt to present true womanhood in the literary field. And that has been possible when women writers came forward to redirect of attention away from the sins of male authors.

"I have another duty equally sacred.....My duty is to myself."⁶

Feminism in its early stages, visualized an exclusively all female world where men would have only peripheral functions. However, the present day feminist thought, while trying to destroy masculine hierarchy, is not against sexual dualism. Feminism is necessarily pro-woman but it need not be anti-man. Affirming such a view, P. Ramamoorthi aptly remarks:

"The attempt to create female enclaves are extremist reactions but the recent trends in feminist literature are an inclination that it is possible for a woman to live in the world where men also live"⁷

Simone de Beauvoir's classic observation that a woman, "...is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with her..."⁸

is true of the Indian woman despite different laws and constitutional safeguards pronounced in her favor. She still continues to be defined with respect to man and to be regarded as subordinate to him.

The great son of India, *Swami Vivekananda*, also is in great support of equality among men and women. He sees the women as the living goddess and says man to worship them as incarnation of universal motherhood.

"O India! Forget not that the ideal of thy womanhood is Sita, Savitri, and Damayanti; forget not that the God thou worshippes is the great ascetics, the all-

renouncing Shankara, the Lord of Uma; forget not that thy marriage, thy wealth, thy life are not for sense-pleasure, are not for thy individual personal happiness; forget not that thou art born as a sacrifice to the Mother's altar; forget not that thy social order is but the reflex of the Infinite Universal Motherhood.....and repeat and pray day and night, 'O Thou Lord of Gauri, O Thou Mother of the Universe, vouchsafe manliness unto me! O Thou Mother of Strength,..."⁹

There is, however some change in the attitude of the woman herself as an individual in her own right. It is in this context that Indian women writers like *Nayantara Sahegal, Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Prewar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Gita Hari Haran, Sobha De, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri* and many more to name only a few, depict the anxiety of the educated, independent, middle-class Indian woman searching for a balance between her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother in a predominantly patriarchal society and her new-found sense of self longing freedom and private space. The Indo-English women novelists aimed at portraying Indian women's sense of frustration and their alienation. Their characters are shown very often as torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. Their works reflect the microcosmic India caught in the crucible of traditions, conventions and social changes. It has been account of women's world and psyche at its best one of the thematic concerns of the post-independence Indian English Fiction. The problems and predicaments peculiar to the Indian women have found artistic expression in the works of Indian English women novelists since 1970.

Quest for feminine identity is largely a post-Independence social phenomenon in India which is influenced by various changing faces of, reality-freedom movement, progressive education, social reforms, and increasing contacts with the West and Urban growth. The question of female identity has therefore become a real, palpable human problem of our society. Various forces and factors have brought in growing cracks in the traditional roles of Indian women and the feminine consciousness in

India is slowly nurturing itself within them. The tensions and conflicts that have found their way into the traditional monolithic roles assigned to women are proof of feminine awakening. The increasing roles of women in society, those of the freedom fighter, of the social worker, of the working women, and so on are also the outcome of these tensions and conflicts, since traditionally Indian women have been confined only to their roles at home. A natural feature of feminine sensibility manifested in creative writing and conditioned by social forces in the tendency towards discovering the identity of female characters in a world where the norms of living are still laid down by men. Therefore a recurring theme of many of the women writers is an exploration of a woman's identity, a study of her arrival at self awareness.

Down the ages, the place of women in the tradition-bound, male dominated Indian society had been very pitiable. Women were treated as no more than mere puppets; they were confined to the four walls of the house. Freedom enjoyed by men in different fields of activity was considered a male prerogative and therefore denied to women.

"...if only she were allowed to keep her one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces. Apart, apart. That enviable, cool, clear, quiet state of apartnessHer dreams too were in pieces, tormented, like the night slit and torn by long blades of rain."¹⁰

The seeds of emancipation were shown by the British' rulers, thanks to their sagacity and foresight, by their patronage and encouragement of women's education. Leaders and reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and a host of other luminaries rendered sincere service for the upliftment of women. Even after Independence, the position of women, economic, social and cultural and in almost every stratum of Indian Society remained uncertain. A vast majority of women had to face a life of humiliation in the form of gender-bias while performing the roles of wives and mothers in the rigidly custom-bound milieu they lived in. But what is shockingly true is that even women with liberal modern education

with an irrepressible yearning to break loose from the time-honored crippling and iniquitous social laws, condemning women to a role of subordinate to men do often find themselves in embarrassing situations due to various reasons. There are numerous instances where working women with sound economic potential are also not able to escape from the pitfalls created by the customs and beliefs of the tradition-bound Indian society.

Slowly, becoming aware of the injustice heaped on them, women began to raise their voice in protest and this led to the birth of Women's Liberation Movement in the early seventies. Elite women living in major cities were initially drawn into the vortex of these feminist movements and their main role was to bring home to the women diverse sections of society, how they were subjected to iniquitous and humiliating treatment in this custom-bound 'male dominated environment.

"Feminism in India has failed to gain the desired momentum because of the sparse body of writings that theorize and propagate the rights of women. From the sati to the inheritance laws to the modern construction of a family in rural and urban areas, sexism is the blinker that women are made to put on at birth and taught to obey and accept throughout their life. Demanding social, economical and political equality or the act of demanding itself is a significant trespass against traditional values."¹¹

With the passage of time, more and more votaries of feminism found the ranks of the movement, Kali for Women, a feminist publishing house, has come into being which publishes books on women by women. The feminist journal *Manushi* is focusing on the women's problems. Besides such, crusading effort by the media, several forces are interacting with women even in the rural areas to awaken them to the age-old problem of sex-bias afflicting this society.

The position of women in the society is slowly but steadily changing for the better following their unremitting assertion of their individuality by turning their anger against the humiliating conventions imposed on them by man down the

ages. Women are beginning to take part in the affairs of the world but it is a fact that, after all it is a man's world. They have yet to travel a long way towards their goal of taking up their position alongside men in terms of perfect equality. As long as the gender discrimination continues, the class of male-female identity is also bound to be there. And so long as this clash persists, disastrous consequences such as the break-down of marriages, and worst still, women taking recourse to suicide continue to plague our society. This problem, which is defying a solution despite several decades of reformist, statutory and otherwise, is detrimental for the self-respect of women.

Shashi Deshpande in one of her interviews said,

"It's ironic that I ...find the use of the phrase "woman writer" both intriguing and irritating. I too have thought-when it isn't "woman singer" and "woman dancer", why is it "woman writer"? I have possible answer that: it's because a woman who writes is put in a separate class. She is not a writer who happens to be a woman. She is, specially, a woman writer and should be judged as such."¹²

It is said that the literature of any country is the store-house of information on the cultural and sociological aspects of the people:

"The role of the writer, is to feel the pulse of the society, know its sickness and suggest such cures as are in consonance with its culture."¹³

Feminists argue that literature all along has been tuned to the point of view of the male-element. Women is often 'marginalized', 'repressed' or 'silenced' in literary works. An idealized image of woman is presented in literature concealing the bitter reality of her position in a patriarchal society.

Alice Jardine attempts to define feminism as a "...movement from the point of view of, by, and for women."¹⁴

It is, therefore, imperative that women writers write from women's point of view write boldly about their own emotions and experience. Bringing about the difference in male and female experience and its expression in literature, *Virginia Woolf* says:

"...there is the obvious and enormous difference of experience in the first place; but the essential difference lies in the fact, not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each sex describes itself."¹⁵

She also desired that she should write and be read only as a woman and not as a 'surrogate' for men. The women writers have to write constructively to provide role models for the oppressed women. By reinterpreting old myths and questioning the validity of traditions and customs that circumscribe women in narrow slots, Indian women novelists have to continue challenging the operating codes of morality which subordinates women in the social structure.

With the advent of Western education and ideas in the Twentieth Century horizon of the "Indian woman has extended beyond the confines of her home and family." The wider spectrum of life has made the educated Indian woman, conscious of the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that regulate her life as a woman. She feels trapped in her role in the family and questions her socially-ordained subordinate status. Once awakened to her individual potential, she is unwilling to return to her traditional position. Very often a woman has to support her family financially because of the rising cost of living and the break-up of the joint family system. But to her dismay, she finds that despite her economic independence she still holds a secondary position to man and is expected to suppress her-own longings and voices as a human being.

The question of feminine identity is a live issue for women novelists and strikes a sympathetic chord in their hearts. Anita Desai is emotionally on the side of the heroines and portrays them with the insight and sensibility of a woman. For her, writing is a process of discovering the truth. Her protagonists have all been women ranging from the daughter and young wife to the middle aged wife and mother. Her novel "Clear Light of Day" is a rare one intensely serious and yet very readable. Since most of the women novelists have shown greater interest in analyzing and portraying women characters than male novelists do, an important advantage of their feminine sensibility is the projection of Indian

women from all the sections of Indian society, a portrayal which is free from male distortion or prejudice. The artistic sensibility of Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai is thoroughly annealed with their famine sensibility. It controls and shapes their creative aspirations and gets filtered through their themes, characters, attitudes and general tenor.

Shashi Deshpande defines freedom for the Indian woman within the Indian socio-cultural value systems and institutions. She has throughout resisted the temptation of creating strong, glorified female heroes and has presented the Indian woman as facing the very real dilemma of having to choose between modernity and convention. Deshpande has laid open the subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operating within the family and the male-centered Indian society at large. In the changing scenario of post-colonial Indian society that saw newly imported ideas to replace the traditional social morals, *Shashi Deshpande* gave to her characters the specific roles that would fit in the socio-cultural modes and values of the changed society. A new generation of women emerged, embracing the changed values according to which women have voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. The women who are portrayed in the novels have the capacity to make free choice and need not therefore depend on the choice of the male.

Deshpande's feminism does not uproot the woman from her background but tries to expose the different ideological elements that shape her. These include religious and cultural elements-myths, legends, rituals and ceremonies, as well as social and psychological factors e.g. woman's subordinate position in the family and her restricted sexuality. The protagonists- of *Shashi Deshpande's* novels are always modern, educated and independent women. The intrinsic aloneness of human being *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the recognition of responsibility in choice *That Long Silence*, the meaning of *Dharma* in one's life *The Binding Vine* are serious metaphysical issues that subtly envelope Deshpande's works and take them beyond feminist concerns.

Nayantara Sahgal, another feminist, seems to be championing the cause of giving equality to

women. The view embodied in her novels is that the same code of mordant should be applied to both men and women. For example, in her novel, *Storm in Chandigarh* She takes up for treatment the theme of estrangement in marriages and evinces how marriages break over the issues of pre-marital and extra-marital sex relations. In this connection Shyam Asnani has observed:

“Mere living together under the same roof, only the accumulating of a life-times living habits, without any real bond of intimacies in spite of sex and children, the human substance between them dwindling in nothing but the mockery of marriage. True living lies in understanding each other, in mutual respect and trust, honesty and freedom”¹⁶.

Arundhati Roy came into the realm of literature of Indian English Literature when her debut novel *The God of Small Things* bagged the esteemed Booker Prize in 1997. All her female characters are struggling in the fabrication made by male-dominated society. Her female characters like Ammu and Rahel are true fighters. They broke their marriage when they saw that their husbands were not giving respect to their relation and came out from this burden called marriage.

In his address to Japanese youth William Faulkner has observed that “*man himself will prevail over all his anguishes, provided he will make the effort to; make the effort to believe in man and in hope to seek not for a mere crutch to lean on, but to stand erect on his own feet by believing in hope and in his own toughness and endurance*”.¹⁷ ‘The Divorced and the Barren’ in Roy’s novel is such a one who endured all kinds of assaults from all comers in her life and struggled against all kinds of adversities.

Contemporary Indian American women novelists like Chitra Banerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri represent the process of change that the women immigrants goes through in an alien land leaving her family and mother land. Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* is dealing with Ashima who is pregnant with a child and moving to America. She worries how she will bring up her children in an alien land and culture.

Conclusion: However, feminism in the Indian context has definitely reached its zenith with the efforts of Indian writers like Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai whose protagonists free themselves from the traditional roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother and emerge as individuals in their own right. In their reaction to role conflict in a patriarchal society they show the strength to achieve their goals of self realization. From a state of passive acceptance, they move to one of active assertion. Without succumbing to social pressures and without breaking away from accepted traditional social institutions, there protagonists succeed in being individuals.

“The new woman depicted in the literature of these women writers refuses to surrender before the conservative forces of fatalism and subjugation as well as to the market oriented glamour of body and looks and tries to charter her own independent path which could ultimately enable her to lead a self confident and self reliant life. It is essentially an image of modern woman who refuses to be a saleable commodity in the market and prefers instead to assert her individuality by challenging the defined social and family norms and structures, be it marriage, wifehood, motherhood or the larger questions related to her liberty, freedom, recognition of her social and intellectual pursuits...in literature they are shown to be valued for their intellect, intelligence and socio-economic contributions and achievements. Modern woman depicted in the above writings seem to be a product of the rapid transformation and intense churning taking place in the society due to various struggles for women’s autonomy and empowerment and new consciousness arising out of modern learning, knowledge and awareness.”¹⁸

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the expectation. He believes that the best is yet to come.

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