

Feminism as A Literary Movement in India English Literature

Prof. Umesh Vitalrao Kadu

Y.D.V.D. Arts And Commerce College
Teosa, Dist. Amravti

Abstract

Feminism is a movement which advocates granting the same political, social, and economic rights to women as those enjoyed by men. Throughout the world, women have been deprived of their basic socio-legal rights by a patriarchal order. In the domain of patriarchal culture, woman is a social construct, a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted. Feminism in Indian literature, as can be most commonly conceived is a much sublime and over-the-top concept, which is most subtly handled under restricted circumstances. With advancement of time, however, feminism has been accepted in India, setting aside the patriarchal predominance to certain extent. Leaving aside the activists and crusaders of the political and social scenario, perhaps massive work of feminism is also accomplished through Indian literature. After the introduction of western education, significantly with the advent of colonialism in India under the British Empire, reformist movements, promotion of women's institutions, the freedom movement and so on, life had begun to change once more. In post-Independence India, where education of women had already commenced, the New Woman also had begun to emerge. Education had inculcated a sense of individuality amongst women and had aroused an interest in their human rights. Today's contemporary Indian English novelists are writing for the masses using the theme of feminism, which not only interests the readers but also affects them.

Keywords - feminism, education, society, rights, Indian English literature, womanhood, identity, sexual politics, new woman

Introduction

Feminism is a movement which advocates granting the same political, social, and economic rights to women as those enjoyed by men. Throughout the world, women have been deprived of their basic socio-legal rights by a patriarchal order. In the domain of patriarchal culture, woman is a social construct, a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted. The factor which changes a girl into a woman with finality is not simply her anatomy, but the process of social conditioning which influences and moulds her psyche to desire and pursue traditionally accepted and encouraged feminine roles only. To change the conventional image of women constructed by the orthodox society it is necessary to discourage the habit of defining woman as an essence whose nature is determined biologically and whose sole identity is to produce human species. Twentieth century has witnessed a growing awareness among women regarding their desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and destiny. Women's efforts to seek their independence and self-identity started a revolution all over the world which was termed by analysts and critics as 'Feminism'. In the early stages of the revolution the feminists and suffragists were condemned by the patriarchal society for adulterating the minds of women with the idea of liberation from their suppressed state and encouraging them to eschew the blind subordination to the established traditional dogmas. However, soon it blossomed into comprehensive different countries. Their expository and creative writings have significantly encouraged and shaped the feminists' struggle to empower women and help them transcend their deprived status. Successive writers have raised women's issues by expostulating and examining their subordinate situation in the contemporary society. In their work, they have supported and propagated matters related with the suppressed state of women, which greatly contributed in bringing about a change in the social milieu. A discernible recent shift in feminist literature is from the representation of women's victimization to that of their resistance. Although the feminists and feminist writers have been successful in achieving the legal rights for women, yet much has to be done at the social level. Different countries having different religions and cultural mores have a new tale to recite about the plight of the modern women, their dilemmas and conflicts, and their efforts to achieve self-identity and independence. The contemporary writers are still striving to provide liberation to the

female world from the debilitating socio-cultural constraints and oppressive myths of their respective countries.

Discussion

Feminism in Indian literature, as can be most commonly conceived is a much sublime and over-the-top concept, which is most subtly handled under restricted circumstances. With advancement of time, however, feminism has been accepted in India, setting aside the patriarchal predominance to certain extent. Leaving aside the activists and crusaders of the political and social scenario, perhaps massive work of feminism is also accomplished through Indian literature. Yet, prior to comprehending a more intense look into feminist literature in India, it is necessary to grasp the essential concept of the term `feminism` in the country`s context, beginning from its inception. The history of feminism in India can be looked at as principally a "practical effort". Beginning from the first inception of the Universe, there is a fascinating myth associated with the creation of woman by the Supreme Creator, Lord Brahma. And indeed, beginning from Brahma Himself, the idea of feminism in Indian literature, both oral and written, had begun to be established, though perhaps not as blatant as is today. It is said that Brahma had first created man and in his generosity, had desired to give man a companion. But by then he had depleted all the material in the creation of man and hence he had borrowed umpteen components from the handsome creation of nature and had thus made woman out of them. Lord Brahma had introduced woman to his earlier creation man stating, "She will serve you lifelong and if you cannot live with her, neither can you live without her". Literature was not a subject that needed to be left behind, which with time, had gained pace, thus beginning to carve a new way of introducing feminism in Indian literature. It is rather ironical that in India, the premier people who had come forward to claim `women`s rights` were not women but men .

After the introduction of western education, significantly with the advent of colonialism in India under the British Empire, reformist movements, promotion of women`s institutions, the freedom movement and so on, life had begun to change once more. In post-Independence India, where education of women had already commenced, the New Woman also had begun to emerge. Education had inculcated a sense of individuality amongst women and had aroused an interest in their human rights. It was then that the feminist trend in Indian literature had appeared on the horizon and women came into conflict with the double standards of social law through ages and the conventional moral code. Feminist ideology in Indian literature, which had come into India precisely from the west and the women`s liberation movement are not widely spread into India, as fighting for human rights of women has been misinterpreted as movement against Indian womanhood. The images of woman in society and in Indian literature in the past and present mostly belong to the second category). She belongs to a fresh category, more down to earth, more human.

With every kind of Indian literature, there have existed such umpteen kinds of the evolution of womanhood, which have also at times taken the shape of feminism, mostly profound in Indian literature in various Indian as well as English languages. In such an article, it is however just not feasible with the least amount of space being defined beforehand. It can be stated with utmost sufficiency in the frame of Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan that, Indian literature written in twenty two regional languages and numerous dialects not only reflect a common culture and a uniquely India version and way of life, but surprisingly the face of Indian woman in all Indian literatures has impressed upon a pan-Indian psyche with of course inevitable local touches and variations. Women have inspired literature and the feminine theme has been a pivotal importance too. She herself is also a creator of literature and is all pervading. This is true of Indian literature also.

Indian literature spans a rich variety of themes - from the theme of a conventional woman to that of the new woman, reflecting in the process the changes that have been going on in the society. Post-Independence literature in Indian and feminism portrays all these trends and voices, the clamoring of women

for a new and just way of life. Over years, the age old image of the woman seems to be slowly blurring and gradually shading off into a new image

The literary field is most bold to present feminism in Indian literature in the hands of writers like Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Kusum Ansal (Hindi) who count amongst the most distinguished writers, making a link between sexuality and feminism and writing for the idea "a woman's body, a woman's right" in Indian languages. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Leela Kasturi, Sharmila Rege and Vidyut Bhagat are some other group of essayists and critics, who write in passionate favour of feminism in Indian English literature. However, not only the contemporary times and British Indian times, feminist literature in India has existed in India from the Vedic Period, with the gradually changing face of women coming to light in every age, with its distinctiveness.

The first major thrust in Indian English writing came in the mid-1930's when the big trio R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao appeared on the scene. Their work created an awareness about the emerging Indo-English literature. R.K. Narayan and Bhabhani Bhattacharya portrayed modern women protagonists like 'Rosie' in Guide and 'Kajoli' in So Many Hungers respectively. Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao also delineated sensitive women characters in their novels. R.K. Narayan has depicted two kinds of women characters – one group possesses a traditional mind-set, while the other seeks freedom from constricting social norms. The conventional group contains women who are devoted mothers, aunts, grandmothers and wives like the wives of Margayya (The Financial Expert), Srinivas and Sampath (Mr. Sampath) and Natraj (The Man Eater of Malgudi). Though R.K. Narayan has portrayed some strong women protagonists, yet in most of his novels women are not treated with equality. In comparison to him, Bhabhani Bhattacharya's novels possess round women characters who are integral to the development of the plot. His women characters, though somewhat dominated by their male counterparts and patriarchal customs, are still full of life and hope to have a better future. Kajoli in So Many Hungers, Meera in A Goddess Named Gold, Sumita in Shadow from Ladakh are optimistic women. To Bhattacharya, women are a source of strength and thus their contribution is significant not only to their families, but also to their country. Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand have not taken up the theme of women's emancipation independently. Their novels concentrate on the socio-economic issues of their times, exposing the harsh facts and realities of life. Feminist issues are only a part of their overriding concerns. However Anand's protagonist Gauri in The Old Man and the Cow is a fine example of his idea of emancipated woman.

With the attainment of independence various reforms were made by the government to ensure development in the country. Soon, a new sphere of literature appeared where the writers wrote on themes projecting the miseries and complexities of human lives and concentrating on individual predicament. The mid-1950's and 1960's mark the second important stage of Indian English writing, when writers like Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shobha De, and Nayantara Sahgal came out with their works that changed the face of Indian English novel. They have opened up a new vista of human nature and man-woman relationship. The problems discussed in their novels are individual, rather than universal. These writers have projected the inner psychological turmoil of human beings surviving in different sections of the society. Anita Desai has portrayed the tyrannies, torture and violence faced by women in Indian society. She has stressed the disturbed psyche of women which makes them appear neurotic. Shattered by their stifling atmosphere her women characters become depressed and helplessly suffer. Most of her women characters lack the spirit of viewing life with optimism and fail to overcome their existing traumas and apprehensions. Maya in Cry, the Peacock is unable to understand her husband who has a practical approach towards life. Raka in Fire on the Mountain is a product of a broken marriage who has witnessed the violent attitude of her father towards her mother. The brutality of her father destroys the humanity in Raka. She sets mountain on fire and rejoices in her act. Sita in Where Shall We Go this Summer lives a life of comfort and ease with her husband, who is flexible and understanding. At the time of her fifth pregnancy she develops a

psychological imbalance during the gestation period. To escape the reality of her life she takes refuge at the island of Manori with the thought of getting blessings of his dead father who was known for performing miracles among the local people. It not only disturbs the smooth course of her marital life, but also pushes her children to the darkness of the island. Monisha in *Voices in the City* commits suicide as she finds no way out of the monotony of her life. Anita Desai has also projected the pathetic condition of Indian widows through her character Mira Mavshi in the novel *Clear Light of the Day*. She is one of those contemporary writers whose themes revolve around the female world. Her women characters though lack strength, vitality, valour and hope, and are normally unable to develop a positive approach towards life. Her women characters are feeble and engrossed in their pain, which inculcates in them a devious state of mind restricting them from initiating relevant and authentic changes in their lives. Most of them lack the power to analyse their pathetic condition and cannot overcome their neurotic state. Her novels mostly exhibit the disturbed psychology of bereaved women and their lassitude due to the stifling atmosphere in which they have to survive. Her fiction does not talk about the emancipation of women either intellectually or morally. Her themes are not universal rather they talk about individual women and their emotional and psychological turmoil. Ruth Praver Jhabwala is another contemporary Indo-English novelist who has portrayed strong women characters in her novels. Her novels project the post-independence Indian society which consisted of Indians as well as Britishers. They portray beautiful and vivid pictures of the British culture and its style of living. However, her novels lack the warmth and touch of Indianness. Though she has touched upon the theme of human relationships, it is presented within a latticed framework consisting of sophisticated Britishers and learned Indians. She has also delineated women's alienation resulting from the adaptation of British culture by Indians and Indian culture by Britishers. Jhabwala has penned the growing influence of Britishers on Indians which was making them materialistic. While writing about Indians and their families she has displayed the typical Indian housewives as well as modern, educated women. She talks about the attitude and temperament of Indian women in *Esmond in India* when she writes : '66+6++66+ Jhabwala has given us a glimpse of Indian society in which men hold the place of master and women of slave. The feminine traits inculcated in women force them to unquestioningly submit to their male counterparts. Cultural difference also baffles them. Judy in *A Backward Place*, who has a British upbringing is unable to cope up with an Indian husband, similarly Gulab in *Esmond in India* reticently endures her British husband's callousness. Jhabwala has written about a particular section of Indian society, which thrived soon after India received her independence and has limited herself to a particular time-frame. Her themes do not possess a universal appeal. Her writings too do not become a part of feminist literature as they relate about women and their plight with no aim of ameliorating their pathetic state.

Kamala Markandaya is one of those contemporary writers who have tried to define the pathetic condition of Indian women by raising some feminist issues. She talks about women trapped in their poverty like Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* and Nalini in *A Handful of Rice*, whereas in *The Golden Honeycomb* she has written about women belonging to rich families. Unlike Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabwala, she points out that the crux of all prevailing problems of women is their financial dependence. Her women characters like Premala, Sarojini, Vasantha and Meera project the idea that the economic independence of women shall solve most of their problems. These characteristics of Kamala Markandaya's female protagonists distinguish them from women characters of other contemporary Indian-English writers. Her women characters refuse to treat men as oracles. Her novels take up some feminist issues and provide a new, strengthened and independent image of women.

Shobha De's fiction deals with the lives of urban aristocratic women. Marriage to them is a convenience for money, social status and physical gratification, rather than having an emotional and psychological attachment. Shobha De portrays women who, while in quest of self-identity, lose their morality. Her female characters are modern, educated, glamorous, ambitious, money-minded and have thirst for

physical gratification. They are relentlessly in search of a new life-partner instead of analysing their marital problems, and are doomed by their spirit of romanticism. Her characters do not possess any moral or ethical values the Indian psyche normally associates with marriage. Infidelity is not a sin but a routine activity for them for which they have no remorse. Her novels portray the metropolitan elites, who have bartered values and ideals for superficial lusts lust for money, physical gratification, success and ambitions. Shobha De's feministic ideas lack Indianness. Her themes propagate the dilution of family ties by women in order to accommodate themselves in better social positions. Though she takes up some problems related with the lives of women, she fails to suggest any substantial or relevant solutions to them.

Anita Nair is among the contemporary feminist writers writing in English in India. She mesmerizes the readers with her evocative language and descriptions with which her novels abound. She is easily accepted as an efficient practitioner of the genre of fiction. She depicts a vivid knowledge of South Indian culture, and has an eye for describing details. She mainly deals with man-woman relationship and moves from tender compassion to sensuality, to raging hatred, and is a compelling story-teller.

In this whole scenario the fiction of Shashi Deshpande comes as a fresh air, which not only propagates feminist ideas but also advises women to understand their naked selves. Deshpande's novels suggest that women should take cognizance of their weaknesses, overcome them and implement their potentials in order to assert their individuality. As a novelist she mirrors the new socio-cultural context of the process of change. Her novels reflect the social realities of Indian life. They also reevaluate and reinterpret women's status, helping them to reinvent their identity and community positions, norms and values. The themes dealt by Deshpande in her novels possess universality. They do not refer to a particular woman or a particular section of women in the society but are representative of Indian womanhood.

Conclusion

Feminism is defined as cultural, economic and political movements that are focused towards establishing legal protection and complete equality for the women. In Indian writing feminism has been used as a modest attempt for evaluating the real social scenario as women are concerned. There are several novels in English literature of India that actually portrays the actual status of the women in Indian Societies. However, the modern aged women have realized that they are equally competent like the men and they are not helpless unlike the past when men were considered as the sole bread earners, in today's age, women too have become direct money earners of any household. Today's contemporary Indian English novelists are writing for the masses using the theme of feminism, which not only interests the readers but also affects them.

Feminism does not particularly talk of equality and rights of women but it is more about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts. The main cause for the dissatisfaction of the women in today's society is the superior attitude of the men throughout, the women have suffered in silence and feminism talks exactly about that Indian English novelists have frankly highlighted this concept. Authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandya have actually used the various aspects of the male dominated society as their main theme.

References

1. Betty F. 1984. *The Feminine Mystique*. A Laurel Book : New York
2. Dass VN. 1995. *Feminism And Literature*. New Delhi : Prestige Books,
3. Dwivedi AN. 1987. *Studies In Contemporary Indian Fiction In English*. Allahabad: Kitab Mahal
4. Jain Naresh K. 1998. *Women In Indo-Anglian Fiction : Tradition And Modernity*. New Delhi : Manohar Publishers And Distributors,
5. Juliet M. 1991. *Women – The Longest Revolution, From Feminism To Liberation*. Schekman : Cambridge,
6. Karkala JB. Alphonso. 1974. *Comparative World Literature*. Bombay : Nirmal Standard Publishers,
7. Mathur OP. 1993. *Modern Indian English Fiction*. New Delhi : Abhinav Publications,

8. Monika G. 2000. Women Writers In The Twentieth Century Literature. New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers And Distributors,
9. Naik MK. 1980. A History Of Indian English Literature. Sahitya Academy,
10. Pandey SN. 1997. Contemporary Indian Women Writers In English. New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers,
11. Pathak RS. 1997. (Ed.) The Fiction Of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi : Creative Books
12. Suman B. 2001. Women In The Novels Of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi : Khosla Publishing House,
13. Toril M. 1985. Sexual/Textual Politics : Feminist Literary Theory. London : Methuen

