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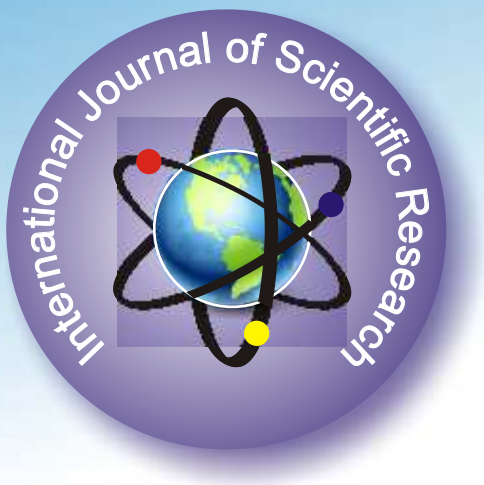

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Feminism and Gender Representation in Indian Writing in English

* Bhaveshkumar B Rana

Abstract

Feminism in Indian English writing is commonly conceived as a very sublime and over-the-top concept, which is most subtly handled under restricted circumstances. However, with development of time, feminism has been established in India, setting aside the patriarchal predomination to some extent. Leaving aside the crusaders and activists of the social and political scenario, perhaps enormous body of work on feminism is also accomplished through Indian English literature. Feminist writers in India today proudly uphold their cause of `womanhood`, through their write-up. In the contemporary scenario there are many men/women writers who, through their writings, have been successful in projecting the existing social (gender) inequality. With regards to the new-fangled styles, technique and trends in women`s novels and poetry there is a noteworthy movement linking the domestic with the public spheres of work. This paper focuses on how feminism and gender issues have been dealt with in the Indian Writing in English.

Keywords : Feminism, Indian Writers' perspective

Feminism in Indian writing in English is not at all a new-fangled concept and over the years many new writers who have broken into the literary circuit and have successfully created a reader base. The female Indian writers along with some male contributors tell the astonishing variety of theme, in a style, that poetry and novels are capable of offering. After absorbing a variety of influences in the last fifty years, after dealing with an array of themes and thoughts, a diverse striates of poetic and literary expressions had been created. Each writer, in their own way, has tried to convey their thoughts in a distinct personal voice, yet they have been successful in forming a part of the chorus, a collective tone emphasizing the sovereignty of women. It must be kept in mind that literary creation by women need not be conceived only as feminist creation. Women writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural principles that constrained their liberty and perpetrated institutional seclusion of women. In most cases the write ups are written in a confessional and personal note, where their composition acts as a social document as they are themselves agents of social revolution. We shall try to explore the feminism and gender representation in Indian Writing in English with reference to the works of literary personalities from the field.

Women writers explore 'old wives` tales', condemn exploitation and try to make sense of the fast changing pace of the new world. Kamala Das explores women-world and others like Shashi Deshpande paint characters who blame their own complacence for their remorseful condition. Shashi Deshpande is one of the serious novelists around who is never after gimmicks. There is an honest voice, very severe about the story being told and its rare writers with little posturing. Her novels usually have women as the protagonists. This has led readers to call her a feminist writer.

Shashi Deshpande is the author of seven novels four volumes of short stories besides number of story books for children. Her first published novel 'Roots and Shadows' has won the “Thirumathi Rngammal Prize” for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. The novel 'Roots and Shadows' gives expression to the woman's plight in contemporary India in the 70s and 80s. In modern times the modern educated young woman struggles against the age old slavery, suffering and suppression. She opposes certain long preserved notions and taboos about the woman. In 'Roots and Shadows' Indu, an educated young woman is highly sensitive. She wants to become independent and complete in herself. She does not believe in the age old beliefs and superstitions of the society. As a motherless child she was tended by the members of the joint family and old uncle, Kaka and Atya always helped her. But she finds that Akka is dominant and Indu had always hated Akka for her narrow mindedness. Right form her childhood it has been in Indu's mind by the women members of the family that she is a female. Indu starts fighting against her womanhood. She hates the utter feminity of the girl's hostel where she resides. She develops a vague sense of guilt and feels that her womanhood closes so many doors for her. She differs from those who follow tradition as a virtue. Defying the traditional role she is expected to play, Indu seeks fulfillment in education and career. Indu asserts her position as a human being equal to that of a man. Shashi Deshpande expresses the frustration and disappointments of women and social and cultural oppression in the male dominated society. She exposes the absurdity of rituals and customs which keep up the male superiority. This shows how a woman grows from self surrender and self abnegation to assert her individuality. The novel “Dark Holds No Terror' rejects the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a wife's existence is to please her husband. It reveals a woman's capacity to assert her rights and individuality and become fully aware of her potential a human being.

Anita Desai is the writer of about nine novels, a good number of short stories and two books for children. In her first novel 'Cry the Peacock', Desai shows the women characters suffering from neurosis. They are guided by fear, guilt, jealousy aggression and their psyche loses grip of their own central position. The movement is backward and forward. The married life of Maya and Gautum results in rupture because the two are not only temperamentally different but mutually opposed. Maya is full of life and wants to enjoy life to the utmost. To her sexual satisfaction is a must and total denial of it makes her a victim of neurosis. Daughter of a wealthy father, Maya is married to Gautum who is very senior to her age, a friend of her father. Maya is interested in all the good things of life in nature, in poetry and dance and also in the life of birds and animals.

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On the other hand Gautum is dry, matter-of, fact and prosaic personality. He looks at Maya's love for the good things as sentimentalism. He is indifferent to the beautiful and pleasant things around him. Like Maya peacocks are the creatures of exotic wild. It is their agony of life denied of pleasure that compels them even to kill snakes to ease out their pain. For Maya peacocks represent the struggle for survival. The 'Cry of the Peacock' is simply a symbol Maya's consciousness has been deeply disturbed by her nightmare and sub-human existence. With the passage of time her despair changes into guilt and feeling of insecurity. The major weakness in the relationship of Maya and Gautum is hardly on the footing of equality.

Shobhaa De , one of India's bestselling authors, presents the modern Indian woman at the centre of her fiction. Her various books with Penguin India the novels (Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, Sultry Days, Sisters, Strange Obsession, Snapshots and Second Thoughts), three book s of non-fiction (Surviving Men, Speed post and Spouse) and an autobiography (Selective Memory), all highlight her attempts to find ways by which women can survive and cope in a world that's cruel to them . She clarifies however that her brand of feminism is not about women getting up and fighting for their rights, but is more sly and subversive . The character Anjali in Socialite Evenings sums up De's philosophy when she says:

"Men feel terribly threatened by self-sufficient women. They prefer girls like me --dependent dolls--You should try it--see how much more you can get out of him that way."

In De's self-help book for Indian women, 'Surviving Men: The Smart Woman's Guide to Staying on Top', she gives similar advice & suggests that in order to "train a man to any level of competence ," women should use "a) food, b) sex , c) food and sex ." However her recently published non-fiction work 'Spouse : The Truth About Marriage' debunks the image that most Indians have of Shobha De being a man-hating feminist. In it, she whole heartedly endorses marriages and says emphatically, 'Don't knock it till you have tried it.'

She stresses that there is no formula for a happy marriage and that nobody has all the answers. For her, marriage is memory. If the good memories outnumber the bad ones, it's fair to declare the marriage a success. Very often we find De exploring the difficulties that women face in balancing careers and marriage in a male dominated society, thus highlighting the economic aspect of this power-play. She stresses that there can be no talk of independence for women without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or free spirit is meaningless so long as the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else. Her novels emphasise the value of equivalence of power. A pertinent example is 'Starry Nights' which is a feminist work of sorts. The starlet is used and abused throughout, but in the final pages of the book , she , her sister and her young daughter walk off into the sunset with self-respect and "an income to match". The ending once again brings out De 's emphatic statement:

"*The women in my books are definitely not doormats. They're not willing to be kicked around."*

R K Narayan's female protagonists in the right perspective highlight his feminist concern. Starting from Savitri in The Dark Room (1938) to Bala in Grandmother's Tale (1992), Narayan's women characters grow stronger and show that the emergence of the `New Woman' is not a myth or a utopia. R K Narayan's new woman has certainly emerged, and she has left an indelible mark on the Indian psyche. However, this new woman is not imported from the West. Rather, she has emerged from the rich treasure of Indian culture. She has a strong base of Indianness and is deeply entrenched in values, traditions and ethos that are exclusively Indian in form and content. Narayan's new woman is bold, self-reliant and assertive. She struggles for freedom, asserts equality and searches for identity. In the process, she empowers not only herself but also her man. Narayan's new woman might not have brought earth-shaking changes, yet she has certainly showed that she is assertive, bold and strong, and is involved in bringing positive changes not only in her man but also in the society.

'Naga-mandala: Play with a Cobra' is, as Girish Karnad says in his note to the play, based on two oral Kannada tales he had heard from his mentor-friend and well-known poet, translator, philologist A.K. Ramanujan, to whom Karnad also dedicates the play. Agency, Karnad suggests in Naga-mandala, as indeed agency in women's tales in general, is intimately connected with their being able to tell their own stories, and of those stories being heard. The old woman tries to 'choke' and 'imprison' her creativity but the story and the song escape her clutches, and earn a life of their own. In many ways, "Naga-mandala" is an explicitly feminist play, and within the rubric of folk-mythology, it develops the oft-used themes of fate, chastity and women's social role and combines it with the unexpected ending one has come to expect of folk stories.

Kundnika Kapadia's feminist work "Seven Steps in The Sky", winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, unfolds the story of how Vasusdha, after thirty-two years of marriage, finally dares to challenge her husband's authority and leave home to fulfill her aspirations. It is also the story of several other women who yearn for fulfillment.

Sarijini Naidu (1879-1940), popularly known as ' nightingale of India', has been the most prominent women poet of the colonial period who won great recognition in India and abroad. She was conscious of the women's predicaments, which she has voiced in quite a few poems. She might be called the ' Spokesperson of Indian Womanhood', as she fearlessly condemned evil customs such as infant marriage, nautches, extravagant expenditure on social and religious occasions, and the glaring disparity of age between girls and men when their marriages were arranged. She revolted against the accepted convention of women's place in the routine of life, and revolted against the formalism and hypocrisy, the harshness and cruelty that she noticed around her. She felt concerned for the desperate condition of the widows:

Nay, let her be! …what comfort can we give
For joy so frail, for hope so fugitive?
The yearning of unfulfilled delight,
The moonless vigils of her lonely night,
For the abysmal anguish of her tear,
And flowering springs that mock her empty years?
('Dirge', The Sceptred Flute, p. 67.).

Toru Dutt constitutes 'Savitri' as the archetype of patriarchally prescribed Indian womanhood; however, she ultimately uses her retelling of the legend to redefine traditional Indian notions of ideal wifeliness. Dutt's highly traditional depiction of Indian womanhood becomes more progressive as she reveals Savitri's girlhood freedom. In the sixth stanza, Savitri's sexual purity is replaced by Dutt's surprisingly vivid depiction of her physical response to Satyavan, upon whose "tall and lithe" body she "looked and looked" before "she went away/Leaving her virgin heart behind".. In stanza fourteen, Savitri tells her father:

"When I have given
My heart away, though but in thought,
Can I take back? Forbid it, Heaven!
It were a deadly sin, I wot."

Kamala Das, pioneer in modern feminist poetry, speaks of her 'endless female hungers' in her iconoclastic poetry. Das' provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, women's roles in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity, and the political and personal struggles of marginalized people.

Love and sexual carving are the pervasive themes with Indian women writers from the time of Vedas. Das, with candour and unflinching honesty, deals with various facets of love. She advocates free love /sex as an instrument of self discovery. Das declares sex as the only plausible substitute for real love. Her hypothesis is that woman's carving for real love can be fulfilled in physical union with a man.

In Rushdie's Fury, the author explores male rage through figures of archetypal femininity. The two central tropes in the novel are mythical "Furies" and "living dolls"- either cyborg creations or "real" women dollified and finally murdered by their male lovers. Charting the move from "doll" as representation of the "real" thing to "living women [who] wanted to be doll-like, to cross the frontier and look like toys", Rushdie concludes: "Now the doll was the original, the woman the representation" . Does this reversal further reinforce women's positioning as objects, or does Rushdie offer a critique of this objectification of women?

In Salman Rushdie's novel 'Shame', his representation of women is misogynist because of the way in which the female characters are overwhelmingly characterized by "madness, sexual frenzy, nullity of being, [and] fevers of the brain" in contradistinction to a representation wherein "women are not, in any fundamental sense, mere victims of history; much more centrally, omen have survived against very heavy odds and have produced history."

To conclude, Feminism in Indian English writers have stated that their gender is incidental and that they write, as sensitive human beings and that their subjects or the forms they choose are not dictated by their being female. Yet there are areas of experience that are available only to women or which are ignored by men or described by them in their male-centered terms. Women writers have considered such experiences worthy of exploration and female patterns of living and dealing with the world have produced a female perspective.

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