



CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Dr. Ashti Alamgeer

White Cottage, New Colony, Dharampur, Samastipur

ABSTRACT

The present paper looks at the historical background of the rise of feminism and women's movement in India. Not only in India but all over the world there has been a close link between feminism and the women's movement, each inspiring and enriching the other. In the Indian context, while the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is a modern one. Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. In the pre-independence era, the women's movement began as a social reform movement in the 19th century. At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by our educated elite through the study of English and the contact with west. This western liberalism was extended to the women's question and was translated into a social reform movement. In the post-Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for overall economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increased concern for equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns. Women's studies and now Gender studies is also an off shoot of the long history of women's movement in India.

KEYWORDS : Feminism, Gender equality Non Government Organization, Women's Movement

Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. One can clearly see the history of feminism as consisting of three waves. The apparent pattern of rise and fall of feminism over time has led to the wave analogy, the peaks and troughs of the feminist movement are characterized as following the motion of tidal waters, with its ongoing cycle of gradual swelling, eventual cresting and final subsiding (Jane Pilcher; Imelda Whelehan, 2004, p. 52). The first wave was in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century's, primarily concerned with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the rights to suffrage. In Britain the Suffragettes campaigned for the women's vote. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses. In 1928 this was extended to all women over eighteen (Melanie Philips, 2004). The second wave was in the 1960s and 1970s when protests were centered on women's inequality not only in the context of women's political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality and work. Second-wave Feminism has existed continuously since then, and continues to coexist with what is termed third-wave Feminism.

Modern Indian literature

The dawn of the new era of modern Indian literatures may be said to ignite in the late nineteenth century. In the writings of this time, the impact of Western civilization, the rise of political consciousness, and the change in society was perceptible. A large number of writers made synthesis between Indianization and Westernization in their search for a national ideology. In the meantime, the Indian feminism too advanced by the stimuli of Western feminism, however it took slightly different route from that of the West. All these attitudes were combined to bring about the renaissance in 19th century India. Antonia Navarro holds, "The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife, this subject matter often been considered superficial compared to the depiction of repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes" 1. Reformers supported female education in India, believing that social evils could be eliminated through the education of the women. Indian women writers gave a new dimension to the Indian literature, in that they vented their deep seated feelings by way of art and literature. Contemporary writers like, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamla Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Krishna Udayasankar, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy etc. have challenged the society for metamorphosis of

womens' status2.

Emergence of nationalism

Indian writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee³, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Pt. Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, to name a few, have made use of this newly acquired concept to break down the caste system in Hindu society. Despising the caste system Bankim wrote, "Due to the caste distinction grave differences had emerged between the higher and the lower castes, a thing unknown in the whole of the civilized world". Bankim also thought of national unity. He continued, "This unity in policy can only be acquired through the medium of English...for Sanskrit is now dead; the English language is the common ground for the communication between Punjabies and Bengalies. With this hope will be built the knot of Indian Union. Therefore, let the English spread as far as it can..." (Cf. Firoz Alam, op. cit., pp 238-241).⁴ Rabindranath Tagore was (1861-1941) was a poet, novelist, patriot and a philosopher. He was the first Asian to receive Nobel prize for literature in 1913 for Gitanjali. He is the writer of National Anthem of India and was also the exponent of Swadeshi. F. Alam writes, "Rabindranath Tagore was to India what Goethe was to Germany and Wordsworth to England. He stands as a literary landmark. Human relationship was another topic of his interest. His poems were inspired by the nationalist movements" (Cf. Firoz Alam, pp. 195-196).⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru was born in a wealthy and aristocratic Brahmin family in Allahabad on 14th November, 1889. At the age of 15, Nehru was sent to England to pursue education in English language. He was deeply interested in literature, politics, economics and history. Nehru returned to India in 1912 and joined Allahabad High Court as a barrister. He joined his political career after meeting Mahatma Gandhi at Lucknow in 1916. (Cf. P. B. Rathod, Indian Political Thinkers, New Delhi: Commonwealth, 2006, pp. 174-175).⁶ Promilla Kapur, Empowering the Indian Woman, New Delhi: Publications Division, 2001, p.6.⁷ The name of Sarojini Naidu figures in the topmost level of nationalists fighting against the British to secure independence of the country. As an indefatigable worker of the Indian National Congress and a political stalwart, her name may be mentioned along with that of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose and Maulana Azad, of nationalism to attack colonial rule. Rise of nationalism proved opportune for the women writers because in the name of nationalism, they could voice out the dormant oppression that had long been suppressed. Gandhiji was totally opposed to gender discrimination. He did not like Indian society's preference for a boy and general neglect of a girl child. He viewed, "Woman as the embodiment of sacrifice and

ahimsha"⁶. This idea gradually spread in the country and many common women came out to join in the national struggle for freedom, freedom not only from British rule but also for freedom of expression within the country. 2.1 Emergence of women after independence After independence, Indian English Literature has been growing rapidly both in quantity and quality. It began, through the momentous, outstanding, and vibrant contributions by the contemporary Indian writers as competent as the British, American, Australian, Canadian and African literature. The struggle for freedom was voiced in the form of writings. A great number of Indian writings are vehemently apprehensive about various ways and forms of oppression they undergo. This subjugation was both interior and exterior. Once treated as a solitary voice, is now audible in every sphere of life. Hence, having examined the role and the place of women from the earliest possible data in the first part, it is opportune to decipher where they stand in the era during and after the independence.

Search for modernity and British impact

The Indian English literature is a journey from nationalism to the search of nation. English education benefited the British for sure, but brought forth many social reforms and innovations to English literature paving the dawn of a new India. Writers like Sarojini Naidu⁷, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo⁸ through their lucid writings poured enthusiasm among the hearts of Indians. Sarojini Naidu tried to re-establish self-esteem within the women of India while Tagore filled the heart of the Indians with the sense of patriotism⁹. There emerged a champion of liberty in Raja Ram Mohan Roy who advocated the rights of women. He was determined to give women their proper place in the society. He acted as a bridge between India and England. His vision was to make India a new and modern country and Indians to become a virile new people. He abolished sati and advocated in favor of widow remarriage¹⁰. With his profound and pioneering fiction, Raja Ram enabled English readers to experience the spiritual depths of Indian culture. His writing is the voice of an ancient and insightful culture that speaks to the modern world¹¹.

Nayantara Sahgal, Mulk Raj, Shashi Deshpande, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya, Gita Mehta etc. are a few examples who searched for alternatives to existing literary models making Indian modernity a mosaic. This also emerged as a new creative force of resistance. It resisted the injustice and cruelty of the colonizers and manifested what we often referred to as the literary resistance¹².

Indian literary scene after independence

After independence, the Indian literature had an outstanding impact on the creative writing in various regional languages. Post-independence India did see a greater awareness on the part of the reading public as well as the government of the existence of many more and wealthier languages and literatures, outside the limited margin of one's own mother-tongue or province. „The partition of India did see an emotional scar in the souls of many writers, mostly in Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali literatures. Many moving short stories and poems have been written on this theme by authors like Amrita Pritam, Kartar Singh Duggal, Krishan Chander, Khushwant Singh, Premendra Mitra, Arundhati Roy and Manoj Basu, to mention a few names¹³.

The martyrdom of Mahatma Gandhi was another such event, about which soul-stirring poems were written by Vallathol Narayana Menon, Bhai Vir Singh, Shivmangal Singh Suman and others. So also things like identity crisis of the writers, the clash between traditional cultures and western modernity, the concept of experimentation under the Western influence is mostly found in the writings during those days. It emerged as a chase for new values and their sources. Several poets revealed the poet's solitary struggle in opposition to the

mounting crisis of uprooted identity. They wrote political poetry on the theme of agony and struggle. It was a poetry of commitment. Literature now enthused to the downtrodden and the exploited. „Likewise the woman has been a focus of many literary works; she is no longer a paragon of virtue and chastity to the extolled poets and philosophers. The Indian women are now making a stir out of their placed solecism. Arising political and social conscious in a fertile milieu have brought them out into the open protest against decimation, dowry, rape and exploitation. The woman in Indian novel now reflects the shift in the sensibility as a writer and reader¹⁴.

Contemporary literature;

In today's ultra adhunika (post-modern) era, the effort of the contemporary writers is to be natural, to be Indian, to be socially conscious and to be near to the common man. Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Shahshi Tharoor or Amitav Ghosh came out of the shadow of British English only to decorate the Indianized English distinctively¹⁵. Also the regional languages were freely used in the prose forms; thus breaking, restructuring and adding a new twist and dimension to the traditional narrative patterns. Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Marathi writers followed to the 'modern' and 'postmodern' idiom of writing. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand's work is supplied with Hindi and Punjabi words like 'haanaa', 'saalam-huzoor', 'shabash-shabash'. The most path breaking of all, however, is Arundhati Roy's use of untranslated Malayalam words in day to day conversations in her „The God of Small Things like 'chacko sir vannu', 'she is very beautiful sundarikutty', 'oower, orkunniley, kushambi'¹⁶.

Women in search of greater autonomy and freedom;

The impact of the English Literature reflected in the regional literatures of the subcontinent introducing several important changes in women's personal and professional life. Prolific Indian female authors in English like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande gave rise to the emergence of feminism in India¹⁷. Emancipatory women's writing has arisen sturdily in all Indian languages, seeking to subvert the man-dominated social order, forging revisionary myths and counter-metaphors by women writers like Kamala Das (Malayalam, English), Krishna Sobti (Hindi), Ashapura Devi (Bengali), Rajam Krishnan (Tamil) and others¹⁸. A large number of writers are in the process of identifying a pattern of problem-solving within the traditional system and sustain an indigenous process of renewal. English is no more a colonial language, writers are aware of their inheritance, complexity and uniqueness, and it is expressed in their work naturally. Feminism is an ideology that opposes the political, economic and cultural demotion of women to positions of inferiority. Feminists' condition in India have an unlike dispensation than that of Western feminism in that the Indian society has always been extremely hierarchical. There is also quite a lot of hierarchy within the family pertaining age, sex and ordinal position, genial and fine bond or within the community referring to the caste lineage, education, occupation and relationship with ruling power etc. have been upheld very sternly. In India the history of the modern Western feminist movements is divided into three waves Each wave is categorized by means of looking at the same feminist issues in a different perspective¹⁹.

The first-wave (1850-1915)

It refers to the feminist movement that occurred in between 1850–1915. Suma Chitnis, an eminent sociologist, from Maharashtra recalls how the most typical features of this movement was initiated by men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy along with other reformers like Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Matahari, Phule, Agarkar, Ranade, Tagore, Madan Mohan Malviya, Maharshi Krave and the women joined the crusade²⁰.

Second Wave (1915–1947)

During this period the battle against colonial rule was strengthened. Self-government became the pre-eminent cause. Gandhi legitimized and extended Indian women's public activities by calling them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj. He dignified their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance; and impressed a position for those in the public field. Peasant women played a vital role in the rural Satyagrahas of Borsad and Bardoli. Women organizations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) occurred. Women were dealing with issues involving to the scope of women's political participation, women's franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the nationalist and anti-colonialist freedom movement made the mass utilization of women to a fundamental part of Indian nationalism²¹

The third-wave (Post-independence-1947)

Prior to independence, most feminists accepted the sexual division within the labor force. Nevertheless, feminists of the 1970s dared to raise their voice against the inequalities and battled to reverse them. These included unequal wages for women, demotion of women to 'unskilled' spheres of work, and limiting women as a reserve army. The fruition is seen as in 1966 Indira Gandhi became the first female Prime Minister of India. She served as prime minister of India for three consecutive terms²².

CONCLUSION

The patriarchal society prevalent in India had jeopardized and crippled the Indian mind to such an extent that men thought that no woman was found worthy of education. Men considered themselves independent, superior and even almighty. A man was invariably the breadwinner whereas the woman was supposed only to share what the man had earned with his sweat and blood. It looked as though, a man's world would continue even without a woman. Traits are visible, that in ancient India, women though having an enormous potential, were being unutilized and underutilized. Customarily women were treated as 'abla' which means a weakling, dependent on men and confined to the four walls. Thanks to some courageous and daring women, today the table is being turned upside down. As the civilization changes, the societies go through transformation, Indian women too are on a crossroad not to prove them but to get out of the shadows of men. Today, women dare to walk shoulder to shoulder with men. They are ready to expose the splendour and beauty of the world in which they live have a better role to play than remaining mere spectators within the four walls of the house. The men who thought they were superior to women have now recognized the potentialities of women; women are not just spectator but partners and coworkers. Women are not inferior to man in rank or performance in anyway. This is true in the field of literature too.

References

1. Antonia Navarro-Tejero, Modern Indian women writers in English, (www.literature-study.online.com as on 24.04.2016).
2. Antonia Navarro-Tejero, Modern Indian women writers in English, (www.literature-study.online.com as on 24.04.2016).
3. M. F. Patel, Feminism in contemporary Indian women writers, Jaipur: Avishkar Pub, 1998, P.v.
4. Bankim Chandra Chatterji was a patriot, poet and a novelist. In the field of literature, in West Bengal, he is ranked after Madhusudan Dutta.
5. Firoz Alam, pp. 195-196).
6. P. B. Rathod, Indian Political Thinkers, New Delhi: Commonwealth, 2006, pp. 174-175).
7. Promilla Kapur, Empowering the Indian Woman, New Delhi: Publications Division, 2001, p.6.
8. Santanu Ganguly, "Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949)", in Studies in Indian Poetry in English, Kolkata: BooksWay, 2009, p. 73).
9. Monisha Sarkar and Subh Brat Sarkar, "Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950)", in Studies in Indian Poetry in English, Kolkata: BooksWay, 2009, p. 45).
10. Firoz Alam, op. cit., p. 196.
11. Ibid., p. 301.
12. Robert L. Hardgrave, Word as Mantra: the Art of Raja Rao. Austin: University of Texas, 1998, p. 60.

13. Jasvant Rathod, "The Indian literature in English: a journey from nationalism to search of nation", Researchgate, Vol. 1, Multi Disciplinary Edu Global Quest, October 2012, pp. 156-158.
14. M. F. Patel, please see the left cover flap.
15. Shanta Krishnaswamy, The woman in Indian fiction in English, New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 2001, pp. 53-56.
16. M. F. Patel, op. cit., p. vi.
17. Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things, London : Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 304-340.
18. Shubha Mukherjee, "Anita Desai and her Women," in Feminism in Contemporary Indian Women Writers, M. F. Patel (ed.), pp. 51-59.
19. A N Shrivastava, The Champion of Indian Fiction, New Delhi: Mohit Publication, 2011, p. 27.
20. Priya D. Wanjari, Understanding Feminism, Philosophy, Waves and Achievement, Nagpur: Dattsons, 2014, p.
21. Suma Chitnis, The Crisis in Higher Education, Surat: Centre for Social Studies, 1993, pp. 1-2.
22. Firoz Alam, op. cit., pp. 41-43.
22. Ibid, pp. 27-29.