

Feminist Literature: Empowering Women, Transforming India



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Abstract

The present paper attempts to understand the socio-academic stature of women in India with special reference to feminist literature. Literature is not merely a collection of fanciful tales, reflecting emotions of myriad shades but it mirrors a holistic view of the social, economic, political, and educational evolution of the society. Literature is highly influential and productively inspiring, irrespective of gender biasness. Literature is multi-dimensional as it provides vocabulary, vision, values and more significantly, the power to make decisions during all oddities of life. But by and large, it empowers half the population on earth to unshackle themselves from the oppressions of masculine and patriarchal society. This paper also investigates the impact of feminist literature in uplifting the social standards of women who had been victimized since ages. Feminism was a revolution in order to establish equal rights for women in every sphere of life ranging from power to politics, war to worship and fashion to education. Feminist literature opened a new world for women in terms of social equality, literacy, education employment and even added resplendent wings to their dreams and aspirations. The article tries to estimate the active role of literature in the upliftment of women in gender biased society through the literary capacity of feminist writers. It also seeks to analyze and describe the ways in which literature portrays the dominance of male gender. It tries to explore the socio-economic, socio-political and psychological forces engrossed within literature. Furthermore, this study aims to evaluate the need to liberate feminine gender for the growth and development of a nation like India.

Keywords: Feminist Literature, Women Empowerment, Gender Biasness, Social Liberation, Educative Potential.

Introduction

Women and woes are complimentary to each other. This crude and bitter reality has been expounded in literature of all times. Literature is multi-dimensional. It replicates life in all its form voicing not only the saga of extreme suffering but the towering growth of the feminine gender as well. More significantly, literature empowers an individual to make decisions during all oddities of life. Since ages women have been suppressed by the masculine gender. In this context Ajit Kumar Sinha opines, "Women in India are, by and large victim of social, economic and political exploitation"¹.

In January 2019 the United Nations Population Fund released its report which denounced the global priority needs for women and girls as they are highly affected by crisis. The report further illustrates that 35 million women and girls are required to be prevented from gender-based violence in India. Indian demography proudly utters that women comprise approximately 48.18% of the total population, merely 1.82% less than the masculine gender yet the social status of women is million miles away in terms of holistic development and social justice. The National Crime Records Bureau data reflect how incidents of rapes have gone up by 12-15%, while other crimes have risen by 3-5%. Heinous cases like sex and rape with women registered as NCRB data states that the year 2018 witnessed 35,527 cases in UP, 31,126 in Maharashtra, 28,135 in Rajasthan and 6,518 in Jharkhand. We can't simply neglect the rough realities of women exploitation where 11,332 women and girls getting trafficked every year.

But there is other side of the picture as well. Certainly, significant gains have been made over the past decades. There have been considerable developments in the status of women due to the inception of a revolutionary term, Feminism. Feminism is a social movement and ideology that fights for the political, economic and social rights for women. Feminists believe that men and women are equal, and women deserve the

same rights as men in society. The strong wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s helped theorize a woman's discourse. A feminist text can lead to a better understanding of the woman's condition. Thus the very basis of feminism which is reformist in nature helps women to understand their position in a better manner. In this context Linda Gordon holds the opinion that, "...feminism is an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out to change it deserves a mention".²

The progress of a nation depends solely on the way it treats its women. And when women use their mighty pen to change the world, no barriers dare to hinder the way. Today names like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Shobha De and Jhumpa Lahiri have established themselves as the eminent Indo-Anglican writers of the International repute. Their creative capacity is not limited to an art but all forms of art. In the field of cinema, women like Rekha, Smita Patil, Shabana Aazmi, Vidya Balan and Konkona Sen are such names who don't play feminised roles, but have asserted themselves over this male-dominated realm. In the field of Politics, from Indira Gandhi to Shiela Dixit, Uma Bharti, Sushma Swaraj, Smriti Zubin Irani, Vasundhara Raje, Mayawati and Mamata Banerjee today, are strongly making their presence felt.

Objectives of the Study

The present paper aims to understand the development and growth of women in empowering themselves as one of the strongest pillars of social, economic, political and literary flag-bearers of the nation. It emphasizes the role of Feminist writers in reflecting the sufferings of women in India. The gender inequality prevalent in India has been ruled out by the extreme efforts of these writers who have not only dealt with the pains of feminist gender but have also created a spark to

live and fight for justice.

Feminist literature or Women's literature encompasses several psychological and physical traumas which the women have suffered through ages. These realistic presentations in the literary texts have enriched women with the miserable life led by women in the past. Drawing lessons from the past, women today have strengthened themselves and are progressive towards their own academic and social development. There is an earnest love for education amongst them so as to improve their stature.

This paper intends to educate women folk to fight for social injustice and gender discrimination. Through the literary plots and the factual data reflected in literature, the feminine gender can get the basic idea and ways to beat and defeat such social evils which are harassing them. The various measures implied by the eminent authors in their writings can be well understood by the women-folk of contemporary India. Their suggested ways to fight against women oppression can be boldly faced and challenged by women.

The present women are well educated in urban and sub-urban India but the rural India is still facing the suppression of the masculine. This article will empower such rural women to raise their voice

against the oppression and harassment which has befriended them. They would know their rights and the various programs launched by the Government to empower them.

Review of Literature

Megha K. Thakar. & Dr. Minakshi D. Desai, (2013) in their research paper "Gender Inequality Against Women – A psychological perspective", discusses the social issues which make women unequal with men. This paper starts with the description of achievement of women, as they have succeeded in different fields as the ruler and controller of the country and how discriminatory attitudes towards them have existed for generations and affects over their lives. So, they are struggling both at home and at work place simultaneously. In fact "these different manifestations of inequality are not generally independent from one another and that, this interdependence can replicate inequalities over times."³

S. Giriappain 1997 has analysed the women empowerment with the corresponding levels of discrimination and effectiveness of decision-making by women in different rural enterprises and concluded that the female headed households were effective in taking decision in respect of work mobility, schooling, health care, asset creation, employment generation and social participation in low social status households. The informal empowerment was wide spread through women earning members, their decisions were subjected to various degrees of discrimination by males.⁴

Saradha in the year 2001 reported that the product empowerment of women in self-help groups was found to range from high and low with 35.80 and 35.00 per cent, respectively. It indicated that even though the women are psychologically empowered but their real empowerment level was low. The possible reasons for this may be the patriarchal society where the women are regarded as weaker section and the managerial competencies, decision-making power, reduction in drudgery, assessing information and resources and critical awareness of rural women were found to be low because of the lack of general media exposure, low level of education and lack of recognition.⁵

Thus it can be said with a reasonable amount of confidence that reviews on the extent of empowerment generally reveal that majority of the women belonged to low and medium level of empowerment. It indicated that even though they are statistically empowered the real empowerment level was very low.

Main thrust

Woman is worshipped as a deity in India. She is honoured as a goddess. There are certain traits in women which cannot be paralleled by men ever. Her characteristics are so unique and special that. Nishikant Jha believes, "Women have certain characteristics gifted by nature, particularly physical and emotional, which are different from men in many ways"⁶. Post-modern Indian woman is so dexterous, proficient and self-sufficient that she can be easily called a superwoman, juggling many fronts single-

handedly. Women are now highly skillful and ambitious and are proving their metal not only on the home front, but also in their respective professions. Indian women are traversing all across the social and professional sphere. They are joining the universities and colleges in large numbers. They mark their presence in all kinds of professions like engineering, medicine, politics, teaching, etc. Their progress is very gradual and it needs to be checked promptly. Their priority is still as a home-maker.

Feminist literature has added intrinsic powers to women. It has boosted their morale and has empowered them to much greater extent. We define women empowerment as giving the women the power to decide and discover all that she wants. Women empowerment is giving a crucial authority to the female gender. It has been proved since time immemorial that women are more responsible when tackling a situation, so delegating authority with confidence is the first step towards women empowerment. Women should have rights and power to face the challenges of life. When we analyze empowering women, it focuses on the confidence and courage to break the barriers of patterns of society and the religious conventions that kept usually women suppressed.

Feminism in India is not only as an impact of the western feminist movement. Its evolution in India soil also credits to the dawn of an independent national identity that India obtained after her independence. It resulted in new awareness among the women folk. The Indian women are actually trapped between tradition and modernity. She is bearing the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future are the crux of feminism in Indian literature. Sushila Singh has the following interpretation "while dealing with feminism as an ideology and also as a critical tool, it is too essential to take note of the fact that it assumes various configurations in accordance with racial, and cultural variations".⁷

Feminism in India has largely grown from Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, R.P. Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahgal and various other eminent writers like Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Nina Sibal, and Bharati Mukherjee. These writers, by and large have highlighted the internal social fabric of the emancipated women sensibility and the saga of tortures since ages. But this scenario has changed and is gradually witnessing a change in the subject-matter, tone and temperament of the Indian English fiction. Modern Indian women have now acquired a mounting character and substance. It has substantially paved way for a new dimension of the Indian novel in English.

Indian women novelists have contributed a lot to the Indian fiction in English. Women are said to be the natural and born storytellers. Their fiction can create a vivid imagery of sentiments and perception and can bring a different approach of the world view. The work of novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande has been widely acclaimed and noticed.

Among these prolific writers is Shashi Deshpande, who has skillfully portrayed the

suffering of women and her individual struggle to secure her social status and financial liberty. In one of her most celebrated novel "The Dark Holds No Terrors", she casts a very strong protagonist, Sarita. Since her childhood she faced the stigma of being woman not only by the social members but her mother as well. So there are certain do's and don'ts for her. Sarita, familiarly known as Saru was constantly reminded of complexion so that she can easily be appreciated by the groom and his mother. Deshpande's women character like Saru rebels the entire social norms whenever her identity is being challenged. Her mother's assertive reluctance compels her to study medicine and finally she establishes herself as a doctor.

The women characters of Deshpande are strong and resistant to her decisions for when being asked by her mother not to marry Manohar, a man of lower case, Saru followed her instincts and married him. Deshpande is trying to concentrate on society where most of the women are not economically and ideologically independent. So she presents such characters who want to create a space of their own to serve as a living symbol. This marriage landed her to severe physical torture, deep psychological trauma and oppression which finally prompted her to leave her husband's home and look forward to her father. Here she tries to create her own identity as a doctor. "Saru's journey is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self."⁸

When we look at different genres in Indian English literature, the representation of women has been written with importance. The aim behind portraying women was to empower the position of women, particularly women in India. Toru Dutt was the first Indian woman poet who wrote in English. Her poems painted archetypes of Indian womanhood, such as Sita and Savitri, displaying suffering of the women, reinforcing conventional myths and self-sacrificing roles in a patriotic manner.

Kamala Das is yet another poet who wrote a poignant and vigorous poetry, depicting not only the man-woman relationship as a major theme but the agony of women too. Her poems were constructed on woman's suppression by the men in the society, through the string of relationship. The miseries of woman can be felt clearly portrayed her poem "The Stone Age."

You turn me into a bird of stone,
a granite dove,
you build round me a shabby drawing room
and strike my face absentmindedly while you
read. (*The Best of Kamala Das*)⁹

The agony and pain takes a heavy toll in the poems of Kamala Das. There is a sense of alienation and sorrow. It helps to ignite minds of other women to get up and voice their sufferings to the world. Her literary pieces cast the women in the most oppressive state.

The rudeness of the patriarchal society was well reflected in yet other poems of her. She writes on the suppression of women in the society by the

masculine gender. In one of her famous poem, "The Old Play House", she strongly voices her protest against the male domination and the humiliation:

. . . Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your Questions I mumbled incoherent replies . . . (*The Old Playhouse*)¹⁰

Male domination was depicted in such a manner that brought out a sympathetic attitude in the reader, and thus generated pathos in her poems.

When we talk about short stories and novels, many Indian women writers have portrayed the female subjectivity in order to establish the female identity in the male dominated society. The central idea in all such works hover around the suffocation faced by woman due to the domination of men. There are prolific writers like NayantaraSahgalwho reaches to explore the female identity in her novels and tries to unveil the real situation of women in her works. She tries to break the complicated notions, beliefs about the society, thus bringing out root cause of the female suppression. The exploitation and suppression is well expounded in *The Day in Shadow*.

"The Day in Shadow" reflects the sufferings of a woman in rural Indian society when the protagonist opts to dissolve a seventeen year old marriage. The story gives a sensitive account of the agonized life of a divorced middle aged woman, Simrit. Her marriage with Som, an industrialist turns out to be a disaster. A divorced woman is neither appreciated by the society nor gets an opportunity to grow. She is discarded by the society. Simrit struggles hard to build a new life for herself inch by inch. She has been, as the novel reads, "an over-loaded donkey...with its back breaking, and no one doing anything about it, not because they can't see it, but because it's a donkey and loads are for donkey's".¹¹

Writers like Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Suan Viswanathan have written about the urban middle class, thus showing the struggle of modern women to cope up with the rules of the male dogmatic society at different levels. The screams of women were made black and white by these writers.

Many Indo-English women writers like JhumpaLahiri and BharatiMukherjewere pro-active in showing concern for carrying out the problem of female suppression. Their works reflected women exploitation and provided unique identity to the modern women. The concerns even extended for Anita Desai. In her novels, particularly psychological novels, there is an image of a suffering woman fighting and struggling within herself with frustration. Her characters differentiate the two worlds, the male-centered and female-centered narrative. "These women writers' works have thus witnessed their incorporated experience of the two worlds, in an attempt to make a new, empowering image of women. Their stories realize both the diversity of a woman and the diversity within each woman rather than limiting the lives of woman to one ideal, these writers push the ideals towards the full expression of each woman's potential."¹²

Examining the plot of the Indian woman writers, one can appreciate both the diversity of woman and diversity within each woman. The feminist woman of thoughts allowed the writers as critics to attack the petty sexual difference in the patriarchal ideology. Another, most recent development of the feminist view was of an over-arching gender theory, which considers gender, both male and female, as a social construction upon biological differences. Critics of this vein found gender as imprisoning and voiced their views against this prejudice. Images of male-wrought representation of woman came under fire, prompting the emergence of a unique female consciousness and a feminist tradition in the literature.

Conclusion

Feminist literature in India emphasized on the sufferings and exploitations of women by the male-dominated society. These texts reflected the agony of women and they tried to head towards enabling women to fight for her right. Empowering women was a challenging task and in order to acknowledge that gender based discrimination, awareness and education was of primary significance. Suppression of women was a social malice and it cannot be removed by mere adoption of few laws or policies. Many laws are only found on paper, but are not implemented in actual terms. The powerful section of the society, masculine gender never tried to uplift the status of women in India rather was a contrary approach towards them.

After independence the Indian English feminist literature thus took up challenge modify this society by giving women their space and liberty. These women writers addressed the diverse problems and issues of women. They used their might pen to in build social revelation and sought solutions to her problems. They took up the responsibility to address this complex issues related to women sufferings. It was through their realistic representation of women's life in their works, these writers tried to build a new awakening in the society.

Literature is reflected not only through text but also through pictographic representation. Indian cinema is flooded with such valour of feminism. The legendary role played by NargisDutt in *Mother India* is one amongst many. A woman's fight for justice is well spelled in *Damini* as she rebels against her husband and in-laws to bring her rapist brother-in-law to book. The outrageous dialogue of Ketki in *Mrityudand*, You are my husband, don't ever try to become a greater god translates the women empowerment very well. Whether it's a girl's determination to pursue a sport despite her father's disapproval in Mary Kom or the bold and independent women in Queen, womanhood takes the lead in the contemporary India.

The dawn of new India has empowered women to dream and to translate that dream into reality. There have been new avenues created for women and in some jobs feminine gender is given more privilege than male. The dusk of a black age has come to the climax and women today have achieved their social prestige and a high stature in the society. Women are no longer a slave to the male, but have

created her own identity. In giving such a respectable place to women, these women writers mentioned above have used their pen judiciously and strongly.

In making the feminine gender strong at all fronts of life, the awareness which was brought by these writers is really commendable. These women writers brought a strong wave of feminism in India. It was through their educative talent that they were able to arouse a sensibility of the society and provided an optimistic platform to the women in India.

Feminist Literature has certainly changed the perception of the society and has provided women a respectable position in the society. Feminist literature has equipped the authors to challenge the unchallenged and they have sincerely used their might to alter the condition of women in our society. Women have been educated through feminist literature and awareness has been created through the literary canvas. They are acquiring skills and getting educated and are participating in every walk of life sometimes parallel and sometimes ahead of masculine gender.

End Notes

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