

Feminism in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist writing/criticism is one of the recent trends in modern literary criticism. The Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s is the main motivating force behind this movement. Juliet Mitchell's essay "Woman: the Longest Revolution" (1966), Mary Ellamann's *Thinking About Women* (1968), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Bronte to Lessing* (1970), Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of Medusa" (1975) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981) are the pioneering works in the direction of the evolution of feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism is a powerful organ for the expression of feminine sensibility and aspirations in innovative linguistic and stylistic patterns. It is chiefly concerned with the interpretation and reinterpretation of texts of women writers. Women have been writing about their experiences in a male dominated world since long but it gained currency in the 1960s. The feminist writing of the 1960s was mainly concerned with: it examined the representation of women in literature and probed the mode and manner of the construction of those descriptions. It found it imperative to interrogate the circumstances and authority and purpose of the descriptions. It positioned itself to resist the ideology that existing images of women propagated in society. It discovered the importance of working through books, literature and other mass media circulation of images of women as the most way of affecting everyday conduct and attitudes. The feminist writing and thinking of the 1970s is the investigation and elaboration of patriarchal systems. Patriarchy indicates the structures through which male domination over women is achieved.

Feminist writing seeks to unveil the mindset in men and women that perpetuates gender inequality. Specific heed is paid to male writers constructing typical and influential images of women. Feminist criticism of the period is certainly abrasive, polemical and combative. Add to this fact that in the 1980s, feminist criticism began to be influenced by the development of other branches of literary theory. It also veered away from the critique of a male version of the world. It acknowledged that the history of civilization/mankind has been formulated as the history of men, and women have been rendered invisible in that narrative. Feminism then solicits to recuperate women from the periphery of history and make women's experience visible. In other words, it explores the nature of women's experiences and seeks to reestablish the lost/suppressed narratives of women's experience.

"Our country belongs to its men", proclaims Aunt Lila in Anita Desai's novel *Voices in the City* (1965). Lila's statement is indisputable for women in India have been treated shabbily by their fathers, husbands and other male members of the society. For instance, father and husband recognized women as their property which can be possessed, managed and disposed of the way they desired and it continued until Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the father of Indian renaissance, came. He raised his voice against ignominious customs such as polygamy, purdah, child marriage, female infanticide, the practice of sati and worked tirelessly to establish educational facilities for women. He infused the spirit of equality among the Indian masses. Thereafter, it was Mahatma Gandhi who gave a new impetus and guideline to the Feminist movement in India.

He liberated women from docility, servitude and domesticity. He asserted that men and women were comrades, sharing equal responsibilities in social life and identical rights in political sector. Moreover, he believed that men and women complement each other, and one is not in any way whole without the other. The National freedom struggle of India did much to redeem Indian women from the clutches of subjugation and superstition. Savitribai Phule, Sarojini Naidu, Kamini Roy, Ramabai Ranade, Margaret Cousins, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Annie Besant etc. played an important role in order to get rid of what Chaman Nahal, known for his novel *Azadi*, calls 'dependence syndrome.' In this context John E Abraham observes:

“Feminism in India can be traced to the days of Ram Mohan Roy and the Atmiya Sabha he started in 1914. The emancipation of Indian woman was a byproduct of Gandhiji’s non-co-operation movement. The Independence struggle paved the way for women out of the hearth and chimney nooks into the life of the nation. It gave them an opportunity to realize the potentiality they possessed.” (P. M. Nayak et al 22)

Traditionally, India had a male-chauvinist society. Indian woman in literature as well as in life had no independent character. Anita Desai beautifully portrays these details in *Voices of the City*:

Always Bengali women ... follow five paces behind their men. They wear saris of the dullest colours, beige and fawn and off-white, like the female birds in the cage, and there is something infinitely gentle, infinitely patient about their long eyes, the curve of their shoulders, their manner of walking, which arouses, not aggressiveness in one ... but a protective feeling ... I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Ramavana*, in the dim light of sooty lamps. (P. M. Nayak et al 8)

In pre-independence India the representation of womanhood in literary works was stale and perverted. It was either overstated or underestimated. In other words, it was improbable and imitative. Women didn’t hold an influential place in most of the Anglo-Indian novels. There is hardly any woman character in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*. Though there are few Indian women characters in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* yet they are sketched, not drawn. In Richard Collin’s *The Slayer Slain*, Mariam, the heroine, is portrayed as a woman of beauty and virtue. The earlier Indo-Anglian fiction of this time depict women as romantic, fascinating, wise and graceful. The writers of this period treated women’s lives, beliefs, experience and values as peripheral.

They assumed that literature about public life was more important than about individual life. The novels published during this period mostly show that ideas of dutifulness and allegiance are the true ideals of Indian girls and girlhood. Besides, they also picture the suffering of women. Bankim Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife*, Lakshmi Debi’s *The Hindoo Wife*, Toru Dutt’s *Bianca* and Kali Lahiri’s *Roshinara* belong to this category. It is pertinent to mention that the earlier works of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya also present woman in the traditional image, i.e. an object of pity and with no will of her own. So, M. Anand’s Laxmi in *Coolie* and K. Markandaya’s Rukmani in *Nectar in Sieve* are the typical traditional women characters, who have no autonomous existence, of this period. Raju’s mother in R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* is a mere shadow of her husband. Therefore, in early Indian novel the image of womanhood was motherhood—unselfish, ever-forgiving and all-suffering.

With the emergence of Western education and culture, the Indian woman has emanated as a new being. Due to the spread of education faith in traditional customs and values slowly and gradually got eroded. It paved the way for conflict between tradition and modernity. Bharati Mukherjee, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabvala Vimala Raina, Shoba De, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Jhumpa Lahiri in their works traverse the dichotomy between traditional and the newly imbibed values. Their female characters are entirely different from the earlier women characters, i.e. they not only occupy the centre of the stage but show determination enough to fight against social evils and male supremacy.

They brought into Indian English fiction multifaceted women characters. Their women include hawkers, gypsies, prostitutes, painters, nuns and employed ones which are rarely seen in the early fiction. The novels such as S. Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terror*, B. Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters*, N. Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us*, J. Nimbkar’s *Temporary Answers*, A. Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain*, K. Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* A. Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and J. Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* exhibits that it is not only a question of women as the protagonists rather they are motivating factors in society, initiating and controlling the dynamics of both their lives and that of others in the glimmering world of ours. Moreover, the recent India fiction, particularly written by women, portrays that women are rational/intellectual, and independent-minded beings; they are capable of taking decisions; they running their lives on one’s own choice; they are no more dependent on father’s/husbands and so on. And last but not the least, the Indian English novelist presents women characters who symbolize the emerging spirit of feminine freedom.

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