

The Voice of Feminism in Odia Literature

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ABSTRACT : *Feminism, in literature as well as otherwise, began as an expression of dissatisfaction regarding the attitude of the society towards the identity and rights of women. However, slowly, it evolved to empower women to make her financially, socially and psychologically independent. In the field of literature, it evolved to finally enable the female writers to be free from the influence of male writers as well as the social norms that suggested different standards for male and female*

KEYWORDS – *Feminism, identity and rights of women, empower women, free from the influence of male writers, Sita, Draupadi, Balaram Das, Vaishanbism, Panchasakha, Kuntala Kumari, Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Nandini Satapathy, Prativa Ray, Pratiova Satapathy, Sarojini Sahu, Ysohodhara Mishra*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

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". The primeval myth carries an unambiguous implication of woman's image in life and literature for centuries.

World's two of the most prehistoric greatest epics, **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata** written by two sages **Valmiki** and **Ved Vyas** have been composed pivoting around two central characters **Sita** and **Draupadi**, both women. It was during this time that the nascent stages of feminism was born in ancient Indian literature, the illustration of which needs no further introduction - the tribulations of both Sita and Draupadi is perhaps realised by every Indian presently. The key role women played in literature and life in the past and present in both parts of the globe is equally significant. In ancient Vedic literature, women were elevated to Devis (Goddesses); they were turned into myths and legends. Her real identity of a woman however was provided by the primordial myth, that is social stereotypes which have been suggested, are two poles of feminine experience in the world. Sita absorbs all harshly imposed desolation and mortification of the male ego, whereas, Draupadi challenges the male ego to the epitomic limits of human excellence. Sita accepts, accommodates and withdraws; Draupadi resents, rejects and involves herself in the process of life as a protagonist. These two feminine archetypes define the limits of feminine experience in reality, especially the Indian literary reality. Even in the present day Indian literature, the gender division moves between new 'iconisations' of these two bold and prehistoric figures.

II. WOMEN & LITERATURE

Just like any other field, the world of literature has always been dominated by men. So when we have a William Shakespeare, a Leo Tolstoy, an Ernest Hemingway and even our home-grown Chetan Bhagat or Amish Tripathy, ever wondered why it's so important for women to write or to voice their opinion at all? The answer is simple. It's because half of us are women and we must have our representation in every walk in life, so is literature. If a man writes a story on women, doesn't matter how good he is at the skill, he ends up briefing only

the incidents; on the other hand when a woman writes she details out what she undergoes, her psyche, her innermost feelings and those emotions could be only narrated through first hand experiences.

Introduction of Feminism in Odia Literature:

If coming down more down the line, keeping aside the predominated 'Hinduistic' beliefs of Vedic Period, the post-Christian era in its just-blooming period, also has retained visions of feminism, not surprisingly from a woman, but from a man. Times during those that is being mentioned, the Indian indigenous cultural background was not much doused within anti-womanly sentiments and badgering the fairer sex with ungainly measures. 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 were men. Balam Das, a poet well known in **Orissa** was a pioneer of feminism in India. It can be said that long before the idea of feminism had come up in Europe Balam Das, a poet of the 16th century had brought forth the concept of male domination of women in a strictly patriarchal society. Poet Balam Das was also known as revivalist of **Vaishnavism**. Popularly known as Panchasakha he had a considerable influence on **Oriya Literature**. Lakshmi Purana composed by Balam Das was an example of a piece of literature which talked of women liberation and had given birth to the spirits of feminism. But in reality Lakshmi Puran was written to popularize a Brat or Vrat. (Vrat or Brat means a custom of fasting which is observed by the women to please a particular god or a goddess. Every Vrat or Brat has a legend associated with it which is to be recited while worshipping that god or goddess.

Feminist writers in India today proudly uphold their cause of 'womanhood', through their write-ups. The literary field is most bold to present feminism in Indian literature in the hands of writers like **Amrita Pritam** (Punjabi), Kusum Ansal (Hindi) and Sarojini Sahoo (Oriya), 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.

Women suffered neglect due to male chauvinism

The work of the women writers has not been given its due importance in the past, most probably due to male chauvinism. In the past, the basic subject matter of women writers was the feelings of a woman while she is confined in the walls of a house, while the main authors used to write on vibrant themes. So the work of male authors was able to collect more praise from the readers. But In the last century, the readers acknowledged the work of women writers as a strong way to spread modernism and feminist statements. In the past 20 years, there has been a remarkable progress when we talk about feminist writings in the Indian literature. In today's generation, women writers are wealthier and are foreign qualified too.

Picture of Feminism in in Odia Literature:

Impact of Fakir Mohan Senapati:

Till 20th century women across the world had no voting rights and had little social acceptance as a scholar. Forget about India, even at the onset of nineteenth century books written by women writers in England used to get published with anonymous author. In popular cultures across the world women education has always taken a backseat and our homeland Odisha, Utkala or Kalinga was no different. The novelist Fakir Mohan Senapati's wrote timeless classic *Rebati*. In the novel, *Rebati* a small girl living in British era, was fortunate enough to get a generous father who educated her in a time where women education was believed to be a bad omen. After she started her journey an epidemic broke out in village and everyone including her father, mother and tutor died leaving behind the poor girl and her grandmother. The helpless old lady kept on taunting, cursing the girl at the peak of her voice for bring bad luck to the family till her last breath.

Kuntala Kumari Sabat:

The first name that comes to the picture is Dr Kuntala Kumari Sabat 1900-1938 – widely known as the first significant female poet of modern Odisha. She is the Charlotte Brontë for Odia literature. Charlotte Brontë one of the greatest novelists of all times from early 19th century England lived only 38 years, yet she has left behind her timeless classic, "Jane Eyre". Ms Sabat also lived for the exact same number of years 38; yet in this small period of time she earned a great reputation not only as the first lady doctor of Odisha, but also in the field of social work, freedom fight and literature. Unlike other Indian women writers of the past who used to write only on devotional concept, through her writings she raised her voice against many social evils such as purdah,

child marriage, casteism untouchability, discrimination against women, and advocated women's rights, steps towards their empowerment and widow remarriage. She also worked for Red Cross in Cuttack in those days. She practiced in Delhi as a doctor and continued writing in many languages Odia, Bangla, English and Hindi. Even she had been an inspiration to Dr Pratibha Ray in her childhood days. Like her widely acclaimed poem "Sephali Preeti" on the night flowering Jasmine she withered away at the tender age of thirty eight.

Sarala Devi

Sarala Devi – First woman MLA from Odisha was also a great writer. Born in an aristocratic Zamindar family in year 1904 Sarala devi got an opportunity to learn not only Odia which was her mother tongue, but also Bengali, Sanskrit and English from her tutor who used to teach her at home as woman education in schools and colleges in those days was not heard of. Though married against her wish at the tender age of fourteen, Sarala Devi found a like-minded human in her highly educated husband and later came up as a crusader of social evil to end child marriage, polygamy, dowry, Sati that had plagued the growth of women in the country. Secretary of Utkal Sahitya Samaj at Cuttack from 1943 to 1946, she has written around 30 books and 300 essays in her lifetime.

Rama Devi:

Jamnalal Bajaj award winner Smt Ramadevi Choudhury a writer, a freedom fighter, social reformer, and is arguably the first Odia woman traveler to Europe and also first woman politician in Odisha. During the salt satyagraha by Mahatma Gandhi she is said to travel from village to village inspiring women to join the independence movement in which she actively participated. Arrested many times and spent considerable period in jail for her work of courage this lady never knew awkwardness or fear. Her spectacular work of struggle and women empowerment is beautifully crafted in her autobiography "Mo Jibana Pathe". Rama Devi Women's autonomous college in state capital Bhubaneswar is a small tribute to Smt Choudhury's contributions to rising of women liberation in Odisha.

Sailabala Das

Adopted daughter of Utkala Gauraba Madhusudan Das was the first Odia woman in history to travel to England for higher studies. Sailabala became the first woman Honorary Magistrate of India. She was a pioneer in uplifting women education in Odisha by working in various leading positions in the space. Her written autobiography "A look before and after" published in 1956 serves a valuable record of her life and contemporary era. She also has penned "Tribute of a Daughter to Her Father" on her legendary father Shri Madhusudan Das. The renowned Sailabala Women's college in Cuttack is named after this great lady without whose contributions we Odia women perhaps would have been decades back in our prosperity.

Nandini Satpathy:

Smt Nandini Satpathy, the iron lady from Odisha had many feathers in her cap. She was the first as well as only woman chief minister of the state of Odisha working during 1972 and 1976, and at one point referred as the next Prime Minister of India after Smt Indira Gandhi. Her authored books have been translated to many different languages in India. Her last major literary work was translating Taslima Nasreen's Lajja into Odia.

Prativa Ray

The most famous women writer, the Murthidevi, Jnanpith as well as Padma Shree award winner Dr Pratibha Ray comes to the picture here. World traveler, social reformer and owner of so many titles for her spectacular work Dr Ray is a grounded person who is known for her punctuality and always true to her words.

Pratibha Satpathy

Sahitya academy award winner Smt Pratibha Satpathy is one of the leading poets of India who has been into this art for more than four decades. Many of her works she herself has translated to Hindi. The wider participation of Odia women in literature perhaps was after the 70s when we came across quite a new faces then who are well known writers of the current era; Sarojini Sahoo, Yasodhara Mishra, Sushmita Bagchi,

Sarojini Sahoo

Sahitya Academy award winner and writer of many Odia bestsellers Smt Sarojini Sahoo is a trendsetter feminist writer of India. She is also a columnist in The New Indian Express. She says, a woman lives all her life in fear, the feminine fear introduced to life during teenage, follows her during pregnancy and never leaving till death. In fact you would rarely come across with a writer who is so bold with her subject line who has no hindrances in discussing subjects of taboo be it puberty of menopause.

Yasodhara Mishra

A professor in English, a Sahitya academy award winner for her literary work and an activist who works for the upliftment of women of Kalahandi. Many of her stories are converted into telefilms and radio plays. Currently she is working on her project 'Festivals, Rituals and Gender: Women of Orissa'.

Sushmita Bagchi

Unlike most of the feminist writers of India, Smt Bagchi writes on health, poverty and illness. This lady from Odisha who started her writing career some 25 years back from Odia monthly journal Sucharita now is a Sahitya academy award winner. Many of her books translated to other Indian languages and currently started writing in English to reach the wider horizon, which is perhaps the need of the hour.

She writes her experience as follows. "I still remember my book launch in Bhubaneswar some 1.5 years back presided by Dr Pratibha Ray. Her words are still ringing in my ears, "Shabda Brahmo. Words are magical. The two biggest virtues in a writer are fearlessness and compassion". A writer has the ability to bring positive changes in society. A writer has the power to bring new ideas to the world. Today when the awareness of women inequality is slowly and steadily gaining public attention, it's the responsibility of more and more educated women to raise their voice through their pen so that womenfolk of our country would realize their appropriate role in society".

Some more notable developments of feminism in Odia literature:

The founding of a women's magazine called *Sucharita* in 1975 by Sakuntala Panda had a significant impact in helping female writers find a voice. Some of those writers are Giribala Mohanty, Jayanti Rath, Susmita Bagchi, Paramita Satpathy, Hiranmayee Mishra, Chirashree Indra Singh, Sairindhree Sahoo, Supriya Panda, Gayatri Saraf, Suniti Mund and Mamatamayi Chowdhry. Giribala Mohanty needs a special introduction for her deep sensitiveness for women's issues. Her poems depict the emotional binary of social apathy and the self-confidence of women. Her collections of Poems 'Streeloka' (Women), 'Kalijhia' (The Dark complexion Girl), 'Ma Habara Dukha' (The sorrow of being a mother) and 'Kati Katia Katyayani' expresses her feelings in a lucid and lyrical way. Sarojini Sahoo had a significant influence on these women, paving the way with a feminist approach to fiction and the introduction of sexuality in her work. She is known as the Simone de Beauvoir of India, though theoretically she denies the Hegelian theory of "Other" developed by de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex*. Unlike de Beauvoir, Sahoo claims that women are an "Other" from the masculine perspective, but that they are entitled to equal human rights according to Plato. Suniti Mund's Story Book 'Anustupa', Poetry Book 'Jhia' And Novel 'Abhisapta', 'Agarbatira Ghara'.

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