

The Feminist Flare in Indian Women Writing

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ABSTRACT: The contribution of female authors at Indo-English literature has markedly increased and that a greater awareness is also to be found, with many critics to direct their attention at the literary depiction of the modern Indian women's problems, be they of a psychological, emotional, a social or an economic nature. Women's literature is solely or overwhelmingly concerned with comprehensive investigations of a more fundamental nature i.e., common themes like the clash of cultures. The female writers, chose their themes within the confines of the clearly drawn 'sphere of women'. Thus writers initiated questioning traditional images by way of probing into meaning of a single experience; a mood or a sentiment based on a moment or moments of rebellion, a woman is given primary importance, and her relationship with man, in many cases her husband, is most touched upon. Besides, a number of stories depict experiences of girls or young women entering womanhood. These constellations, no doubt, do not differ very much from those of earlier writers but there is a significant difference, more often than not the relationship of man and woman is portrayed as being strained or women is portrayed as being disturbed or even questioned, what we call a feminist trend, and quite frequently this disturbance arises out of the woman's attempt to discover for herself a meaningful life in society, be it in her profession or in her social activities outside her home.

KEY WORDS: feminism, Individuality, womanhood, disempowerment, Rights of Woman

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The origin and demand of women empowerment which began late in the 18th Century more particularly with Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792) was ambivalent in nature simply because it tried to analyze the gender relationships in the binary of male and female. Mary Wollstonecraft was the wife of the philosopher William Godwin and the mother-in-law of the poet Shelley. Her whole life and her works were one long protest against the institutions that denied women's any other identity except the one they acquired through men. In her book she identifies the woman's body as the location of her disempowerment and attributes to it the responsibility for the political subordination of women. She refers to marriage as "legal prostitution". John Stuart Mill wrote his book 'The Subjection of Women' (1869). He advocates equality legal and social, to men and women alike. Mill's sympathetic attitude towards feminism was one aspect of his belief that the liberty of the individual is absolutely necessary for the development of the society. He wrote his book to show the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting not power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

Historically, women were not placed in a position where they could describe the society, issues related to human development and epoch related to their world. Woman had never been in position to context the discriminatory world radically. That is probably the reason that there is not a woman who has created a great philosophical religious system or great ideology on which the reformative values of human civilization could be based. However, the credit for an organized movement for women's rights goes to America. In 1818, the Seneca Falls declaration of Sentiments and Resolution, drawn and signed at the at the Obscure Village, Seneca Falls, New York, demanded for suffrage which carried social and political revolution for women's rights into new era.

In the 1920s there were clear signs of new and different approaches in relation to women writers and literature. This was noticeable in Virginia Woolf's on essays on women authors who suffered from economic and cultural disadvantages in what she termed a 'Patriarchal Society'. Her book 'A Room of One's Own' (1929) was to become a classic document of the feminist critical movement. She advocates herself to the issues of why there were so few women writers and why it is frequently difficult or impossible for a woman to write. Dorothy Richardson's very important twelve-volume stream of consciousness novel 'Pilgrimage', the first volume of which appeared in 1915 (and the last posthumously in 1967), centre on the female consciousness of the heroine. According to feminist theory, the subordination of women originated in primitive societies in which women served as objects of exchange between father dominated families that forward alliances, through marriages. Michael Ryan remarks, "The assumed norms in many societies are for women to be in charge of domestic

labour and child rearing while men engage in more public concerns.”³ The male domination results into male violence against women. Obviously, the question arises why women have been treated as subordinate to men. However, with the advent of new millennium the globalized world has become so small and compact. The woman of today is growing in height, in status, in leadership. She enjoys freedom in social, economic, judicial and personal strides crossing the threshold of house. She is steadily progressing in every walk of life. But the greatest problem woman is that she is a ‘woman’. She is shackled in the chains of traditions, conventions and age old social barriers. Today she is riding two boats simultaneously. She moves forward to new achievements, new avenues and new realms.

In the Indian context the dominant approach has been liberal feminist, where action has been organised taking the existing structures. Among the major novelists who made considerable contributions to the Indian fiction is Anita Desai who has created a significant place for herself. She explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman. Her woman characters try to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Deeply exhausted by this trapeze etc, they are further bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is unmasked before them, when they face loneliness and lack of communication and communality and are finally brought to mental crises when masculine and institutional pressure are added to exacerbate them further.

Anita Desai’s first novel, ‘Cry, the peacock’ (1980) presents the story of Maya, a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is brought out in terms of immeasurable loneliness. The very beginning of the novel highlights the theme of husband-wife alienation by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautam. In this novel, Mrs. Desai explores the disturbing emotional world of the neurotic resulting from marital discord. Maya, who cannot communicate with the cold Gautama, laments: “He was not on my side at all, but across a river, across a mountain, and would always remain so.”⁴ (Cry, 131). The husband-wife alienation caused by the temperamental incompatibility between the two, an important existentialist theme, forms the very core of the novel.

One of the major of Anita Desai is Sita in the novel ‘Where shall We Go this Summer’, a novel that displays the great artistic sense of the age of characterization of the novelist. She presents the protagonist as a pessimistic and whimsical victim of situation. Her sharp sense puts her in troubles. People seem to her like Pariahs- “They are nothing-nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter, animals.”

Another prominent novelist is Nayantara Sehgal who in her novels presents the emergence of the new women who is no longer “a sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth lulled into a passive role that requires no individuality,” but someone who can claim to be man’s equal partner. Different types of married women are presented in Sehgal’s novels. Saroj in ‘Storm in Chandigarh,’ Rashmi in ‘This time of Morning’, Simrit in ‘The Day in Shadow’ and Bushan Singh’s mother in ‘Mistaken Identity,’ all have a mind and will of their own, and they are brave enough to question the established norms of conventional marriage.

The female characters in Sehgal’s ‘This Time of Morning’ are products of a changed social condition in India and they emerge as characters endowed with greater individuality. Rashmi, the only daughter of Kailas and Mira, comes back to her parents, having deserted by discontented husband Dalip, an I.A.S. officer, contemplating divorce. Rakesh, her childhood friend, meeting Rashmi after a long interval observes “Now she looks displaced. It was marriage then, that had altered her, made her a moth trapped in cement.” She renews her relationship with Rakesh “who had been closer than a brother, more than a brother, more than a friend”. Thus she accepts Rakesh as a true companion. Similarly, Saroj in ‘Storm in Chandigarh’ is unhappy, not been able to find a reciprocal emotional involvement with her husband Inder. Besides, the temperamental incompatibilities of the pair vitiate further their conjugal relationship. Brought up by fairly liberal parents, Saroj has a premarital affair in her college days which she confides to her husband Inder, hoping for a clean break from the past. Unfortunately to Inder her confession makes beginning of a nagging suspicion. Even after four years of marriage with Saroj, and having two children, Inder continues to harbor a deep-seated doubt with regard to Saroj’s loyalty and brutally torments her with questions on her premarital relationship, while he himself indulges in an affair with their children’s teacher Mera. He believes in two codes of conduct obviously, One for men and another for women. To Inder, “A wife was one half of an enterprise, the complaint partner who presided over home and children and furthered her husband’s career”⁸ (Storm, 53). In course of time, Saroj realises endurance in marriage is not a virtue in itself. She makes friends with Vishal Dubey, a liaison officer. She finds in Dubey, the understanding and mutuality in relationship which Inder has denied to her all along. Saroj begins to protest against Inder’s authoritarian ways and soon the situation worsens and she decides to leave Inder’s home forever asserting her individuality.

Simultaneously, in ‘The Day in Shadow’, Simrit is victimized by a selfish husband, Som. Obviously, tortured beyond tolerance she turns to Raj, who is understanding and sympathetic.

Another woman writer of the new generation who deserves a place of high respect is Shashi Deshpande. Early in her career Deshpande forget her own style and identified her own themes – family life, focusing specially on women and after probing their mind- which have since become her literary trademark. Shashi Deshpande’s novels reveal the women’s quest for self, for exploration into the female psyche and an

awareness of the mysteries of life and protagonist's place in it. All three protagonists in 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', 'Roots and Shadows' and 'That Long Silence' shed-off the chains they feel themselves engaged in, leaving their parental houses and find themselves entrapped in the same chains in the houses of their husbands or in-laws. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists in their self-quest undergo the process of individuation and establish themselves autonomous beings, overcoming and controlling their tendencies to inflation.

As in 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', Saru is hurt by her mother's preference for her brother Dhruva on the basis of gender difference only. "He is different. He is a boy," are the words that haunt her mind and generate hatred for her mother. She feels guilty on account of her watching her brother drown and die. Her sense of guilt is further deepened by her mother's words, you killed your brother... why didn't you die? Thus Saru's wounded self germinates in her hatred for mother figure. Later, Saru's love for Manohar proves to be failure, and results in frustration. 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' reacts against the traditional concepts that everything in a girl's life is shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male. Saru becomes a famous doctor and husband turned out to be simply a lecturer. This made her socially and economically his superior. The simmering inferiority complex of Manu burst out the day a girl had come to interview her, who has asked him "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well"? Manu's male ego is hurt. His masculinity asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assault upon Saru. Since that day Manu becomes a sadist: the benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night.

Similarly in 'The Long Silence' Jaya, the protagonist, when required to face a traumatic situation temporarily seeks shelter in neurosis which evades her responsibility as an adult individual for her without her being aware of her. Her suffering initiates the process of self-discovery in her which leads in the last analysis to her fresh perception of life. She emerges to the end of the ordeal as a woman with certain willingness to compromise with life's problems while earlier she showed a surprising lack of accommodation and expensiveness.

Shobha De is yet another distinguished member of this new breed of writers. She depicts the breaking up of the institution of marriage. Her narrative holds our breath for sensuous opulence and subtlety of variation and the result is that the novel 'Sister' becomes a best seller. It makes a popular reading.

Mikki, the protagonist of the novel 'Sisters' returned home following the deaths of her parents in an air-crash. Her father had sired another daughter, Ramanbai, a trusted employee of the Seth. Alisha decided to take on her step-sister one day. Circumstances forced Mikki to marry Binni, an elderly person. Binni showed his true colours after marriage. Mikki was beaten and forced to leave the house and came back to her parents' place. An incident brought the two sisters closer and they stayed together. Behind this apparently simple story lies the frustration in the lives of two women.

Like other women novelists Manju Kapur expresses her concern for women with a missionary zeal and seems to suggest, with sincerity and honesty, the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women. Manju Kapur's first novel, 'The Difficult Daughters' is a story in the background of partition. She describes the traumas of her female protagonists. She resonates with her feminine assertion, hatred for violence, blood, death and ill feeling in the name of God. Like 'Difficult Daughters', 'A Married Women' is a true confession of women's personality, her discontentment in marriage, her defiance and restlessness. "Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation do not encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship". A woman is not only a wife-mother but something more. Dealing with religion, politics and social values Kapur realizes India as socially cosmopolitan, political egalitarian and religiously sectarian. The age old themes of marriage and politics are coupled with lesbian relationship.

Acclaimed by jurists all over the globe, runner up for prestigious award 'The Commonwealth Literary Prize', Githa Hariharan's 'The Thousand Faces of Night' is a significant contribution to women studies. It is a Mahabharata of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims to their own ambitions, humility, arrogance and submission.

Bharti Mukherjee is the most commercially successful among women writers of the Indian diaspora, she gained critical acceptance only during the last couple of decades. She is quite essentially Indian diaspora writer one who gives an authentic fictional treatment to the immigrant experience in such of her novel as 'Jasmine'.

Her first novel 'The Tiger's Daughter' (1972) depicts a satirical picture of Indian society, through the eyes of Tara Banerjee, a young expatriate, who visits her mother-land after a gap of seven years. She expects to find her country as she had left behind but is shocked at Calcutta's poverty and squalor.

Indian Women's writing has always enjoyed an equal status with the mainstream of Indian fiction in English. It initiated many debates and helped secure a more modern role for Indian women looking for new ideals and models for themselves. The theme of women identity has indeed been an important subject of contemporary Indian writing.

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