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Feminism and Feministic Concerns in Indian Women Writers in English

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*Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion.*

--Lord Tennyson
(*The Princess*)

Gender bias has seeped into our collective conscious since times immemorial. Women have always been taught to be tolerant and submissive; to 'watch' what they say and 'when' they say; and to avoid 'loud' behaviour. The patriarchal system of society teaches women to internalize the concept of male domination in the process of their socialization. Feminism aims at studying this gender bias and gender-specific discrimination against women. Feminism refutes the masculinity approach to women. In the essay, "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf complained that woman's social obligations hindered a writing career. Their lives gave them a different perspective, but women were not fundamentally different from men in their psychological needs and outlooks. *The Second Sex* is Simone de Beauvoir's comprehensive study of the secondary status lent to women throughout history. Beauvoir is of the view that the history of humanity is a history of systematic attempts to silence the female. She says,

One is not born a woman; one becomes one...Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth.

(--The Second Sex)

Women had always been made to feel that they were inferior by nature and though men paid lip-service to equality, they would resist its implementation. Some men might be sympathetic towards women's issues, but only women themselves knew what they felt and wanted.

Feminism in India is a by-product of the Western feminist movement but it got sustenance from various native sources such as Indian freedom movement, spread of education, employment opportunities and women's rights laws. Today, there is a lot of rise in consciousness amongst women, especially in urban areas. Women in India have finally come to realize that they have a separate identity, a self apart from the family. They have slowly mustered courage enough to proclaim their individuality, to reject subordination through domestication. Literate women are more enlightened about their rights and duties.

In Literature too, women have begun to more than just express themselves as well as their

thoughts and desires. Anita Desai is not essentially a feminist but nevertheless she is a strong representative of the welcome “creative release of the feminine sensibility” which began to emerge after the second world war. Desai turns her gaze inward to discover the strengths and weaknesses of what goes on into the making of the modern Indian middle-class woman. Conscious of her role as a woman writer, Desai is concerned more with thought, emotion and sensation rather than action, experience and achievement. Desai’s is a domestic world, and her focus the interior of a mind teetering on the brink. Her women characters are extremely sensitive and conscious of their femininity. Caught in the trap of marriage, she can do nothing but languish in misery. The woman frantically attempts to redefine herself which inevitably ends up in lack of communication and a mismatch of wavelength betwixt the spouses. Maya in *Cry the Peacock* (1963) suffers from father fixation and becomes miserable as her search for a father substitute in her husband does not measure up to her anticipation. Her barrenness coupled with the albino astrologer’s prophecy of the impending demise of one of the partners after her marriage agitates her mind to the extent of pushing her towards insanity. *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) depicts Sita’s reluctance to deliver or abort her fifth child. Her quixotic wish is that she should keep it safely in her womb and prevent it from being born into this big, bad world. To escape the mundane reality of her existence, she goes to the island of Manori, her childhood home, where instead of finding peace, she becomes alienated. Desai’s novels touch upon most of the relations and phases of a woman’s life cycle: woman as grandmother and granddaughter in *Fire On the Mountain*; as daughter in *Cry, the Peacock*; as mother in *Clear Light of Day*. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* the woman is involved in a mixed marriage; in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* a woman’s several interracial liaisons are explored.

Arundhati Roy in *The God Of Small Things* (1997) has beautifully outlined the constraints of women operating within patriarchal society. Her maiden novel leans on the hush-hush realities of life – the facts that are supposed to be hidden in closets, in our minds, forbidden to be uttered. Unlike his sister, Ammu’s brother Chacko is granted a privileged university education at Oxford. Father was of the view that “a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl.” Although Ammu works as much in the factory as her brother, she is legally is not entitled to the family property. Chacko’s freedom of movement gives him a greater choice of prospective marriage partners. His upper class status also allows him to choose sexual partners among the factory girls. In fact, his own mother colludes with this situation, regarding it as “Men’s Needs,” in contrast to her daughter’s (Ammu’s) needs and choices which ‘violate’ the sanctity of womanhood. Mammachi is not happy with her marital life with Ammu’s father. She does not leave her husband but she merely transfers the love she feels for her husband to her son Chacko, when he saves her from a beating. “From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love.” She thus ironically perpetuated her dependent state and her need for a masculine protector, which underlines the inequalities functioning within the institution of marriage. Mammachi’s daughter Ammu is equally the victim of idealized gender roles operating within marriage. Initially, she is a “foolish jewelled bride” who marries her husband only to escape an unbearable home situation. However, the reality of Ammu’s predicament is that she is a divorced, beaten wife and later the lover of Velutha, the Untouchable. Ammu’s daughter Rahel equally fails to conform to patriarchal gender stereotypes. Her troubled behaviour – decorating cow-dung with flowers or barging into the senior girls – is taken as a sign of moral depravity, as if she has breached all taboos of socially acceptable/missible female behaviour.

Shashi Deshpande is a feminist par excellence. In her works the issue is not just a quest for identity of the female protagonist. There is a progressive movement from a concern with oppression to one with the concepts of freedom and choice. The past is important but more important is fruitful participation in the present. The protagonists are not rebels but they learn to grow in the cause of their encounter with the harsh realities of life. Subsequently, they generate in themselves the power to cope with the male orientation. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the protagonist Sarita musters up all the courage to face the harsh reality of the world once again:

All right, so I'm alone. But so's everyone else. Human beings.....they're going to fail you. But because there is just us, because there is no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk.

In *That Long Silence* (1988) Deshpande depicts how even an educated woman has to struggle hard in order to assert herself. The crux of all prevailing problems is the subjugation of women, their silent servitude. In *The Binding Vine* (1992) the discovery of her long-dead mother-in-law's poetry jolts Urmi out of her shock and she looks for glimmerings of hope through her web of loss and despair.

The poetry of Kamala Das is bluntly honest and full of lively spontaneity. She is a confessional poet. Kamala Das has criticized the convention-based conservative society which always disapproved her unconventional thoughts and ways. Das's poetry flung open its doors to let in topics that women kept latent and subdued in their minds and hearts. She became the subject of her writing, putting everything in black and white, ornamenting her emotional outbursts in poetry or prose. In one of her better known lyrics, "An Introduction," she tells us how she was dominated upon and how she retaliated:

*Then...I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers.*

She honestly confesses that her marriage has reduced her to a beggarly state. She feels so neglected and insecure that she even seeks love outside her home. In "The Stone Age", the husband is spoken of as an "old, fat spider", and when the husband leaves, she drives to "the other man", the lover, and the deed is done. It is an act of defiance, an assertion of her freedom, a breaking away from the dull routine of domesticity.

Her poems "Jaisurya" and "Afterwards" explore filial love and express the concept of feminism in its best form. "Jaisurya" describes labour pain and birth of the child:

*They raised him
To me then, proud Jaisurya, my son,*

*Separated from darkness that was mine
And in me*

The woman in her adores the child and forgets her own pains of bearing it. In the poem “Afterwards”, she thinks of the child’s future in the world and is grieved at the very thought of his suffering.

Purdah and Other Poems by Imtiaz Dharker is an attempt to expand the margins assigned to woman. Woman has been forced to be ‘kept hidden’ by the stifling shackles of conditioning. Purdah is not merely a form of dress, but a custom, a norm of behaviour, an indication of a whole social system. Purdah’s likening to a coffin tellingly communicates its deadening impact of this custom on the soul of a woman who is meted out a burial treatment while very much alive.

In or out of Purdah, Tied or bound
Shaking your box to hear
how freedom rattles... (p.10)

The mirage of freedom, an auditory fantasy of its rattle, the restriction of Purdah can be compelled both by external forces or even consciously chosen, self-imposed restrictions. Paradoxical though this may sound, Dharker puts forth this bitter fact in another poem:

*The haunted house could get you,
so that’s where you went
because you wanted to be got
Didn’t you, Didn’t you.....
(Haunted House)*

Mahasweta Devi, who has bagged the prestigious Jnanpith and Magsaysay Awards for literature has traced the life of tribal women and the atrocities committed on women by the essentially patriarchal, feudal system in Bengal. Daulati is a prostitute who resigns to her fate and lives a death-in-life existence. Basmati (Palamo) is a bold and dauntless woman who falls into the trap of prostitution. In the novel *Gohuan*, we meet Jhalo, the brave, self-assertive protagonist who refuses to be exploited after her husband’s death:

*I have neither put my thumb impression nor borrowed money, why should
I do unpaid labour ?*
(p.183)

When Jhalo, raises her voice against sexual exploitation, she infuses a spirit of confidence and courage in her fellow women sufferers. They say,

*It is very surprising that we are untouchables, the water we touch is untouchable, but
our women are not untouchables.*
(p.185)

The story ends on a revolt by tribal people against the high-class land-owners:

Each bonded labourer appeared like Gohuan to them with whose bite death was certain.
(p.202)

The story “Draupadi” is intensely powerful and shocking. Like the mythological Draupadi, here the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen is treated like an object and mishandled by the male-dominated society. Dopdi Mejhen is gang-raped in custody but she turns the terrible wounds of her breasts into a counter-offensive. Senanayak is among those men who leave a woman scarred on all levels of existence but he cannot face Dopdi in broad daylight—

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.

(p.196)

Thus Mahasweta Devi’s tribal women are not meek and submissive but they have the inner strength to face their circumstances boldly. They work towards a meaningful existence and assert their rights to reshape their lives.

The whole gamut of contemporary literary talent is beyond the limits of the present paper. Claiming to be non-feminists, most Indian women writers have inadvertently contributed to the flux of feminism and catered to its advancement in one or the other way. It’s all a façade that times have changed. Women are still on the same plane. Transformation needs to take place on a mass level. But the sorry state of affairs is that it has eventuated only in a fraction of India – the women in urban section definitely have advanced. But majority of Indian women are silent sufferers. The essence of Feminism can be achieved only if there is change in men’s attitude towards women but more importantly women’s attitude towards themselves and towards other women. The situation in India is pretty grim. On one side women are worshipped as Goddess Durga, Kali, Saraswati but on the other they are maltreated, condemned, molested, and exploited. Owing to vicarious pressure from family, women in our nation today are forced to abort their unborn girl child much against their individual wishes. They are not allowed to voice their opinion. If women in the family support each other and second each other’s opinion, a substantial change in the status of women can be anticipated. Women have to be treated as a subject and not as an object. On the whole, Feminism may be considered as a kind of cultural movement that is working towards a social change through the interface of life with literature and criticism.

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