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Indian Fiction and Women Writers in English: A Brief Study

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India, a place of incredible diversities and enormous possibilities, has given this a world a gift of fantastic narrations in form of its great stories. Here the history of fiction is as old as its existence. It has been an essential part of human nature to listen to stories and narratives provided by parents, grandparents and teachers. The origin of fictional narratives dates back to the days of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata by Valmiki and Vedavyasa and the anterior narrative modes in Sanskrit, such as, prose chronicals (akahyayika), romantic tale (katha), an episodic story (upakhyana), an episodic story sung and enacted by a bard (abhinay), didactic bird and beast fable (nidarsana), a story in dialogue form (pravalhika), a story satirizing society (matallika), a tale narrating several adventures (parikatha), a partially narrated well-known story (khandkatha), etc.

With the arrival of British on the Indian soil, India came into contact with the western culture and got exposure to English language, literature and culture. Since 1835 Lord Macaulay's recommendation of English became the official language of the educated Indians, journalists and higher education. A tradition of writing in English sprang up at the beginning of the nineteenth century and in this respect Raja Rammohan Roy became the father of Indian literature in English.

The novel in India was a borrowed genre and a direct outcome of English education introduced by the arrival of the British. Fictional narratives written in various Indian languages from the mid-nineteenth century onwards bear a remarkable closeness with the western novels. In India literary status of novel was bestowed only on those long narratives which adapted the European form and incorporated the local ethos. The first book written in English by an Indian, Dean Mahomet, was Travels of Dean Mahomet, a travel narrative published around 1794. It was in Bengal that literary renaissance first manifested itself but its traces could be seen in Madras, Bombay and other parts of India. The first Indian English novel was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's Wife (1864).

The novels published from the eighteen sixties up to the end of the nineteenth century were mostly written on social and historical issues drawing upon the contemporary British fiction. Some Women novelists also joined the trend of writing fiction in English but they would be discussed separately in the forthcoming section.

The twentieth century began with novelists of more substantial output. It is worthwhile to mention here works like Romesh Chandra Dutt's The Lake of Palms: A Study Of Indian Domestic Life (1902), Sarath Kumar Ghosh's Verdict of Gods (1905), Madhaviah's Satyananda

(1909), Jogendra Singh's *Nur Jahan: The Romance of an Indian Queen* (1909), etc., which dealt with social and historical themes. The whirlwind of Gandhian movement blowing across the country during 1920-1947, gave a new turn to ideas and methods. The impact on Indian English novel was the sudden flowerings of realistic novels, concentrating on contemporary social and political issues. Some of the prominent themes of the time were struggle for freedom, the East-West encounter, the communal problem, the miserable condition of the untouchables, and the oppressed section of society.

The emergence of the great trinity, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao around the mid 1930s was the most remarkable event in the realm of Indian English fiction. Mulk Raj Anand, the most prolific of the trio was a creative writer with a strong social commitment. Dealing basically with social realism, the stories of his fictional works mostly focused on the themes of plight of the poor and the downtrodden, evils of caste system, poverty, and the problems of low-caste and untouchables. His prominent works were, *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), etc. R. K. Narayan, the contemporary of Anand and a product of South Indian middle-class family, explored the urban Indian middle class ethos in his fictional world. His remarkable works were, *The Dark Room* (1938), *The Guide* (1958) and *The Painter of Signs* (1976), etc. The youngest of the trio, Raja Rao was regarded as a significant writer whose fictional world reflected the spiritual sensibility and ancient wisdom of India. He emerged on literary scenario as a symbolist, a myth-maker and a philosophical novelist with his novels *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), and *The Cat and the Shakespear* (1965), etc.

The initial years after independence witnessed a sudden spurt in novels dealing with the trauma of partition and complications arising in social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. Apart from the major trio, the novelists appearing on the literary scenario continued the tradition of social realism in their fictional works. Notable among the contemporary novelists were, Bhabani Bhattacharya (*So Many Hungers*, *Music for Mohini*, *He Who Rides the Tiger*), Manohar Malgaonkar (*Distant Dreams*, *Combat of Shadows*, *The Prince*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, *The Devils Wind*) and Khushwant Singh (*Train to Pakistan*, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*). The literary scenario of the time also saw the emergence of the writers like Sudhindra Nath Ghose (*Cradle of the Clouds*, 1951 and *The Vermilion Boat*, 1953), G. V. Desani (*All About H. Hatterr*, 1948), Balchandra Rajan (*The Dark Dancer*, 1959 and *Too Long in the West*, 1961) and M. Anantanarayanan (*The Silver Pilgrimage*, 1961) who came up with various experimental novels. The exploration of the agonized existence of modern man gave a new dimension to Indian English novel and the most prominent novelist of this time was Arun Joshi (*The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strong Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), and *The City and the River* (1990), etc.).

In the fiction of these male novelists the image of woman was projected either as an embodiment of idealized womanhood, as a dutiful daughter, sacrificing mother or wife, as an epitome of virtue, beauty and sensuality or as a subjugated woman to traditions, orthodoxies and patriarchy.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), a quintessential post-colonial-text "brought about a renaissance in Indian Writing in English which has outdone that of the 1930's" (Mee 318). The appearance of *Midnight's Children* (1981) seemed like a break in the tradition of Indian Writing in English. After *Midnight's Children* the succeeding works of Rushdie, such as, *Shame* (1983), and *Satanic Verses* (1988) were celebrated as important works giving a new direction to the trend of fiction writing. The decade of the eighties and nineties witnessed the prominent writers like, Shashi Tharoor, Allen Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Chandra, Mukul Kesavani, Anurag Mathur, etc. who emerged with new ideas and progressive outlook and strengthened the Indo-English fiction writing in various ways.

An overview of Indian women's writing shows that their ability to write in English opened new vistas for Indian women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The air of emancipation of women trickling in from the West and other socio-religious reformist movements initiated by men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others, enabled the women writers to come with the image of the New-Woman in their writings. By New-Woman, I mean here the mute Indian woman, who started writing for the first time after her long silence under subjugation. If Toru Dutt's *Bianca*, or *The Young Spanish Maiden* (1878) was romantic, Raj Laxmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife*, or *The Enchanted Fruit* (1876), Krupabai Sathianadhan's *Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Child-Wife* (1884), Saguna: *The First Autobiographical Novel in English by an Indian Woman* (1895) and Shevantibai M. Nikambe's *Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife* (1895), are the outstanding works of the time projecting the image of the New-Woman. This could be identified as the first phase, when the women writers attempted to give a voice to the mute Indian woman.

Interestingly in the decade of the forties and fifties a group of Muslim women writers, such as Iqbalunnisa Husain (*Purdah and Polygamy, Life in an Indian Muslim Household*, 1945), Zeenuth Futehall (*Zohra*, 1951) and Attia Hosain (*Sunlight on a Broken Column*, 1961) showed an awareness of the changing times. Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House* (1956) and autobiographical work, such as *Home to India* (1945) are saved as chronicles of the times. The three women novelists, who came to eminence since the fifties were Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Ruth Praver Jhabvala who merged into the mainstream of Indian fiction in English along with their contemporaries Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar and such. Thus one finds that the male domination in Indian English fiction underwent a change during the fifties with these women writers. Women's writings in the fifties and later showed a compelling temptation to idealize them.

Kamala Markandaya came to limelight as a social realist with her novels like *Nectar in the Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1957), *A Silence of Desire* (1961), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffers Dams* (1969), etc. Her contemporary Nayantara Sahgal voiced the feminist quest for freedom and its interconnections with political concerns through her novels. Her novels like *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) foreground the emotional incompatibility in arranged marriages and woman's need for

space in a patriarchal society. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's experience as a triple exile and her ironic mode of writing established her as a powerful writer. Her novels were set in Delhi and focused on Indian arranged marriage (*To Whom She Will*, 1955), corruption in Indian public life (*The Nature of Passion*, 1956), and many other contemporary issues.

Anita Desai added a new dimension to women writing in the decade of the sixties by shifting her focus on the unexplored realm of female psyche through her outstanding works like *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), etc. The later women novelists gave expression to the most recent problems and showed remarkable awareness of the challenges of the present. These women writers portrayed the women characters, their psyche, hopes and fears, insecurities and frustrations, feelings and sentiments more realistically than their male counterparts.

Shashi Deshpande, Jai Nimbkar, Sunita Jain and Raji Narsimhan who have been writing since the seventies established the assumption of a third generation of women writers. The delineation of the growth of women's self awareness is the major feminist concern in Indian English fiction. The way patriarchal institutions, marriages, inhibit women's attempt to chart out an identity of their own is a major theme in the works of the writers of the time. Shashi Deshpande emerged on the Indian fictional scene in the seventies but created a place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. Shashi Deshpande is renamed name in her realistic portrayal of the Indian middle-class educated woman undergoing a gradual transformation in terms of her position in society finding herself between tradition and modernity.

The image of new woman and her struggle for an identity also found an outlet in the decade of the eighties in Namita Gokhale's *Paro : Dreams of Passion* (1984) and Nina Sibal's *Yatra* (1987). Shoba De with her debut *Socialite Evening* (1989) took a daring step by focusing on the women in the aristocratic section of society.

The decade of nineties witnessed a number of Indian women novelists whose works were marked by an authentic presentation of contemporary urban middleclass Indian women. The remarkable women novelists of the nineties were, Gita Hariharan (*Thousand Faces of the Night*, 1992), Meena Alexander (*Nampally House*, 1991), Rani Dharkar (*The Virgin Syndrome*, 1997), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*, 1997) and Manju Kapur (*Difficult Daughters*, 1998), etc.

A word here must also be said about the expatriate and the migrant women writers who projected the cultural conflicts and expatriate experiences in their novels. The important women novelists in this context are – Bharati Mukherjee, Meera Syal, Anita Rao Badami, Shuna Singh Baldwin, Uma Parameswaran, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, etc. In their writings the theme of migration leading to self discovery held an important place.

Thus the women writing entered a new phase, and presented the 'New Indian Woman' who was dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her by patriarchy. The term 'New Woman' came to signify the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place

and position in family and society. The 'New Women' was one who was trying to assert and ascertain her rights as a human being and was determined to fight for the equal treatment with man.

Feminism, one of the most important social movements of the past two centuries began in Europe, found its full echoes in the USA and spread to the countries of the third world. The movement has brought a progressive transformation of human society on a global scale. Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed by men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. In its broadest sense the term denotes an awareness of woman's identity and interest. The movement was slow to start and it was in the late 1880s that the term feminism actually appeared. It was Alexander Dumas, the nineteenth century French dramatist, who first used the term feminism for the movement of women's political rights.

The roots of the modern feminist ideology could be found in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) who laid the ground work for future feminists. These figures could be designated as the First Wave feminists who campaigned for both equal rights in terms of law and regulations and cultural rights for women. These books drew attention of the public to the need to re-establish a new society based on equality of men and women. In the early twentieth century Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) further geared up the movement against sexist paradigms. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), won great acclaim as a feminist book and succeeded in shattering the myth of femininity and showed how the women deprived of their social, economic and political rights, remained relegated to the background. The work marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Feminist Movement.

Feminism as it was theorized and practiced was not the same in all parts of the world. Feminism differed in its definitions and goals, from nation to nation and from culture to culture. Each country has its problems peculiar to the culture and feminism adapted itself to the cultural and social realities of that particular country.

Indian feminism is different from the Western feminism. Unlike the Western Feminist Movement, the Feminist Movement in India was initiated by eminent men of the time, in the form of abolishing sati (a widow's death by burning her alive on her husband's funeral pyre), abolishing disfiguring of widows and child marriage and obtaining legal rights for women to own property. However, the development of feminism in India can broadly be divided in two phases- the former phase (1850-1915) and the later phase (1915-1947). In the former phase eminent men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others initiated to uproot and abolish the social evils of sati, child marriage and disfiguring of widows. With the Western influence and a galaxy of social reformers Indian women felt an inner urge of consciousness and showed will and determination to attain the goal of emancipation. In the later phase while struggling against the colonial rule nationalism became the eminent cause of development of feminism in India. Mahatma Gandhi expanded Indian women's activities by initiating them into the non-violent

Civil Disobedience Movement against the British rule. The participation of women in the freedom struggle developed their consciousness about their role and rights as women. The women realized that their mission in life did not end with becoming good wives and ideal mothers. They aspired to become useful members of the society and tried to strike a balance between the best of the West and the finest of our cultural heritage. The new awareness of their right to equal status with men as partners in major ventures in life led women into new avenues of employment, education and even industrial ventures.

The concept of equality of women gained meaning with independence of India in 1947, when the new government and new constitution was set up. Thus the social and political set up of India was much different from the West for which feminism in India did not grow like western feminism. It is significant to note that the western woman faced enormous difficulties due to the regressive attitude of the opposite sex. In India, the cause for women's freedom was first espoused by the enlightened males themselves. Women came on the scene later. As such they faced relatively little difficulty because the Indians were more liberal in granting them their rights. In effect the rights came as gifts and not as result of any sustained struggle on the part of the Indian woman.

Indian society right from the very beginning since the days of Manu, the ancient founder of law-system in society, has been a highly patriarchal society. Manu, laid myriad roles and duties for women from childhood to death. In India the institution of marriage and family is still considered necessary because it provides security and social status to both men and women. It becomes difficult and traumatic for them to break away with the institution of marriage and family. In contrast to the West, the Indian culture places a greater value to compromise, as it is the most acceptable accommodation of conflicting pressures satisfactorily resolved. In such atmosphere, the western feminist concepts of rejection of family and home, hating men and waging a war against them is untenable.

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