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A Survey of Feminism in Some Women Poets of Indian Writing in English

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Abstract:

From sociological perspective, feminism is a conflict theory and theoretical perspective which observes gender in its relation to power, both at the level of face-to-face interaction and reflexivity within a social structure at large. Focuses include sexual orientation, race, economic status, and nationality. In the words of Chris Kramarae, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings." While the roots of feminism are buried in ancient Greece, most recognize the movement by the three waves of feminism. Notably, first-wave feminism was a period of feminist activity and thought that occurred within the time period of the 19th and early 20th century throughout the world. It focused on legal issues, primarily on gaining women's suffrage (the right to vote). Second-wave feminism is a period of feminist activity and thought that first began in the early 1960s in the United States, and eventually spread throughout the Western world and beyond, while the third-wave feminism encompasses several diverse strains of feminist activity and study. Though exact boundaries are a subject of debate, it is generally marked as beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to the present. More and more women engaged themselves in public activities. Their movements protested against their restricted roles in the society. Interestingly, this enhanced feminist awareness is apparent in their writings. Some notable examples are, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women*, Elaine Showalter's *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* etc. These thought-provoking books are largely responsible to instill a new awakening among women that influenced the scholars towards feminist ideas. Now we come to depiction of feminism in literature, especially poetry. Feminist literature is fiction or nonfiction which supports the feminist goals of defining, establishing and defending equal civil, political, economic and social rights for women. Coming to approach, feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical, fictional, or philosophical discourse. This paper will attempt to study feminism in the women poets of India writing in English.

Keywords: sociological perspective, theoretical, reflexivity

Introduction:

Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social rights for women. The global idea of feminism refers to the belief that men and women deserve equality in all opportunities, treatment, respect, and social rights. In general, feminists are people who try to acknowledge social inequality based on gender and stop it from continuing.

The feminism or feminist movement, what we see now, has its roots in the western world, especially in Europe and United States of America. If we literally take 'feminism' as an advocacy for equal rights for women, India boasts to have a grand tradition of women's high status in society. But it has been a fictional truth. In modern sense feminism in India has been of recent origin, borrowed from the west. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Simultaneously, Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as laws of inheritance and the practice of Sati, widow immolation in the funeral pyre of deceased husband.

It is pertinent to note here that the history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati; the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India Movement of 1942 and independent women's organizations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, post-Independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the work force and right to political parity. Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights and access to education challenging. Besides perpetrating heinous crimes and violence against women, in the past two decades, there has also emerged a trend of sex-selective abortion, resulting in dwindling sex ratio. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.

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It is remarkable here that the origin of Indian writing in English by women can be traced back to the last quarter of the 19th Century. Simultaneously, this emergence is an important milestone for feminism in India. Access to English education was one of the main reasons of modernization of the thinking of Indian women. The broad scope for higher education inspired women to pursue English education, which made a visible impact on the status of women. Indian women came in contact with the Western culture, ideas, philosophy, literature and movements that were appealing and thought-provoking. They got an opportunity to express their Indianness in the newly acquired English language.

Remarkably, Indian English women writers of this early era tried to communicate their agonies, the obstacles women faced and disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu society. These women writers struggled to give form and shape to their autobiographical accounts, which attracted publishers, both in India and abroad. Here it must be remembered that Toru Dutt was the first Indian woman writer in English, who came directly under the influence of the West. But she remained traditional in her poetry. The main themes in her poetry are nature, love, family, mythology, and legends. There is only a light trace of feminine sensibility in her poetry. Toru Dutt shows a very strong attachment and affection for her family.

Sarojini Naidu, popularly known as the nightingale of India wrote many poems, depicting varied feelings of love. She made an attempt to depict the plight of Indian Women as well. Most of the novels of early 20th century by Indian women writers in English are also autobiographical projections. Toru Dutt's *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden*, Krupabai Sathianathan's *Saguna*, Kamala and *The story of a Conversion*, Swarnakumari's *An Unfinished Song*, Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling and India Recalled* etc. are some of the noted examples of this category. The emergence of women writers in English in India is of great importance as they could communicate their own experiences as women.

In the post-independence period of India, there emerge a group of modern women writers in English, who have a distinct sense of their identity. They are not conventional, not influenced by sources like epics, myths, legends and folktales. They are well educated, bold and convincing. They understand the meaning of male domination. This period marks a change in the attitude, outlook, themes, imagery, and, use of language - clearly differing from their predecessors. These writers articulate feminine experience and a new personal vision. They create their own literature by rehearsing relevant issues in their writings, making it a strong vehicle to carry their feministic thoughts and beliefs. They try to uncover those elements of 'self which had been hidden under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. They portray their experiences and real life situations through characters specifically created for this purpose. About the recent works of Indian women writers in English, Rashmi Bajaj makes the following statement: We have here increased social consciousness, a strong awareness of identity as woman, championing of women's cause, problems of alienation and identity crisis, daring portrayal of sex and emphasis on the study of personal relationships.

Interestingly, many Indian women poets in English made their debut in the 1960s. Noted among them are, Kamala Das, Monika Varma, Margaret Chatterjee, Ira De, Roshan Alkazi, Sujatha Modayil, Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande, Sunita Jain, Lila Ray, Suniti Namjoshi, Mary Gupta, Indira Dhanrajgir, Shri Devi Singh, Lalita Venkateswaran, Gauri Pant, Tillottama Rajan, Chitra Pershad, Nasima Aziz, Vimla Rao, Malathi Rao, Dorothy Sinha and so on. They are poets endowed with creative genius. They are mostly confessional. They write about their personal experiences, displaying feminine sensibility. They develop the theme of man-woman relationship.

Remarkably, they depict frustrations of women living in a male-dominated society and they deal with themselves like love, lust, sex, sorrow, grief etc. They are the pioneers to explore some exclusive female areas of sensuality and sexuality. They do not hesitate to discuss subjects like childbirth, menstruation, masturbation, lesbianism and so on. Thus, the post-independence scenario presents a better indulgence of Indian women writers, who have carved an abiding niche in English poetry, through their wonderful creations. The main themes and characteristics of the poetry by women help us to analyze how and why Kamala Das and others like her emerge as feminist poets. The general family background of these women poets is typical. Almost all of them belong to highly modern, educated and urban families. They are convent educated and qualified. They are different from the traditional pattern of Indian womanhood. They are not flexible to adjust to the old way of family life. Due to changing social mores they can't tolerate forced adjustment, compromise and submissiveness. This creates a natural tension. They rebel against the conventional role of women in society and struggle to assert their new identity. They do not hesitate to express their feelings and bitter experiences in their writings. Obviously, this is the impact of modern notions of womanhood and femininity, propounded by Western thinkers and activists—globalization of thought and perceptions.

Here it is apt to quote Sunanda Chavan, who says, “An Indian woman poet in English evolved her full identity as a modern woman only in the post-independence period. . . . The variety of new tensions encountered by contemporary women stimulate Indian feminine progress from tradition to modernity.” Notably, stimulating Indian feminine progress ‘from tradition to modernity’ is the key phrase here, which is the end result of the poetry of these women. They achieve this end result by expressing a Variety of new tensions’ encountered by them. Thus, the very first characteristic feature of their poetry that strikes the reader is that they are invariably confessional accounts, with a touching narration of their own self from within. Love, as exchanged between the self and the man in her life, is the most important theme used by any feminist woman poet, while coming out with her confessions.

Prominent among contemporary love poets are, Sujatha Modayil, Margaret Chatterjee, Gauri Deshpande, Lalitha Venkateswaran, Roshan Alkazi, Lila Ray, Mamta Kalia, MonikaVarma and so on. It is Kamala Das who begins a new trend in love poetry.

In fact, the early 19th century (approx 1850-1900) marked the birth of English writing in Bengal as a language of protest. Indian poetry begins in Bengal with the British gaining stronghold. The initial poets were elite, poets from the upper classes. English poetry gradually moves out of Bengal to Bombay in a big way with publications of the Bombay Presidency poets. Nation uplift involved inextricably the uplift of women. The earliest social reformist writings in English during this phase addressed women's issues. Raja Ram Mohan Roy penned his objections of the exploitation of women-dowry, childhood marriage etc. R.C Dutt, the poet interestingly criticized the superficiality of Western women's liberation during this time.

Further the first quarter of twentieth century was imitative of Romanticism and Victorianism. Romantic and new romantics emerged expressing nationalism and oriental thought. Tagore in addition to his honor as a mystical and nationalist poet is also considered a feminist writer by some scholars. His novels 'Choker Bali' (A Grain of Sand) and Ghare Bhaire (The Home and Outside) are known for its bold female characters. The woman poet of note here is Sarojini Naidu, contemporary of Tagore and Aurobindo. She earned the title 'Nightingale of India.' (first woman president of Indian National Congress) Nationalism, Spirituality, mysticism, romanticism, love for the country, Indian motifs and subject matter in English forms is the capsule her poetry takes. The Progressive Writer's Association, created between 1932-1936 in London and India functioned as an umbrella under which progressive writers all languages found shelter though dominantly Urdu. It poised itself as a 'united front' of writers against imperialism and a conduit to give voice to the social reactionary. The women writers (prose and poetry) mentioned in the PWA docs are Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Usha Dutt, Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Arpita Das, Sheila Bhatia, Binata Roy, Uma Chakaravarthy, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaldevi Chattopadhyaya, Siddiq Begum Sevharvi, Anil D'Silva, Mahasweta Devi, Sulekha Sanyal and Anupama Niranjana. Kondapalli Koteswaramma (b. 1925) wrote poems for children about peasants and artisans in Telugu.

Next, the third quarter of 20th century has seen the full bloom of the modernist trend. The modernist sensibility took root in the sixties in India. The post-Independence disillusionment in the 60s found the perfect vehicle in modernism.

Post-independence era, i.e., the years after 1947, brought no golden age but the third world rift with social challenges- displacement, corruption, poverty, population, modernization, erasure of the community base and the individual voice left to navigate loss, chaos and search for identity. Inward, Intellectual, ironical, sarcastic painful are the voices in the Indian wasteland. In the bevy of male poets who emerged the woman poet who powerfully shook the Indian Literary scene was Kamala Das (the only woman poet anthologized by Parthasarathy in his work 'Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets.'). Confessional, autobiographical, imagist, sexual, feminist, honest, her prose and poetry rose like a shooting star opening up possibilities for the woman's voice in Indian English poetry. She was a trail blazer, controversial and condemned, celebrated and sought. Quest for the self was unabashedly a womanly self, fleshed in the body. The poignancy and vulnerability within her words pulsates. She was short-listed for the Nobel prize in 1984. Her poems are too many to quote, every one of them an emblem in the poetry of protest.

In some sense Kamala Das's poem breathtakingly announces that for a woman politics and protest are not contained only in outer socio-pol-econo structures; the fight against any kind of oppression involves a woman's body. The boundary of what is political redefines itself as not just the individual, but the individual as flesh and spirit. She asks for no compromise. Her battle for equality insists the acceptance of body and flesh as real as nation and patriotism. Her poetry recalls Mirabai, a 15th C mystical woman poet immortalized in contemporary India. Mostly

spiritualized, what is forgotten is that her poems are as much erotic as they were sublimely spiritual as well as rebellious to the social more of the day.

III. CONCLUSION

Obviously, feminism is an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society and conscious action by both men and women to change this situation. Linda Gordon, a noted historian, defines feminism as 'an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it'. Today, feminists are working towards the emancipation of women. Present-day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice. It is an endeavor to control women's lives within and outside their homes. Feminism asserts the value of women as women. It efficiently counters the systematic devaluation of women that is, there under patriarchy. It demands and fights for a just and equitable society where there is no discrimination based on sex. Thus, the concept of feminism incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international recognition. Such movements, though by different names, had been initiated by women in England and America already. The remarkable themes explored in feminism include discrimination, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, art history and contemporary art, and aesthetics. In particular context of poetry, feminist poetry is a movement that came to life during the 1960s, a decade when many writers challenged traditional notions of form and content. There are many questions, but generally, feminist poets have a connection to feminism as a political movement. And the feminist lens allows us to look at text through the eyes of a feminist to closely analyze how women are portrayed and presented in comparison to men. Feminism-- a movement for social, political, economic, and cultural equality between men and women; campaigns against gender inequalities.

Poetry in India has had a long tradition. During different phases of time (from Vedic period to the present) many illustrious women has earned name and fame in the field of poetry in different vernacular languages. No doubt, writing in English started with the advent of British Colonialists in India. So far many Indian poetesses in English have been internationally acclaimed for their brilliant accomplishment and bagged coveted recognition.

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