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Women Writers of English in the Literary Marketplace: Feminist Figures Forging from Fringe to Fame

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to give an overview of the trends in the literary marketplace and how the female authors have emerged from being a small segment among the writer to become strong contenders in the literary scene. The paper would look back in history to search for the first women authors in the world who wrote in the English language to map their development and graph their rise through the centuries. It would also throw light on the genres of fiction and prose that the women writers first began writing in and the factors that led to their rise as influential authors. The last section of the paper would delve into the contemporary trends in the market where women authors have continued to dominate the best-sellers' lists, exploring the Indian literary marketplace. This paper would focus primarily on the women writers of English and evaluate the various aspects of the literary world.

Keywords: Women Writers, Genre, Literary marketplace, Best-sellers, Capitalist Patriarchy, Literary Awards, Advertisements.

“For most of history, anonymous was a woman”- Virginia Woolf

The literary marketplace may be defined as a platform where the writers' opinions, views, and perspectives are thrown open to the public, for being read, analysed, comprehended, and evaluated. The writer's work is laid bare and open to the world for them to dissect the expressions which may have been expressed in any form or genre, be it a poem, a story, a novel, a drama, or even an article or an essay in a magazine, periodical, or newspaper. The concept of selling and buying comes live in the marketplace as the narratives are showcased and advertised to lure the readers, who are categorized based on their choices and flair for reading a particular subject or genre. Some may enjoy romantic comedies, a few may delve deep into the pathos and tragedies, a lot many find solace in deciphering the connotations of poetic verses while

others may get glued to a book to detect 'whodunit?'. The late nineteenth century witnessed an outpouring of literature in general and of fiction in particular to meet the demands of diverse and dispersed readers.

The various components of the term literary marketplace besides the writer include Print Ecology which saw a relationship between the readers and the sellers soar, the business of fictional writing that ensured a lot many novels being written and sold, the emergence of the new periodicals, the growing dominance of the periodical press over the book trade tended to merge the literature and literary journalism that saw a remarkable number of (mostly male) writers to establish careers as journalists and "magazinists." This also saw new efficiencies in the marketplace like transportation, postal services, free deliveries, and printing technology. the management of literary properties favoured those writers and publishers who most successfully converted into income the multiple rights inherent in works of literature with audience appeal. These included periodical syndication, cloth, and paperback editions, and international publications. It also has lately seen the emergence of literary agents in the last two decades of the century as another instance of entrepreneurship in the cause of efficiency, but it was also an explicit sign that the business of writing and the business of publishing was no longer synonymous. While the rise of agents was inextricably tied to the commodification of literature, the process of commodification was itself propelled most forcefully by the American passage of an international copyright bill in 1891. With this emerged the concept of the best-seller; or the "boomed" book. The growth of a mass readership and the general cheapening of books were obvious requirements, but the best-seller rode other currents as well: curtailing cheap competition in the publishing world, the professionalization of authorship, emergence of agents to place books advantageously, competitive bidding, the protection of investment through copyright of a publisher, the refinement of advertising and marketing strategies, and commodification of literature as quantifiable books to be sold. The concept of the best-seller commodified the maker as well as the made and hence successful writers themselves became forms of public property and famous personalities.

"Buddhist philosophy highlights that a person becomes who s/he is with what s/he does, but not with what s/he has or who s/he is in society." (Gunatalika251) This may hold true for the women writers who did carve a niche for themselves in the man's world of writing and selling. An author exercises authority over what he writes and authority in the society was not associated with women but with the men. The whole idea of women controlling a narrative seemed weird and unacceptable.

With the shift away from grand narratives and the emergence of postmodernism, studying subjectivities and identities rather than structures became prominent in the study of gender inequality. Thus more attention is paid to the active agency and the creation of subjectivities as an essential aspect of the reproduction of gender subordination and the possibilities for resistance. (Gunatsalika253)

In the world of capitalism, amidst stiff market competition, the women writers and their work were considered lowly and were looked down on as frivolous. The patriarchy evident in the world of writing may be referred to as “capitalist patriarchy” which implies a close relationship between “capitalism” and “patriarchy,” with patriarchy nevertheless the primary system of oppression, or at least the primary focus of a particular writer at a particular time. “Under the capitalist system, women are oppressed and such oppression helps the capitalists to control the workforce of men.” (Nath) Women were not expected to express and if they did, it was not thrown open to the public. Women’s writings were not taken seriously and ridiculed for being trivial and trifling often being compared to the household chores that did not require much intellect and acumen. Despite being well-educated, the female writings were perceived to reflect domesticity and docility and remained unacknowledged and unrecognized for years.

Cockburn (1983) also works with the idea of capitalist patriarchy, linking capitalism to a system of sex/gender relations. Her study of male composers in the newspaper printing industry in the UK focussed on the human impact of technological change and found that the printing industry has a patriarchal craft culture in which skilled men and their strong trade union identification marginalized women within the industry. (Gunatalika 252)

The gender bias is quite visible in the literary world where the women writers have not been taken as seriously as their male counterparts. The list of the award winners in literature is testimony to the fact that the women have not been acknowledged and recognized for the work unappreciated for the amount of work that is done all these years.

However, gender discussions have been a concrete part of the world of literature; once again, this issue stands stark in daylight while we find that only 16 women have become Nobel Laureates in Literature as compared to 101 men, in the same genre. Even though women are known to be more thoughtful, analytic, emotionally intelligent, and recursive, it is clear that they have not received enough recognition in the Nobel world,

despite producing commendable works. This could be due to the lack of women in the workforce, women denied a profession, or misogyny in the system. However, it is worth taking inspiration from the few women who fought the evils of society and rose to the ladder of success. (Ghosh)

Of the nearly 50 Booker prizes awarded since 1969, only seventeen have been won by the women authors, a mere 34 percent whereas The Pulitzer Prize in the Novel category (changed to Fiction in 1948 to include short stories) was first awarded in 1918. Since then, only thirty women have won this particular award, in contrast to over double that number of male winners.

Tracing the women writers, the first woman to have been recorded as being a woman writer who took up writing as a profession was Aphra Behn. The rebellious Aphra displayed a sexual frankness in her writings which the other women writers were afraid to emulate. She was a crusader of sorts, revolting and rebelling in her own right against the patriarchal system in the literary world.

Aphra Behn was the first English woman to earn her living solely by her pen. The most prolific dramatist of her time, she was also an innovative writer of fiction and a translator of science and French romance. The novelist Virginia Woolf wrote, "All women together ought to let flowers fall on the tomb of Aphra Behn . . . For it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds." Minds *and* bodies. Behn was a lyrical and erotic poet, expressing frank sexuality that addressed such subjects as male impotence, female orgasm, bisexuality, and the indeterminacies of gender. (Todd)

Later, the Sentimental domestic novels from female authors had found sizable American audiences as well. More and more women took up writing as a passion, hobby, and profession. The subjects that the women writers of English in fiction took up were more socially oriented. Jane Austen and Bronte sisters set a trend of writing and reading among the elite class of the society. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of the setting up of urban settlement, the trend of coffee shops and sharing and discussion of the daily political and social events began. Soon this took the form of periodicals, magazines, and eventually newspapers that saw an upsurge in the printing and wider circulation. Prose writing had now become the order of the day in the world of literature and fictional writing gained momentum with the rise in the urban population. Poetic lyricism had given way to mundane prosaic writings which attracted the urban elite class to this genre for reading stories and novels

that reflected the social fabric and the dynamics of the civic society. Later even the gothic elements were introduced in the mysterious and eerie writings that ensured an avidity for reading among the readers for its spine-chilling and hair-raising impacts.

The 19th century is when the novel as we know it sprung to life, enthralling a hungry, growing audience of literate Victorians, and transforming creators into household names. But most remarkably of all, the era ushered in a wave of female pioneers, an early form of girl power which vitalized literature, and inspired feminists of the future. The genre which played a hand in this victory was the Gothic, with its surrealist form offering opportunities to explore much which could not be intimated in traditional works. Amidst the eerie castles, striking landscapes, and medieval settings of the Gothic, these female writers could call into question male-dominated society, turn traditional power dynamics on their head, and use the supernatural as a vehicle for the sensual. (Wyatt)

Ann Radcliffe (1764 -1823), Emily Brontë (1818-48), Charlotte Brontë (1816-55), Jane Austen(1775-1817), Mary Shelley(1797-1851), Louisa May Alcott(1832-88), Charlotte Perkins Gilman(1860-1935), Charlotte Turner Smith(1749-1806), Clara Reeve(1729-1807), Elizabeth Gaskell(1810-1865) were the women writers of the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth centuries who are also known as the ‘Scream Queens’.

Mystery, crime, and detective fiction were also written by women writers, the first ones being Agatha Christie (1890-1976) and Geraldine Bonner (pen name, Hard Pan; 1870–1930) who had heralded the future trend of the emerging women writers in this genre. The twentieth century indeed witnessed an abundance of women writers who chose this subject for their books and sold many copies to inquisitive and investigative-minded readers.

The last century saw women writers like Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar set the tone for the feminist writings that demonstrated the feminine desires demanding a demarcated domain for the women. Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Jean Rhys, Nawal El Saadawi, Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Adichie, Alice Walker, Urvashi Butalia, Mahasweta Devi are some of the women writers in English who have also been the precursors of modern feminist writing that throws light on the unexplored and contemporary issues that the women faced in the twentieth century, focusing on the narratives that delineate and delved into women’s inner conflicts and chaos.

Talking of the women writers in India, besides Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt, Kamala Markandaya, and Anita Desai, who started writing after the 1980s are Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai. Some of the common themes run through most of the novels of these women writers are the discrimination against the daughter, no recognition of their talent, the conflict between modernity and tradition, and the lack of communication between the sexes. Several women novelists erupted in the nineties, revealing the true status of women. All these writers were born after independence and English does not have any colonial associations with them. Their work is marked by an impressive feel for the language and authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. Generally, they write about the urban middle class the stratum of society they belong to and know best.

Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions, and the factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that the women have no domestic or social space. The Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations are within the framework of Indian social duties and moral commitments. Another factor that marginalized the women writers was the fact that English was available only to the affluent, and educated classes and high social strata that are far from the reality of Indian life. The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers which as a subject is often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women. However, the Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination, refusing to be puppets, and have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively without any hurdle. Today, the works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of modern Indian fiction in English which depicts the growth of a feminist or women-centered approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of feminine consciousness and sensibility.

Women writers no longer portray traditional, enduring self-sacrificing women, but have shifted towards representing female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized by their victim status. A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships, Kamala Das being a pioneer of the same. Women's presentation in the writings of the modern women writers is more assertive in style, more liberated in their view, and more articulate in their expression contrary to the past when individualism and protest had often remained an alien idea and

marital bliss and the woman's role at home was the focus. It is interesting to note the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement.

In academic writings, with more women pursuing higher studies and emerging as eminent scholars, a surge in the number of females joining the educational institutes as tutors and professors was witnessed also leading to a principal contribution to the scholarly world of academic papers and critical writings. A powerful space has been carved by these feminist writers and critics to explore and analyse the feminist subjects in the literary books and other art forms intensifying the need for a wing of critical studies dedicated to the reading and interpretation of feminist works which is labelled the Feminist Critical Theory and Gender Studies, besides a large number of journals that are solely meant for the research papers and articles with predominantly feminist subjects.

Since the 1970s a wide range of feminist writers have made a significant contribution to scholarship by uncovering the lost histories of real women as well as revealing the subversive zone occupied by women's imagined reconstructions of reality. Another aspect of the critical project has been to reveal the complex operation of patriarchy, or to recover dissident readings lurking within traditional texts. In these terms, the literary canon has been challenged, both from within, and from the outside – from the position of exclusion, silence, and oppression. Although feminists share many ideas in common, regarding the role of power, for instance, the diversity of current work calls for the notion of feminisms, rather than a single system-driven ideology. In this regard, feminist scholarship and cultural production both reveals the dominant gender binary, while simultaneously deconstructing the shifting boundaries. (McCormick)

Furthermore, the feminist writings have evolved in their treatment of subjects and diversified and branched off to other areas like Racist, Marxist, Liberal, Cultural, Eco-Feminism, and Casteist Feminism in India eventually magnifying its stance in the literary and critical circles.

Clearly, women's writing continues to occupy an important place for more reasons than one. It projects the responses of more than half of humanity and reflects a consciousness constructed by gender. Women's writing has questioned the existing viewpoints which are essentially patriarchal. All women's writing need not necessarily be feminist. But feminist interpretations can also emerge through absence and negation. The women authors symbolize the troubled self of a woman who rejects being contained by the

society. She subverts the subjection and the feminine identity imposed by patriarchy. Furthermore, colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as it emphasizes a relationship of inequality and injustice. In the patriarchal societies, be it India or Africa, women are subjected to male subjugation and suppression. Female oppression is deeply rooted in the structure of the different societies. (McCormick)

The present-day marketplace has seen a fierce presence of women authors who are professionally successful in selling the maximum number of copies of their books around the world. Besides the literary and scholarly writings, the mass readership is picking up books that are written by the famed authoresses whose narratives are selling like hot cakes. In the list of the best-sellers of the world, the women writers have continued to dominate for the past few years. The charisma of the female authors is unmatched which is supplemented by the engrossing and fascinating tales that are created, drafted, formulated, advertised, and marketed to compete in the world of the book business.

There is a need to study the factors like the subjects that they write on, the panel of judges who may seem prejudiced, that have contributed towards the fewer awards won by the women authors over the years, also evaluating how they can be countered and overcome. A woman's image is used as a glamour factor to endorse and advertise a book by the publishers who look for reaping profits which shifts the focus from the literary content to the appearance of the authors. Exploring this aspect of selling books in a highly competitive capitalist market is an important and relevant subject that could be taken up for further research.

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