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Exploring Feminist Perspective in Indian Literary Works

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Abstract

The word 'Feminism' seems to refer to an intense awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. The subjugation of woman is a central fact of history and it is the main cause of all psychological disorders in society. One of the most enduring truths about India is that it is a country of contradictions and at the heart of these contradictions stands Indian women who are among the most oppressed in the world and at the same time they are among the most liberated, most articulate and perhaps even the most free. Can these two realities be simultaneously true? Presently India has several women, young and old, working in all kinds of professions, on powerful and dignifying positions and yet Indian newspapers are full of stories of rape, sexual harassment, exploitations, violent incidents even murder of a woman for dowry & physical relations etc.

Keywords: Feminism; English Literature; India; Feminist Movement, patriarchy.

Introduction

Indian feminist literature challenges patriarchy, caste, and societal norms, evolving from 19th-century reforms to modern, diverse narratives addressing sexuality, identity, and empowerment. Key figures range from pioneers like Tarabai Shinde and Savitribai Phule to contemporary voices like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who explore women's agency, autonomy, and the complexities of the female experience in traditional and urban India.

Review of Literature

- Sushil Singh" has expressed strong, controversial views criticizing modern feminism and advocating for traditional gender roles, often in the context of marriage and societal structure.
- Srinivasa Iyengar highlighted the "aggressively individualistic" nature of new Indian women, particularly noting this in the work of Kamala Das, which explored female sexuality and questioned traditional social roles. Evolution of Women Characters: In his Indian Writing in English_ and other analyses, he documented the journey of women from being victims of male-dominated societies to becoming agents of their own destiny.
- Nayanathara Sahgal challenges the traditional, sometimes deified, role of women in Hindu society, advocating for a modern, independent woman (the "New Woman") who holds her own against societal pressures. Integration of Personal and Political: Her work often juxtaposes personal marital issues with political, social, and

economic themes, showing how women's rights are intrinsically linked to the broader, shifting landscape of Indian democracy.

- In the words of M.K. Bhatnagar, "Feminism in the Indian context is a byproduct of western liberalism in general and feminist thoughts in particular". With the social and cultural change in post-independence India, women find themselves standing at the cross-roads.

Growth of Feminism in India:

For centuries human experiences have been synonymous with the masculine experiences. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right, but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life. This situation has continued to remain the same. What have shaped the feminine perspective differently from the concerned or paralleled developments in the Western culture and in the Indian Continent are differences in dress, in attitude, in cultural behavior and family structures. In the initial stages feminist movement in India was submerged in the freedom struggle. In a way freedom struggle liberated women from conventional social constraints and gave them constitutional Rights.

Indian society believes that men have the power and cultural hegemony in the society. A peculiar feature of Indian society is that men defend maleness and consider women not manly which is not basically human. Women are marginalized through cultural institutions and religious rituals. Feminist movements have been trying for removal of this marginalization. Feminism is reformistic in nature and helps women to understand their position in a better manner. In this

context Linda Gordon's opinion is that "feminism is an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out to change it deserve a mention" [1]. The ancient lawgiver of Hinduism, Manu says, "The father looks after her during childhood, the husband protects her during youth, and the sons take care of her when she becomes old. Women are never fit for freedom" [2]. These forms Indian view of the womanhood that relates primarily to the Indian fabric of living. In the modern times we have great political luminaries as Kasturiba, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhiji who took leading part in making India free. Even before this a noteworthy name in the field of feminism is Savitribai Phule (1831-1897). She is perhaps the earliest Indian feminist. She started the First School for girls in the subcontinent at Bhide Wada in Pune in 1848. She had to face humiliation at hands of caste Hindus. The practice of child marriage was prevalent in the 19th century and since the mortality rate was very high at that time, many young girls often become widows even before attaining puberty. Such widows were forcibly shaven their heads, wear a simple red sari and live a life of austerity. Savitribai stood up against this system. She even organized a strike against the barbers in order to persuade them to stop shaving the heads of the widows. This is an epoch-making event in the history of Indian feminist movement. But in the West Virginia Woolf was indeed a revolutionary feminist. A critic Elizabeth Hard Wicin wrote "Virginia Woolf has a feminine mind different from the masculine" [3]. She fought for the cause of women. She was of the opinion that women's movements, could be the basis for transformative social change.

The feminist movement began in the West with the French Revolution. It was just three years later that Mary Woolstone Craft published her book *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*. These two incidents paved way for liberty, equality and fraternity. It was also a sigh of relief for women all over the world. In 1869 John Stuvart Mill Published *Subjection of Women*, a very persuasive and well-reasoned book which exerted great influence on feminist movement. Charlott Bronte in her writings also condemned the social system of her day.

Today feminism is more or less a world phenomenon though it began in England. The American women were probably the first to wage a hard long-battle for equal rights which was previously barred. Despite its wide popularity in Europe and America, feminism has not been defined in strict in India. For some it is the emancipation of women in three fields, namely political, economical and social. Political emancipation means the power to vote as well as the right to assume office. This kind of emancipation was attained long ago. Now women have attained economic emancipation too. They have the right to property in their names and claim an equal share in father's property with their brothers. Today there are no constraints on the courses in the field of education that they take up. They are free to leave their parents' home and lead an independent life. However, women are not completely emancipated from sexual taboos. In the Scandinavian countries free sex before marriage is allowed. In some other countries occasional, extra martial love affairs after marriage take place. A rational solution is yet to be found to the problem of determining what kind of sexual morality would be best from the point of view of general health and happiness.

Modern Indian feminist movement may be said to have begun with Raja Ram Mohan Roy's success in making the East India Company Government pass a bill making it illegal and punishable for a widow to burn herself on the funeral pyre of

her husband. Later, the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj worked for the upliftment of women. In Maharashtra, Ramabai Ranade did laudable work for the upliftment of women. Later, into the political sphere stepped women like Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalaxmi Pandit and others who fought shoulder to shoulder with men for political freedom under Gandhiji's leadership. Socially women's voices become mute, the term silence is a part of the constitution of female identity, that subjectivity is a crucial factor to women. Sophocles says "silence gives the proper grace to women" [4]. Women speak on sufferings in the patriarchal order. That is why culture prefers them to be silent.

The concept of silence recurs in women's writings. Women writers have proved themselves as silent protesters. They have given vent to their feelings of poetry. In pre-independent India, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and a host of other poets produced the best kind of poetry. Toru Dutt in her first years dealt with estrangement between the family and the Orthodox Hindu community. She made use of Indian epics and mythologies like Savitri, Sita etc. display a feeling of revolt. As Rajaji comments "The Tenderness and purity are the untold sufferings of women take shape as in Uttar Ramayana are like an un-flickering lamp. It throws light on the equality of their hearts" [5]. Toru Dutt observes "sufferings of women but does not extricate the feelings of women. Sarojini Naidu, the woman, the patriot, looks into the buried and broken heart of women. She sees there a new vision of the chained mother and vowed to break the bonds" [6]. Her two collections of poems, namely, *The Golden Threshold* and, *The Broken Wing* consist of sensitive beauty, and the beauty of living, beauty of holiness. Being a patriot poet, freedom struggle is the main motto of her poetry.

Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatta, and other modernist poets have written poetry on their surroundings. But Gouri Deshpande's *Beyond the Slaughter House* is quite different. This collection of poems is proof of her disinterest in Hindu ethos. It is the duty of a Hindu women to bear children to destroy ancestral darkness. But Gouri rejects babies. Fetus was aborted by her for economic, legal and social reasons. Gouri was able to differentiate the hierarchy between male and female and come out with the injustice she faces in society. Kamala Das, a fierce feminist dares without any inhibition the hurts she received in an insensitive and largely man dominated world. Being a Nair caste, she makes a few pejorative remarks such as, "The Nair males are violent in temper and they are crude in when sexually aroused. She seems to have not loved anyone including her. She is the type of an unhappy soul who wants the whole world to turn on the axis of her personality, and when it refuses, she condemns it. Feminism comes naturally in her poetry" [7].

A feminist novel for India is not a novel which a woman writes just because she is a woman and knows how to write. It is written by one who has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible, external and internal forces, by the one who is not carried away by feminism. Shashi Deshpade in her novels depicts the struggle of women in both family and society. Malithi Rao's *Rita*, *Passion Fruit* and *Oh America* deal with women's quest for self-discovery.

In this way feminist trend is visible in Indian English Literature.

Suggestions

- The women should be aware from their rights which are provided by the constitution.

- Women should know how to defend themselves when they are hit or beaten by their in-laws or husband.
- Women should take step themselves for not giving dowry as in the recent scenario women is self-dependent.
- Women should develop self-esteem and self confidence in themselves so that they can share their opinion with their husband.

Conclusion

Feminism is a very wide concept and to discuss it fully is very difficult. If we talk about the rights given to women by our constitution then it is fully clear that those rights had not implemented as they had been introduced by governments. As in the matter of property, women never get the share of property because of their mental state as they are considered to be the most emotional creature. This is also because of our patriarchal society which never allows women to establish their career and get higher places. Parents from the day one, teach their daughters to be submissive in front of their in laws as well as male counter parts and this should not be done.

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