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Literary Feminism in India

Abstract

The word feminism refers to the advocacy of women's right seeking to remove restrictions that discriminate against women. It relates to the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. Feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present. The word feminist refers to the person who advocates or practices feminism and it takes political position. Female is the matter of biology and feminine is a set of culturally defined characteristics. Indian feminists have also fought against cultural issues within the patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and practice of widow immolation known as sati. Unlike the western feminist movements, India's movement was initiated by men and then joined by women. The feminist literary criticism spent most of its energy describing how women were represented in literary works by both men and women writers. Deshpande, as a great feminist and Indian novelist, presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood treading the labyrinthine paths of human mind and sheds light on the

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subtleties of the human female. Her novels are in themselves the schools of psyche based on lives and problems of women only. Each novel is a voyage of discovery for her, a discovery of herself, of other humans, of our universe.

Keywords: feminism, feminist, literary feminism, nationalism.

Introduction

. . . in childhood a women should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's and when her husband is dead, under her sons, she should not have independence.... (Buhler, 1992)

The term feminism coming from French has its origin from the Latin word 'femina' meaning 'woman', and thereby it refers to the advocacy of woman's right seeking to remove restrictions that discriminate against women. In other words, it relates to the belief that women should have the same social, economic, and political rights as men. The term became popular as early as 20th century showing struggles for securing woman's suffrage or voting rights in the western countries and the well organized socio-political movement for women's emancipation from the patriarchal oppression. Feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with marginalization of women in patriarchal culture, a culture organized in the favour of men. Unlike other approaches, like formalism, feminism is an overtly political approach and can attack other approaches for their false assumptions about women. Woman is defined exclusively in her relation to man. The asymmetry of the categories male and female is made manifest in the unilateral form of sexual myths. We sometimes say 'the sex' to designate woman; she is the flesh, its delights and dangers. The truth that for woman man is sex and carnality has never been proclaimed because there is no one to proclaim it. Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth (de Beauvoir, 1949). The plural form "feminisms" is political because it disrupts the notion that 'feminism' is a single category, with clear limits, fixed in a single semantic space. The plural form rewrites the category as something potentially transgressive or subversive. If there

is more than one feminism, feminisms might be anywhere, might do anything. This is of course, the point. Feminisms are multiple (Robbins, 2000). The word feminist refers to a person who advocates or practices feminism and it takes a political position; female is the matter of biology and feminine is a set of culturally defined characteristics. While feminisms are concerned to define between sex and gender, between femaleness and femininity; they do not want to forget biology completely. There are strategic reasons for remembering bodies. Sex and gender are not, however, the only sites of women's oppression; one can be oppressed because one is poor, one is coloured, undereducated, addicted or imprisoned. Feminisms, as Robbins puts it, are political discourses which uncover the symptoms of oppression, whatever their grounds, diagnose the problem, and offer alternative versions of liveable realities. Notwithstanding the contributions of the revolutionary nineteenth and early twentieth century authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelly, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, feminist literary criticism developed mostly since the beginning of the late twentieth century women's movement (Guerin, et al., 2005). That movement included the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan, who examined a female 'self' constructed in literature by male authors. Most men support feminists with the false belief that equality among genders will lead to a better world. A careful analysis will show that he is brainwashed into believing that only women suffered throughout ages, and men need to support discrimination of fellow men for betterment of humanity.

Feminism in Indian context

Traditionally, right from the ancient days, India was a male-dominated culture. Indian women were covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and reticence in literature as well as in life. They were inanimate objects, who followed five paces behind their men, they had to be gentle, patient, gracious, and for generations together. Bengali women were hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring verses from "The Bhagavad-Gita and The Ramayana" in the dim light of sooty lamps' (Neeru, 2008). The Indian woman today is no longer a Damayanti, she is a Draupadi or a

damianus or a Nora or a candid Joan of Arc. Social reformers, Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and political revolutionaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru lent her a new dimension, gave her a new direction.

The term feminism in India refers to a set of movements intending to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. Like their feminist counterparts in the world, feminists in India seek gender equality. This can be the right to work for equal wages, to have access to health and education as well as political rights. It is worth mentioning that feminists in India have also fought against cultural issues within the patriarchal society of India, such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as Sati.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati (Gangoli, 2007). The second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement, and independent women's organizations began to emerge. Finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women in the work force and right to political parity.

Kumari Jayawardena in her pioneer work on feminist movements in Asia, in the late 19th and early 20th century, defines feminism as “embracing movements of equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system”. In this definition, she assets these movement as (1) the formulation and consolidation of national identities which mobilized anti-imperialist movements during the independence struggle, and (2) the remaking of pre-capitalist religion and feudal structures in attempts to ‘modernize’ the third world societies. The rich history of women’s movements in India has been well documented by scholars (Smt Shailaja, A.Patil, 2006).

The coming of M. K. Gandhi changed the total scenario. He gave a new direction and dimension to the Feminist movement in India. He freed women from passivity, servility, and domesticity. Feminism as a new way of life, as a new viewpoint came into existence in India with

the partiality of feminine and trying to redefine woman's role and situation in the society. Women's role in Pre-colonial social structures reveals that feminism was theorized differently in India than in the West (Chatterjee, 1999). In India, women's issues first began to be addressed when the state commissioned a report on the status of women to a group of feminist researchers and activists. The report recognized the fact that in India, women were oppressed under a system of structural hierarchies and injustices. During this period, Indian feminists were influenced by the Western debates being conducted about violence against women. However, due to the difference in the historical and social culture of India, the debate in favour of Indian women had to be conducted creatively and certain Western ideas had to be rejected (Gangoli, 2007). Women's issues began to gain an international prominence when the decade of 1975-1985 was declared the United Nations Decade for Women. Historical circumstances and values in India have caused feminists to develop a feminism that differs from Western feminism. For example, the idea of women as "powerful" is accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion (Singh, 2010). 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 (Ray, 1999). Unlike the Western feminist movement, India's movement was initiated by men, and later joined by women. The efforts of these men included abolishing sati, which was a widow's death by burning on her husband's funeral pyre (Gangoli, 2007). The custom of child marriage, abolishing the disfiguring of widows, banning the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows, promoting women's education, obtaining legal rights for women to own property, and requiring the law to acknowledge women's status by granting them basic rights in matters such as adoption (Chaudhuri, 2005).

It was believed that men and women were partners, sharing equal duties in social life and equal rights in political field. Though the Municipal vote for Indian women was acquired right in 1855, but it had not been properly utilized by them for lack of education, lack of opportunity for self-development, lack of interest in social problems. Women had enjoyed equal rights with men in the Vedic days. They had the opportunity of receiving the highest education. Hence, Gandhi

acclaimed the concept of Ardhangini, enshrined in Indian culture, and accepted the fact that men and women are complement to each other, and one is never a whole without the other. He proclaimed the scriptures, which conceived Prakriti and Purusha as one, man and woman as one in the concept of Ardhanariswara.

Feminism and Nationalism

Sarojini Naidu's presidential address to the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in Bombay in 1930 arrests two central themes. They are, firstly the tension with the western origins of feminism and secondly, the construction of a nationalism that erases internal differences, perceived as potential threats to nationalism. Naidu addressed the women's conference in the following words:

We are not weak, timid, meek women, we hold the courageous Savitri as our ideal, we join how Sita defied those who entertained those suspicious of her ability to keep her chastity. We possess the spirit of creative energy to legislate for the moral of the world. I think this conference is writing the history of women of the world. I am not a feminist. To be a feminist is to acknowledge that one's life has been repressed. The demand for granting preferential treatment to woman is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been on the side of men in council and in the fields of battle.... We must have no mutual conflicts in our homes or abroad. We must transcend differences. We must rise about above nationalism, above religion, and above sex.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi addressing the All India Women's Conference in 1980 said:

. . . I have often said, that, I am not a feminist, yet, in my concern for the unprivileged, how can I ignore women who, since the beginning of history, have been dominated over and discriminated against in social custom and in laws . . ? In the west, women's so-called freedom is often equated with imitation of man. Frankly, I feel that is merely an exchange of one kind of bondage for another. To be liberated, a woman must feel free to be herself, not in rivalry to man, but in the context of her own capacity and her personality. We need women to be more interested, more alive and more active, not because they are women,

but because they do comprise 'half the human race'. Whether they like it, or not, they cannot escape their responsibility nor should they be denied its benefits. Indian women are traditionally conservatives but they also have the genius of synthesis to adapt and absorb. That is what gives them resilience to face suffering and to meet upheavals with a degree of calm, to change constantly and yet remain changeless which is the quality of India herself.

This speech dominating nationalist frame resurfaces the conflation of the Indian women with Indian nation and culture and its very special identity.

Feminism and literature

The literature written mainly by women and concerned to women is called feminist literature. After a long decade of struggle, feminism has managed to establish itself as a legitimate and widely respected academic discipline although gender conscious reading has become ineluctable and widely practiced in almost all scholarly fields. A number of thinkers, such as John Ellis, Harold Bloom and Roger Kimball insist on labelling feminist critics an 'angry', 'resentful' and 'hostile' who hate literature and assault the canon. They maintain the view that politics and aesthetics are incompatible, the former infecting and staining the purity of the latter. Rita Felski (2003) sets out to unveil the blind-spots and errors of such claims and to liberate feminist scholarship from the burden of this harmful and mistaken caricature before it settles into popular. Feminism has transformed the academic study of literature, fundamentally altering the canon of what is taught and setting new agendas for literary analysis. Rita Felski explains how feminism has changed the ways people read and think about literature. In literature one of the main purposes is clarifying reality and we know that problems of women are one of the biggest problems in the world so literature can be as a medium for solving these problems.

The feminist literary criticism that appeared in the sixties and seventies was frequently naive. It spent most of its energy describing how women were represented in literary works by both men and women writers. The male writers came off badly. Feminist literary critics wrote about literary characters as if they were real people and

they predictably found women characters treated less sympathetically by men than they would like. They also wrote as though authors had a public duty to be ideologically correct on sex, race, and class. This early school of feminist thought is still in full cry, and Milton remains the chief sinner among the poets, and Dickens perhaps the worst offender among nineteenth century novelists. It is common, for instance, for feminists to refer to Milton's "misogyny" although, in fact, Milton was far ahead of his time in the respect, both spiritual and intellectual; he showed for woman as a moral agent, as in his treatment of Eve.

Literary feminism in India

Indian literature of the twentieth century is a memorable record of the triumph and tragedy of Indian people involved in the most significant engagement in their history, the struggle for independence and the challenges that followed the achievement of that goal (Kumar das, 1991). Feminism throws a challenge on the age-long tradition of gender differentiation. It attempts to explore and find a new social order, to find pertinent resolves to the real life problems in the light of traditionally-gendered role-playing. Woman has always been projected as a secondary and inferior human being. Feminism is perhaps the most powerful movement that swept the literary world in the recent decades. It has been articulated differently in different parts of the world by various writers depending upon their class, background and level of consciousness. As a critical tool, feminism aims at providing an altogether new awareness of women's role in the modern complex world. Famous feminists in India such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, wrote significant novels in this field. Here we explain briefly Ms Deshpande's novel and her perspective. One of the important novels by Shashi Deshpande is *The Dark Holds No Terrors In*. This novel has been translated into the German and Russian languages. She very well portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women, who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. They are equally aware of the social and cultural inequalities to which they are subjected to, and hence they want to rebel against them in their search for freedom and identity, but ultimately they find themselves against the well-entrenched social inertia. Sarita, in this novel very boldly confronts reality and realizes that the dark no

longer holds any terror to her. Sarita, usually known and recognized Saru is an ordinary, simple, modest and sensitive middle class woman aware of her own limitation, but lacks self-confidence. She wished and hoped and always longed to break away from the rigid traditional norms. She yearns for a new environment where, the mother cannot thrust her will on her daughter. The unhealthy experience at her parental home leads her to discover the hidden reserved strength in human being, which at times leaps up to help the individual by shaping life into a pleasurable and a possible one.

Her second novel is *Roots and Shadows* where Shashi Deshpande studies the issues and problems of the contemporary middle class women. She pictures modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women, who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. This novel won the Thirumathi Rangamal prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. The entire world presented in the novel is a well-knit closed world of a joint family. Indu, the protagonist, is caught up in a conflict between their family and professional roles, between individual aspiration and social demands. Caste system and patriarchy are the two major factors responsible for this narrow-mindedness. In her third novel *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood treading the labyrinthine paths of human mind with a rare gift for sharp psychological insights into the subtleties of the human female, supported with rich evocative, unassuming and pretentious style. She delicately delineates the swings of mood, the seesaw moments of joy and despair, the fragments of feelings perceived and suppressed, heart-wringing anguish of the narrator protagonist, Jaya, a housewife and a failed writer. Her unequivocal feminist stand has got her a distinctive place in the contemporary Indian English fiction. Her themes are based on lives and problems of women only. Her novels are in themselves the schools of psyche of those people whose capacity for rational thought vanishes on being victimized to traumatic experience. *That Long Silence* (1988) is a novel of a woman and her life. Shashi Deshpande confesses that only a woman could read her books because they are written from the inside, as it were. Her novels are autobiographical in nature depicting her own experiences of the educated middle class Indian women's predicament and they tend to be gender specific. Her work concentrates on the status of the women in the traditional bound, male-dominated middle class

society of the contemporary India. According to Shashi Deshpande, each novel is a voyage of discovery for her, a discovery of herself, of other humans, of our universe.

Conclusions

Much of the early reforms for Indian women were conducted by men. However, by the late nineteenth century they were joined in their efforts by their wives, sisters, relatives and other individuals directly affected by campaigns such as those carried out for women's education. By the late twentieth century women obtained greater autonomy through independent women's organisations. Women's participation in the struggle for freedom developed their critical awareness of their role and rights in independent India. Literary feminism was concerned with the politics of women's authorship and the representation of women's condition within literature. The canon tried to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing intending to interpret their writings in a way that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view. Above all, it will resist sexism in literature.

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