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A STUDY ON FEMINIST LITERATURE IN INDIAN ENGLISH - AN OVERVIEW

Ette Jyothsna

Research Scholar

Department of English, Ekalavya University

Damoh, Madhya Pradesh

Faculty, Department of English, Government Degree College for Women

Jagityal, Telangana State, India

ABSTRACT

By studying Indian women's literature through research on international literature, it possible to define the characteristics of feminist writing in India, and make a comparison between eastern and western criticisms of women's literature. Entering the 20th century, as the Women's Liberation Movement was being developed worldwide, Indian women (especially female intellectuals) began to awaken and to struggle for the basic privileges of equality between male and female. Going with the tide against the feudal ethical code, the voice of women's liberation, of the equality between the sexes, and of the freedom for both self-chosen courtship and marriage became louder and louder. Breaking away from the outdated traditional modes of thought, women tended to walk out of traditional families, and to step towards a newborn society. Compared with western society, eastern society enjoys a disparate developmental process and a distinct conformation system of consciousness, as well as different cultural traditions. Among the eastern national cultures, India's culture remains deeply significant. This research paper to be discussed in "A Study on Feminist Literature in Indian English – An Overivew"

Keywords: Feminism, Women Liberation Movement, Female Characters, Traditional Colonial Clutches.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

"The point of feminism is you should'nt have to be a man to be treated with equal respect"

Kimberle Williams Crenshaw,
a familiar Feminist lady

The changes that took place at the social level were the natural aftermath of the political upheaval. More and more women who joined the work force of freedom struggle were educated and became economically independent and even supported families. Despite this newly acquired power, they failed to question the accepted patriarchal and sexist oppression on them. In the early decades of the 20th century women took other women for granted and focused their attention on male dominated spheres. In the typical Indian families of that period, father was the central figure governing or controlling female members of the family. In this way a male child plays dominant role. As Anna Jameson points out, "Surely it is dangerous, it is wicked in these days, to follow the old law, to bring up woman to be 'happy wives and mothers'.....as it for woman these existed only one destiny one hope, one blessing, one object, one passion, in existence; some people say it out to be so, but we know that it is not so; we know that hundreds, that thousands of woman are not happy wives and mothers, are never either, wives are mothers at all.

The Indian society believes that men have the power and cultural hegemony in the society. A peculiar feature of the Indian society is that men defend maleness and consider women not manly which is not basically human. Women are marginalised through cultural institutions and religious rituals. Feminist movements have been trying for removal of this marginalisation. The strong wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s helped theorize a woman's discourse. A feministically read text can lead to a better understanding of the woman's condition. Thus, the very basis of feminism which is reformistic in nature 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 deserves a mention". The women-centered perspective now locates specific virtues in the female experience. This should, conceptually speaking, take to a concentrated study of feminism so as to place in the proper perspective whatever is vital about woman in life and literature. Preferably this should be apart from whatever the 'ism' stands for in the history of ideas. "In the present context, the rise of women's awakening and of ripening consciousness causes the consequent battle against a tradition formed by male dominated society. For centuries human experiences have been synonymous with the masculine experiences, which made the collective image of humanity one sided and incomplete. 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 parallel developments in the Western culture and in the Indian Continent



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are differences in dress, in attitudes, in cultural behaviour and family structures. In addition to this the feminist movement in its initial stages was submerged in the freedom struggle. And. the freedom struggles liberated women from conventional social constraints and gave them Constitutional Rights. Yet the fact remains that feminism is essentially a movement social in basics and socio-political in proliferated dimensions and is primarily directed against the sufferings of women at the hands of wicked men". An 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. Woman is never fit for freedom". This form's Indian view of womanhood that relates primarily to the Indian fabric of living. It is necessary therefore, for the feminist to remember that the Indian society has provided a very complex picture of womanhood. In the modern times we have great political luminaries as Kasturiba, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi who took leading part in making India free. Services of Tara Bai, Ahalyabai, Razia Begum, Rani Durgavathi, Jhansi Laxmi Bai etc to our nation are rare and remarkable in nature. Women like Gargi, Mitreyi of ancient times enriched our spiritual heritage. They are also examples of emancipated women.

Western Feminist Literature

Virginia Woolf was indeed a revolutionary feminist. A critic / Elizabeth Hard Wicin wrote, "Virginia Woolf had a feminine mind different from the masculine". Women since ages have been under man's subjugation and her attitudes have changed under the influence of masculine standards. Now she has to find out ways of her own, without yielding herself to the criticism of any Taskmasters. Woman should be able to live her own life. Woman has been living in darkness of ignorance and negligence since ages but now she is moving towards light by slow degrees. "Virginia's feminism is positive, constructive and deep. She opines that purely masculine or 'I purely feminine mind is dangerous". The feminist movement began in the West with the French Revolution. Mary Wollstone Craft. published 'The Vindication of The Rights of Women', only three years later. The first event symbolized the beginning of liberty, equality and fraternity for the whole of mankind, the second stood for freedom from the trammels of tradition for equality to women with men for the better half of the mankind.

In 1869 John Stuart Mill published 'Subjection of Women', a very Persuasive and well-reasoned book which exerted great influence on feminist movement. However, the movement developed rather by slow degrees. Charlotte Bronte condemned extensively the social system, which brought up girls to regard marriage as their sole destiny. In a letter dated 1st April 1845, addressed to her friend Ellen Nessey, Bronte wrote, "not that it is a crime to marry or a crime to wish to be married - but it is an imbecility which I reject with contempt - for women who have neither fortune nor beauty to make marriage the principal object of their wishes and hopes the aim of all their actions - not to be able to concern themselves that they are unattractive and that they had better be quiet and think of things other than wedlock".

Today feminism is more or less a worldwide phenomenon though it began in England. The American women were probably the first to wage a hard long-fought battle for equal rights and break into previously barred professions and with the right to equal education with men, to speak in public to vote for, to hold office, and to own property. It is surprising and note-worthy that despite its wide popularity in Europe and America and with the younger generations of the moneyed classes in cosmopolitan cities in India, feminism has not been defined in precise terms, though most people have an idea of what it means, i.e., 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 hold property in their names and claim an equal share in father's property with their brothers. Social emancipation covers more than one thing. It includes freedom from outdated traditions and meaningless customs, which act as shackles against what they want to do.

Feminism On Indian Perspective

Feminism in Indian Short Stories: The publication of stories from Indian Christian Life by Kamala Saththianandan in the year 1898 marked the beginning of the short story in English, by the Indian writers. But the tradition of the short story in India may be traced back to the 'Panchatantra', the Jataka Tales, Katha Sariotsagara. When the Indian short story came of age in the 1930's its possibilities as an art form were realized. Anita Desai - with Desai, the Indian short story attains a certain degree of maturity, especially in her psychological portrayal of the innerself In her collection of short stories entitled 'Games at Twilight and other Stories" (1978) she pleads for an attitude of moderation and adaptability of changing circumstances in the virtue of her successful characters. Looking at Indo-English literature of the 1970's it appears that the contribution of female authors has markedly increased and that a greater awareness is also to be found, with many critics to direct their attention at the literary depiction of the modern Indian women's problems, be they of a psychological, emotional, a social or an economic nature. Womens' literature is solely or overwhelmingly concerned with comprehensive investigations of a more fundamental nature i.e., common themes like the clash of cultures, East Vs West, Spirituality Vs Materialism, the ideas of India Vs the Externalized goals in the West etc. Most of the young



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female writers preferred short form of narration to express their ideas. Majority of the writers of the 1970's belonged to the middle class. Life of this class in India does seem to offer the opportunity, the challenge and the material means to a woman to sit down and write her own stories. The experience of life seems to have been much more predictable to them because of their own traditional role as 'woman in the family' and 'woman in society'.

Thus, female writers, accordingly, chose their themes within the confines of the clearly drawn 'sphere of women'. The short story writers awoke to the question traditional images by way or probing into meaning of a single experience; a mood or a sentiment based on a moment or moments of rebellion. The use of the long narrative form by a generation, as it were, is in the midst of working out for itself new vistas, new approaches to master one's life and experiences would not meet the authors' requirement to give adequate expression to these probing. This is once again 'wrestling with reality'. The use of short story indicates, as it was, the development of the 20th century woman. In the stories of the 20th century women, a woman is given primary importance, and her relationship with man, in many cases her husband, is most touched upon. Besides, a number of stories depict experiences of girls or young women on the brink of womanhood. These constellations, no doubt, do not differ very much from those of earlier writers but there is a significant difference, more often than not the relationship of man and woman is portrayed as being strained or women is portrayed as being disturbed or even questioned, what we call a feminist trend, and quite frequently this disturbance arises out of the woman's attempt to discover for herself a meaningful life in society, be it in her profession or in her social activities outside her home.

For example, in Raji Narashimhan's 'the Last Embrace', the narrator's wife decides to leave him, 'to retire from life'. Similarly, their daughter decides to live her own life, having turned her attention away from home towards a young man with whom she is in love. Little is being said about the motive of his wife's decision in this story. Joshi, the narrator, feels his supremacy as man being questioned and the only thought he can think of is how to reaffirm it once again by a 'Last Embrace'. From Joshi's reaction it becomes clear that to her, he has become unimportant, a non-entity, who perhaps never in their married lives, fulfilled her deepest desires and needs as an individual. In the same writer's 'A Village Story', a woman leaves her husband to take up teaching in a village. When he visits her to coax her into coming back home to him, she sends him away. Quite similar in theme is Sunita Jain's 'The Landing' telling about a woman's and her children's return from the United States to India leaving husband behind in search of a meaningful life. In Shashi Deshpande's 'Rani', a young woman makes love to her doctor, while her husband is dying. Having married her lover, the past to the woman seems a closed chapter not meant to disturb her decision to live a new life.

Ideological Criticism

As an important member of the developing world and the major representative of eastern culture, India is exerting more and more obvious influence on the growing tide of world feminist literary criticism. Compared with that of Britain, America and France, the course of Indian feminist literary criticism presents the following features: - Indian feminist literary criticism has a strong sense of approval of its own national culture. As stated above, although Indian women's experience is full of hardship and suffering, women's contemporary literary works have not fundamentally negated the tradition role of good wives and loving mothers. Modern female writers unveil the difficult situation of women, and then more often than not, they give the heroine a personality of traditional virtues. At the same time, they try to transcend the traditional personality in every aspect. That is, they try to create a new female character who has both traditional virtues and shows modern consciousness. Feminist literary criticism also presents a moderate attitude which does not thoughtlessly and completely negate the historical and cultural tradition of its own nation, but always tries to find a point related to, or consistent with, the new era while assimilating a brilliant cultural tradition so as to refresh and develop Indian women's traditional virtues and fine characters.

The sense of approval of its national culture reflects not only on the contents of women's literary works, but also on its expressive methods as well as on the focus of feminist literary criticism. Indian feminist writings mainly put the woman's fate into a cultural environment of family and society, the marked point of which is not necessarily the individual consciousness of the heroine, but the collective consciousness which represents women's fate of the particular time and place. As compared with that of Britain, France and other countries, Indian feminist literature is less individualist, and much stronger in the common agreement with collectivism based on the approval of traditional culture. It is also the same with literary criticism. Indian feminist literary criticism tends to value works from the angle of historical source, collective generalisation and social influence, instead of exploring the relation between female characterisation and female discourse from the angle of female body politics and desire-satisfaction, which French feminist critical theory has practised.

Indian feminist literary criticism has a close relation to political ethos, which keeps a certain distance from the activities organised by the women's associations. Both women's awakening to personal identity in the 20s and the climax of women's literary



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creation in the 80s were directly connected with the open ethos of active minds and diverse opinions. When society develops to the stage of the old being substituted by the new, the basic social contradictions tend to deepen. And the most serious problems are often women's position and living conditions, which are also the easiest areas for a new power to destroy the old and build up the new. Marx recognised this when he said: 'The progress of society can be accurately measured by women's social position.' Indian feminist literary criticism pays much attention to the social, propagative function of feminist literature. The writers directly expose the various difficulties of women, accuse and criticise the patriarchal system and patriarchal culture for their long-term suppression of women, thereby inspiring women to wake up and to fight against their oppressors. In this sense, Indian feminist literary criticism has a clear political significance and is full of the unyielding spirit of struggle. It always corresponds to realistic political activities and itself often becomes the vanguard of the political wave. The problems revealed in feminist literature and criticism usually draw the notice of the whole society, and the resolution or relief of these problems can usually become a new starting point of social improvement. However, after Indian feminist literature has developed to a certain stage, it will tend to return to the women's virtues found in the traditional literature, and at the same time lessen the strength of struggle against the present social system in which androcentrism still exists. When this happens, female intellectuals need to strengthen their more independent consciousness in order to mediate and find a path in the cultural field. As a result, the pure political organisation of the women's association, subordinated to the leadership of a superior, can hardly become their proper form of organisation. At this point, Indian feminist literary criticism is different from that of America. American feminist literary critics like to express unique personal opinions by debating in small groups, while Indian critics prefer to act independently and unilaterally (most Indian female writers and critics still don't admit they are feminists), though their opinions are quite identical. Apart from that, India has extensive geographical and economic, as well as cultural, gaps between the south and the north, town and country, eastern coastal areas and western inland areas. The social convention and living habits of women in different places varies greatly, and the development of modern travel and communication networks is also uneven. In such varied environments of time and space, Indian feminist literary criticism will develop at a rather low level for women in poor villages while women in highly developed areas, especially in big and middle-sized cities, have relatively high material and spiritual demands. Modern Indian women are in a complicated situation, containing great variations which have been richly and deeply presented in feminist literature and criticism.

Summing Up

Combining comparative literature and feminist literary criticism will allow an exploration of a new field in two ways. Analysing it from the view of comparative literature, we can more clearly see the different artistic features of eastern versus western feminist literary criticism, and more easily understand the different theories of the two. Analysing it from the view of the long-term development of world literature, Indian feminist literature, with the background of Indian culture, has created a large number of eastern female characters, whose 'meekness-outside' but 'sturdiness-inside', uprightness, diligence and kindness indicate the primary factors of an ideal human spirit. They are not aristocratic as are French upper-class women, so that they do not have the luxury of empty conversation, nor are they excessively politicised, so that they avoid the extremes of thorough revolution. They are influenced by western values, but still maintain eastern virtues, pursuing friendship with the world's women, keeping in step with their own brothers and sisters, and advancing with a moderate attitude. The question of what the future of Indian feminist literature will be can only be answered by history. But we can be sure of one point. Indian women, with a literary tradition of several thousand years, will never follow in other people's footsteps. Instead, they will advance in their own unique way.

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