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A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM IN INDIAN NOVELS

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Abstract:

The present paper explores the importance of post-colonial feminism and fiction. Novel is the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression. During recent years standard of English has rapidly gone down in India. Female writers have rarely been the subjects of serious scholarly inquiry. Usually, novels and short stories do not catch my attention but seeing as women writers and their and her Literary Collection, I gave it a try and was thoroughly surprised. The Indian women writers have so much depth, emotion and attachment with Indian traditions and values.

Key words: - Novels, Women Identity and Feminism

Introduction

In postcolonial period women writers faced a lot of problems, but they established their identity in Indian novels. The work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. One factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space, and women's perceptions of their experience within it.

In the false -moral system of male – dominated society a woman has been the victim of male pretence, development and violence since the earliest times. She could not freely narrate or discuss these varied and traumatic experiences with the emergence of the feminist movement; the emancipated woman started freely expressing such experiences in their creative works.

Writing about the growing participation and emergence of the Indo-English woman writers. *Sharad Srivastava Remarks:*

“The Indo-English woman writers have a special advantage in this respect as they have themselves been exposed to the stresses and strains to which the ‘New woman’ is subjected. Also writing in the English language is sometimes more helpful to a UN inhabited frankness so necessary to the portrayal of the emotional, moral and spiritual problems of the new woman”.¹

Feminism has been subtly handled in the massive work of English novels in India. Feminism is defined as cultural, economic and political movements that are focused towards establishing legal protection and complete equality for the women. In Indian writing feminism has been used as a modest attempt for evaluating the real social scenario as far as women are concerned. The Indian English novelists use oriental approaches of feminism. There are several novels in English literature of India that aptly portrays the actual status of the women in Indian societies. However, the modern aged women have realized that they are equally competent like the men and those they are not helpless. Unlike the past when men were considered as the sole bread earners, in today's age, women too have become direct money earners of any household.

The ‘new’ or the ‘feminist’ of the ‘path-breaking’ women writers have carved a niche for themselves in the male dominated world of fiction writing. All the writers differ from each other in some respect but the basic concern in their writing is the same i.e. to present a woman's world in its true light.

“Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. It attempts to analyses the reason for and dimensions of women's oppression, and to achieve women's liberation. To some, liberation is defined as social equality with men, while others feel that the narrow definition reflects the class bias of what is described variously as bourgeois feminism, career feminism, mainstream feminism or liberal feminism”.²

Postcolonial women writers and their work

The background and image of women in Indian women novelists had undergone a change during the last four decades. Female characters from 1980s onwards assert themselves portrayed by them hold marriages and motherhood. They have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing female characters to more dynamic, ready to



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unyoke the barriers of tradition, and to spend their lives in search for identity within and outside the social system. Character traits in the female prototypes in their Noels can no longer be defined simply in terms of their victim status.

Previously, Indian women novelists show both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting their lives to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonic versions³.

It is an accepted fact that the women writers have added new dimensions to Indian – English fiction with their exquisite perception of men and matters. They have analyzed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women have new roles and image as also their well-argued motives and efforts to achieve a harmonious relationship with their surroundings. They have also simultaneously aimed at portraying more realistically the Indian women’s sense of frustration and alienation.

After independence Women writers in India not only sweep you off your feet with just their down-to-earth attitudes, but they also have you nodding with wisdom and agreement. Their leading ladies jerk the average Indian readers out of their typical Indian complacency regarding gender issues. One might tend to think of women writers only in a Mills and Boon context, but women writers in India have proved that they are made of sterner and more serious stuff than that. Our women writers have grappled and more serious stuff than that. Our women writers have grappled with complex issued such as sensuality, servility, subjugation and society. They have handled them with a sense of balance, never disregarding our Indian traditions, yet discovering that there is more in the offing.

These women writers have given literary work in India an unmistakable edge. They are able to sensitively portray a world that has in it women rich in substance, their women are real flesh-and-blood protagonists who make you look at them with awe with their relationship to their surroundings, their society, their men, their children, their families; their mental make-ups and themselves.

The book of Indian literature written in English is smaller than that written in the various regional languages, and spans a smaller range of time, having only commenced with the spread of the English language and education. But in the last two decades there has been an astonishing flowering of Indian women writing in English, the literature of this period being published both in India and elsewhere.

The authors are mostly western educated, middle-class women who express in their writing their discontent with the plight of upper-caste and class traditional Hindu women trapped in repressive institutions such as child-marriage, dowry, prohibitions on women’s education, arranged marriages, suttee and enforced widowhood.

Feminism and women identity

Majority of Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. Thus, the theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood, that is, the Bildungsroman, is a recurrent strategy.

Santha Rama Rau’s *Remember the House* (1956), Ruth Prawar Jhabvala’s first novel *To Whom She Will* (1955) and her later *Heat and Dust* (1975) which was awarded the Booker Prize, and Kamala Markandaya’s *Two Virgins* (1973) are good examples. Sex is implied in these novels, but depicted more explicitly in *Socialite Evenings* (1989) by Shobha De, in which she describes the exotic sex lives of the high society in Mumbai.

As in poetry, the image of the New Woman and her struggle for an identity of her own also emerges in the Indian English novel. Such a struggle needs support structures outside the family to enable women to survive. Nayantara Sahgal uses this theme as the nucleus of *Rich Like Us* (1986). Other novels, such as Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* (1977), look more towards issues of traditional Indian culture, particularly the debate on female education. Another example of the western educated female protagonist’s quest for her cultural roots is Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992).

A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s, producing novels which revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. These writers were born after Indian independence, and the English language does not have colonial associations for them. Their work is marked by an impressive feel for the language, and an authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. They generally write about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know best.⁴



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Many of these authors, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), use magic realism in their novels. Suniti Namjoshi stands out for her use of fantasy and surrealism, and Anuradha Marwah-Roy's *Idol Love* (1999) presents a chilling picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. Other novels deal with various aspects of college life, such as Meena Alexander's *Nampally House* (1991), and Rani Dharker's *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997). Another theme to emerge is that of the lives of women during India's struggle for independence, as seen for example in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998).

In the field of regional fiction, four women writers, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Kamala Das, and Susan Viswanathan, have put the southern state of Kerala on the fictional map, while the culture of other regions has been represented by other women writers.⁵

Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within: the existential predicament of a woman in a male dominated society. Through such characters, she makes a plea for a better way of life for women. Her novels have Indians as central characters, and she alternates between female-centered and male-centered narrative. Her later novels, written since she moved to the USA, reveal all the characteristics of diasporic fiction, that is, a concern with the fate of immigrants, and a growing distance from the reality of India, which is viewed from the outside.

As early as 1894 in Kamala, Krupabai Sathianadhan explored the cultural clash suffered by a Hindu woman who is given a western education in India, and the experience of being caught between two cultures has remained a prominent theme in writing by Indian woman. There are many Indian women writers based in the USA, Canada, Britain, and other parts of the world. Some are recent immigrants, while others, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, are second generation immigrants. These authors write about their situation in cross-cultural contexts.

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