



BREAKING SILENCE: CHALLENGING MASCULINE HEGEMONY

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Abstract

One of the most dominant trends visible in Indian English Fiction during the last couple of decades is that there has been a continuous and concerted attempt to give voice to those who have been marginalized for centuries. The rise of feminism has been the most conspicuous movement that has led to a tremendous shift in the treatment of themes, characterization, tone, tenor and idiom in the Indian English fiction. The appearance of Women protagonists displacing the male hero signaled the dawn of new era that was characterized by a challenge to the male hegemony and patriarchal oppression, and breaking of the deep and long silence of women subjugated for centuries. Kamala Markandya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande move away from idealized and stereotypical characterization of women and present in their novel women protagonists realistically depicting them as individuals trapped in humdrum of life struggling and surviving in this oppressive male dominating society. The present paper is a modest attempt to study the female protagonists of these writers: to come to an understanding of their lives, their hopes, their psychic trials and tribulations, their desperate attempts to find meaning of their existence, and their quest for identity in this, hitherto, alien masculine world.

The most remarkable story of the contemporary world has been the story of the struggle of women for her rights. It has been a world-wide struggle against oppression and exploitation that has ushered in a feminist revolution empowering women to speak after a long period of humiliation, surrender and silence, asserting her right to be heard, asking for her personal space, voicing herself against the centuries old gender based suppression, and rightfully, claiming her right to equality, dignity, and self realization.

Literature, being very closely related to society, has served a two-fold purpose. On the one hand it has recorded and reflected this struggle in social, economical, historical political and cultural spheres of the human lives; on the other, it has shaped and impacted this struggle, in very complex ways, by providing women with a platform to voice their concerns and also by providing insights into the institutions, ideology and the power-relations according to which men and women organize themselves in society.

Tracing in brief the history and basic premises of feminism and the structuring of Indian society on the pattern of sexual relations, this paper is a modest attempt to appraise the contribution of the prominent female authors of Indian English novel like Shashi Deshpande,

Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, and Anita Desai in the emergence of a 'New Woman', who has challenged, shattered and radically subverted the age old traditional assumptions, perceptions and power relations of the hitherto male-oriented Indian patriarchal society. It, thus, aims to record how, through their representation of woman and her concerns in their novels, and by giving her a 'voice', these novelists have brought about a paradigm shift in the ways in which a woman is perceived and treated in our society, thereby contributing to the feminist revolution in India.

Feminism is a label for the political movement that stands for the rights of a woman claiming equality without any prejudice of sexual difference. It is a political label for the struggle of women against the gender based oppression and exploitation of women in a patriarchal society that considers her a weaker sex, deprives her of an dignified existence by encroaching upon her human rights, and limits her to gender defined specific roles that are culturally imposed by the dominant patriarchal society.

defining feminist criticism Toril Moi's writes "Feminist criticism, then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism..."

Feminist Criticism has deep roots in the writings of Mary Wollstencraft's of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792), and John Stuart Mill's 'The Subjection of Women' (1869). A tremendous impetus to it was added by the writings of Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex'(1949), that sowed the seeds for a women's movement. She successfully managed to shatter the myth of 'femininity' and exposed how women, despite their great contribution are treated derogatorily as 'weaker sex', and relegated to the background. . She asserts that 'male' and 'female' are biologically determined categories, whereas 'masculine' and 'feminine' are social constructs. And it is in the interest of patriarchy to conflate 'female' with 'femininity' and to imbue 'femininity' with significations like submissive, emotional, irrational, talkative, etc and reserve meanings like intellectual, strong, rational, active for 'masculinity'. Gender does not simply mean difference but goes on to imply inequality, oppression and internalized inferiority for women.

Another seminal work, Kate Millet's incisive book 'Sexual Politics' (1969) broke new grounds and lent great force to the women's liberation movement by providing insight into the structuring and working of patriarchy that leads to the subjugation of women. She argued that in a patriarchal setup all power is in the male hands and 'the essence of politics is power.'

Over the years feminisms have branched into different directions with various feminisms like Radical, Liberal, Marxism, Black feminisms etc coming forth whatever maybe the issues and concerns of these various feminisms, there are basic principles that cut across these varieties that unify these approaches. According to M.H Abrams these basic premises are as follows

- 1 The basic view is that western civilization is pervasively patriarchal-that is, it is male-centred and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains.

Toril Moi observes: “Patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for ‘femininity ‘ are natural”

- 2 Women themselves are taught , in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination.

In this regard Peter Barry’s comments are worth quoting

“the representation of women in literature ,then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of ‘socializations’, since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the feminine and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations.”

- 3 It is widely held that the concepts of gender are cultural constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization.

As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, ‘one is not born , but rather becomes , a woman...she further observes, “it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine.”

The task of the feminist critics and theorists is to expose the ways in which male dominates over females .One concern of feminists is to take distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women-the world of domesticity, for example, or the special experience of gestation, giving birth, and nurturing, or mother-daughter and woman-woman relations-are the primary interest. Toril Moi further observes that since patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women and women’s experience, rendering them visible is clearly an important strategy.

After having dealt with the basic premises of feminism, it becomes imperative to discuss the position and role of women in Indian society. The traditional representation of woman in

Indian English fiction also needs to be analysed so that a fair evaluation of the contribution of the above-mentioned writers becomes possible.

Indian society, since long, has been a patriarchal society with the male dominating and women being accorded a subservient and inferior position. The code of Manu was observed so that the role of woman was confined to the family and she was denied rights equal to man.

Manu declares: “Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family; in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons.”

However, the 20th century witnessed a change in the lot of the women with the introduction of liberal education, and the efforts of reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Jyoti Phule and Mahatma Gandhi etc. but that was limited to a smaller section of society and the number of women enjoying considerable freedom was very meagre.

In Indian English literature, the trio –Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao-did not pay much attention to women emancipation. Women, as they appear in the novels of men writers, are, most of the time, presented as idealized images of Indian womanhood and are often elevated to the levels of symbols of ‘Shakti’ and ‘Mother Earth’. They have failed to give an honest or real portrayal of their women characters. Women have been perceived and characterized as ideally warm, gentle and submissive, who are to be kept in subordination to the male members of the family.

Truly speaking, the New Woman makes her appearance in flesh and blood in the novels of women writers only. The word ‘New Woman’ has come to signify the awakening of women into a new realization of her place and position in family and society. The publication of ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ by Kamala Markandaya ushered in a welcome deviation from the established practice of hero-oriented novels. It is based on the theme of hunger and starvation and highlights how such conditions affect women the most. Rukmani, the narrator and protagonist narrates in the reminiscent mode about the decline of her family into poverty. Woman as an individual with throbbing pulse, all her longings and aspiration, hopes and frustrations, involved in the vortex of life makes her appearance. Markandaya in her novels provides a powerful critique of the patriarchal society, its social customs and traditions of dowry, arranged marriages fixed by the patriarchs, obsession for male child and the treatment meted out to barren childless women. She shows how these add to the sufferings of women. Ira is abandoned by her husband as she remains childless and suffers, endlessly, humiliation, agony and isolation as her husband marries someone else. Her works are a realistic delineation of the double pulls that the Indian woman is subjected to, between her desire to assert herself as an individual and her duty in the capacity of a daughter, wife and mothers.

Anita Desai's famous novels graphically deal with the turbulent psyche of the modern Indian women. Her protagonists are intelligent, sensible and sensitive, but in an attempt to manage home and children and attain emotional fulfillment, they reach on the verge of mental crises. The theme of modern women's existential struggle to establish her own identity in order to assert her own individuality finds expression in all her novels. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the author provides a vivid description of the void in a woman's life, Sita, subjected to the double pulls, between her desire to assert herself as an individual and as her role as a wife and mother. It is a poignant tale of a woman torn between her desire to abandon her boring existence where she cannot have a self-realisation as a woman, and the realization that these ties cannot be easily severed. Cry, the *Peacock* is another such story where the frustrated and frantic protagonist, Maya, who is on the verge of a mental crisis that is born of her inability to adjust in the society she lives and who is married to an unsympathetic and insensitive husband, ends up killing her husband Gautama by pushing him from the roof. With delicate sensitivity, Anita Desai depicts the trials and tribulations of women trapped in a male dominated society and voices the mute miseries of millions of married women.

Nayantara Sahgal dealt with themes concerning women that were to become major issues in the feminist movement. Her novel 'The Day in Shadow' highlights the agony and humiliation faced by the divorcee – heroine, Simrit. It is an unsparing novel that exposes the inhuman and victimizing treatment meted out to an ostracized divorcee in Indian society. Her best novel 'Rich Like Us' revolves around Sonali, the central character who differs from the stereotypes of Indian womanhood found in fiction. The novel is set in Delhi during times of political agitation against emergency. The impact of emergency is viewed through the eyes of Sonali, an IAS officer, and Rose an English woman who has lived in India for more than forty years and provides a dual perspective on events described. Sonali is a very brilliant civil servant who goes to Oxford to escape the Indian world of arranged marriages. Defying traditional norms and values of the patriarchal setup, her protagonists rebel against the culturally imposed sexual domination. Conscious of her individuality, the 'new woman' of her novels asserts her rights as a human being and is determined to fight for equal treatment with man.

Shashi Deshpande is a very important figure who has greatly contributed to the feminist movement. The image of woman she projects is strong and determined, and she argues for a sense of community, justice and companionship. 'Roots and Shadows', depicts the frustration and despondency experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-centred

patriarchal society. Indu feels agonized when she has the realization that she has all along been unconsciously aping the role of the ideal Indian wife. In patriarchy 'a systematic subordination of women' she could 'neither assert, nor demand or proclaim' and has to be content with 'the gift of silence'. Marriage, to her, seems to be a "cold blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce" that has enslaved and subjugated her, as it is governed by the masculine code formed by male in his own interest. The novel exposes the patriarchal family structure which fosters in women, dependency, a sense of insecurity, lack of exposure and autonomy and an incomplete sense of identity. Her novels by virtue of their feminine sensibility show a great insight and deep understanding of the concerns of women.

Since the inception of the feminist movement in the 1960s in the west and in India, there have been concerted and continuous efforts to highlight the injustices meted out to women and to rid the male-psyche of the prejudices against women. These women novelists has shown great intellectual courage in uninhibited sharing of their most intimate feminine experience, thereby voicing against and rejecting the oppressive patriarchal tradition They have attempted to project woman as the central figure and succeeded in presenting the predicament of woman most effectively. In their works we hear the voice of the New Woman's definition of herself and a quest for her own identity. The appearance of the fully awakened women, prepared to accept the challenges in order to live a meaningful life becomes a reality. They have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. The theme of modern women's existential struggle to establish her own identity in order to assert her own individuality finds expression in all their novels. On one hand, their novels deal with psychic turmoil of women within the confining and restricting confines of domesticity; on the other they expose the gross gender discrimination and its fallout in a male-dominated society. So far as the goals of these feminists are concerned, consciousness-raising has been their main goal. The most significant achievement of these feminists is that they have established feminism as a most dominant trend that will create the awareness required for the desired change in the society in which women should be equal with men and not as victims or subordinates.

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