

FEMINISM: REBUILDING THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN FICTION

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Abstract:

Feminism is a theoretical project, which aims at understanding the power structures in the society, male domination, social practices and social institutions, which are instrumental in assigning a marginalized position to women. Feminist theory also devises the strategies to transform the social structures, which can help in the emancipation. Women writers believed that art is a major weapon for social change. The word activism is synonymous with protest or dissent. Activism in literary writers is a new phenomenon, where they dedicate themselves to the welfare of the society.

Keywords:

feminism, marginality, social structures, silence, stereotypes, individuality

Introduction: Literature considered as the reality of society defined in words depicts the way societal beings regard, understand, or interpret various situations and things in their everyday life. It is an addition to physical existence, not a mere description of it. It is a medium that influences the imagination and vision of the society that ultimately leads to the stereotypes and values that are inbuilt in the system. It is therefore the greatest of human innovations, connecting people together who never were aware of each other. Simone de Beauvoir has the view that the history of literature is a history of keeping the women in subjection and silence (1). Money symbolizes power and freedom and a room of her own is to have contemplative thinking. Very often women had enjoyed these things in the past so to develop their imaginative capabilities and personal freedom. Women were not allowed to think freely; the path was not smooth for them to travel. They had to undergo many hardships to enter into the world of art. Women were not recognized as individuals or autonomous beings. Women had to face many obstacles in the academic circuit, which symbolizes the effects of an educational culture that radically restricts the scope of women's intellectual exposure. The tradition of women being portrayed in literature as submissive and docile has been due to the inferior position women have held in male-dominated societies. However, the wave of feminism in the '70s and '80s sparked resurgence in forging a place for the age of women. Feminists deprecate such masculinity and treatment meted out to women. Feminist literature

tends to espouse the cause of the women and denounces everything that circumscribes the liberty of women. So, feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women rights historically and politically. It emphasizes the value of women as they are. The word "Feminism" particularly as in the words of Alice Jardine: "Who and what, then do we mean by "Feminism"?" (2) has many varied answers. Feminism advocates that woman should assert her autonomy in defining herself against any men. She should define her own identity, dealing herself a past and create solidarity for her and other women. Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of Their Own* calls women's writing a subculture and outlines the development of this subculture in three stages:

1. Feminine: The phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition.
2. Feminist: The phase of protest against the standards and values in favor of autonomy.
3. Female: The phase of self-discovery or a search for identity. (3)

In 1990s a major focus was laid on the concern of the so-called 'otherness', differences and questions of marginality. Woman did not write in the beginning as now, the obvious reason as Virginia Woolf puts it, "A woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). Eisenstein interprets the term feminist or feminism as, "In my understanding of the term "feminist" then I see an element of visionary futurist thoughts. This encompasses a concept of social transformation that is a part of the eventual liberation of women with a change of all human relationships for the better. Although, centrally about women, their experience and condition, Feminism is also fundamentally about men and about social change" (5).

The man is right, being a man. The woman is in the wrong. Normally, woman's image is observed from two angles, what she is (biologically) and what she has to be (socially constructed). A woman cannot escape the fact that she is woman. Society has constructed rigid model role for her and has labelled woman variously. Gender is a historical force also because we find gender bias pre-existent in the society. As soon as, a birth takes place, child gets a

gender identity of a male or a female. This is the primary identity one is given and which remains permanently. On the contrary, scientific evidence has proved cultural forces acting on an individual regardless of his/her anatomy of external genitals that determine the gender role. It is the society, to be more precise the patriarchal society which decides what a man has to do and what a woman has to do. The distinct roles a woman performed as a mother, a wife, a sister, a daughter and as a member of the civilized society are all designed and shaped as per the thinking and preference of the dominant male section. Simone de Beauvoir in the “The Second Sex” writes that one of the important obstacles to a woman’s freedom is not her biology or the political or legal constraints placed upon her, or even her economic situation; rather it is the whole process by which femininity is manufactured in the society. In her celebrated phrase “One is not born but rather becomes woman” (6), she is actually sympathizing with the situation of women. A major development in modern fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centred approach, that seeks to project and interpret experiences from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. It is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural diversion. As Patricia Meyer Specks remarks, “There seems to be something that we call a women’s point of view, an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the countries” (7). This feminine perspective or more especially feminine aesthetics leads a female voice to the novels and works towards women’s self-will and effacement of all qualities conducive to conformity. The primary thing is that these writers do not entertain moral aesthetics at the cost of feminine. For them what is important is not whether these women keep their virtues but whether they are honest to themselves and whether they work towards getting what they want. Women have now become more assertive, more liberated in their views and more articulate in their expressions than the women of the past were. She has started asserting her substantive identity in action not in words but through her creative writings. The Indian woman caught in the flux of tradition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past and a desire to step forward towards the present constitutes the crux of feminism in Indian literature. In literary terms it precipitates in a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. The fictional women created by these writers have emerged as strong individuals deeply rooted in their culture, thus completely erasing the picture of a weak, docile shadow of men. These women have shattered the myth of subalternity that haunted the postcolonial women’s psyche for a long

time. Conjugal understanding is no longer taken for subservience and family ties have come to be respected for the love that they denote and not for any need or dependence. The chrysalis is broken and women are seen first emerging towards self-actualization in literature as they are in life. From a cattle like existence women have come to hold an almost-central position in the society though the society is still to a large extent patriarchal. From being the other, woman has come to hold herself at par with the absolute in literature as well.

Conclusion: Indian woman rubs shoulders with her professedly more progressing Western counterpart as well as with the male of the species. The scale has now tilted in favour of women and they have truly become equals. Famous feminist writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Manju Kapur advocate many faces of feminism encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right of self-determination. The subtle but sufficiently explicit manifestation of women’s dilemma of choice, struggle and survival provides to these writers an elevated pedestal from where they communicate the reality that transcends the parochial walls of gender. The woman’s search for control over her destiny is the key theme representing the bleak past of Indian women who were not given any voice to assert their rights. Viewed from this perspective, their novels appear to be a document of resentment wherein the subdued, snubbed and subjugated woman registers her protest and rebellion against the prevalent male chauvinism. The subaltern’ has come to hold a platform from where she can speak her mind and heart. Thus, today’s woman has traversed the land of silence and has arrived at the hand of speech. The wave of feminism brought new ideologies with it to rebuild the image of women characters in the novels moving away from the traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands, identity and existence.

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