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**FOOTPRINTS OF FEMINISM IN INDIAN WOMEN
AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF THE TWENTIETH
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Footprints of Feminism in Indian Women Autobiographies of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract – The concept of Feminism in the Indian context and its leit motif are described while taking stock of the status and significance of feminism in the distant cultural past of India. The researcher has made an attempt to trace the political climate responsible for the resurgence of feminism which has long been stifled in the name of convention and upkeep of tradition. A few women autobiographers of the twentieth century and their reflection on self-worth which is the other name for feminism has been taken into account.

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Feminism, as we understand it, is multi-cultural and is coloured by the societal, racial, marital, economic and cultural mores of a particular country. Feminism in India has its home-grown flavor and form and is far from the western concept of feminism which is inherently radical in form and content. Jasbir Jain, (1) sums up the spirit of Indian feminism thus “feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realization of self-worth... It does not abandon values or relationships, but goes on to create new ones.” It is the creation of these new set of values as demanded by the changing vortex of times that adds flavor to feminism evolved in the Indian context. To understand and evaluate feminism in its right spirit we need to take a peek into the distant past of India where women stood on equal ground with men and the later day gradual social changes that relegated women to the shadows.

The genre of autobiography is the best medium to learn about the evolution of feminism in its firsthand account. Hence, I have made an attempt to trace the footprints of feminism in the select Indian women autobiographies of the twentieth century. The women autobiographers of India who chose to pen the self-narratives, as autobiographies are also known as, captured in their accounts ‘a conquering of inner fears and realization of self-worth’ in no unmistakable terms. Cornelia Sorabjee, Savitri Devi Nanda, Kamala Das, Amritha Pritam and Nayantra Sahgal have left a significant mark of their feminism in their autobiographies.

The concept of liberation of Indian women from the chains of patriarchal domination is a later day offshoot of nineteenth century as Indian women in the ancient civilization enjoyed unbridled freedom and stood on

even turf with men. The intellectually emancipated Indian woman of the glorious past stands as a glowing testimony of the refinement that is characteristic of Indian civilization. A few examples from the present and past writers exemplify the lofty status of women in India.

What Gauri Deshpande (2) delineates about a brave feminine psyche that is determined to encounter the world through the character of Krishna that “my body is not my jail. It is my boat. I will row it to freedom in my boat” holds quite relevant to the women of the Vedic times in India who enjoyed unfettered freedom and fair treatment. Woman was rightly considered as a dependable aid for the better life of man in this life and thereafter. The texts reveal that women had a choice and say in education, career and even in choosing her partner. She could choose to be a Brahmavadin (pursuer of knowledge) or a Sadyovadhu (home maker) and chart her course of life on her own terms. Women like Ghosha, Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra were said to have composed hymns in Rigveda and involved themselves in the areas of finance, administration, agriculture and crafts. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha remark in their book(3) “In those times women assisted men in performing the most important tasks of religious life; they chose their own husbands, had access to education, and even composed poetry; there was no polygamy or child marriage, and the caste system did not exist.”

With the consolidation of Aryanisation in India, agriculture became the prime occupation and the role of women underwent a change. Women were relegated to domestic chores and their role in religious, intellectual and educational activities of the day gradually faded into oblivion. This period could

well be seen as the Dark Ages for Indian womanhood where women were seen as mere procreators and care takers of home and hearth. The biological limitations of women and their fragility were highlighted as reasons for protection and segregation from menfolk. Woman's dependence syndrome highlighted by the laws of Manu further pushed women into the grey zone of insignificance. As Chinese proverb goes, truth is falsehood repeated hundred times and the false and ill-conceived notion that woman is subordinate to man and needs to be sheltered by man at all stages of her life was forced down upon the societal consciousness.

Manu, the ancient law codifier has put woman, for whatever reasons the traditionalists seek justification, at a lower strata of importance with his stentorian pronouncements that woman needs a male support to rely on in all the stages of her life-father in childhood, brother in adolescence, husband in young age and son to take care of in the autumn of her life. He also described at length the different roles a wife should don to please her husband. A servant in attendance, minister in counsel, celestial goddess in good looks, and patient as Mother Earth ought to be rolled in the persona of a wife, thus goes Manu's dictum which found societal sanction in the oppression of woman.

Thus meekness and submissiveness, docility and fine decorum, suffering and sacrifice became second skin to women who have been badgered into thinking that they were born to serve and obey. Literature too in its mimetic role, considered these qualities to be the attributes of women. Unfortunately, qualities began to assume the gender. Meekness is feminine whereas rebellion is masculine. Service and sacrifice are feminine virtues whereas valour and self-assertion basks in the glory of masculine majesty. Preferential treatment to a male child as against the baby girl struck its deep poisonous root in the soil of prejudice that to this day, India with its avowed progress in all fields is not able to uproot the discrimination. Child marriage and purdah system, sati and widow discrimination, denial of opportunity for education happened to be the unfortunate but invariable companions of womanhood till the late nineteenth century.

The significant feature of Indian feminism is that it was pioneered by men in the nineteenth century when social reformers like Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Iswara Chandra Vidyasaagar, Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Raghupathi Venkata Ratnam Naidu fought against the social evils like sati, child marriage, widow discrimination, purdah system, to name a few. Indian women did not take up the cudgels against menfolk for their subjugation. Instead, a handful of forward thinking Indian men, under the influence of the western education of questioning the prevailing norms in the society, took stock of the Indian tradition and found the subjugation of women, in the name of upholding tradition, an ugly scar on the otherwise pristine Indian culture. Indian women accepted the tenets of male superiority and acknowledged that docility is the virtue

of women. But as the Indian women were exposed to the currents of western thought and education, they began to seek their rightful place in society adopting a non-belligerent approach. Indian Feminism, like its western counterpart, is not rooted in anti-male principle nor does it advocate exclusion of men from women's domain. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay opines, in her article 'The Status of Women in India' in the book *Women in Modern India*.

"This movement cannot in any sense be said to be a rebellion or a revolt against man; it is rather an attempt to regain lost ground. It is not actuated by any spirit of competition nor marked by violence; it is a movement of calm assertion" (4)

With the national movement gaining momentum, women were encouraged by Mahatma Gandhi to take part in India's freedom movement and they played a laudable role in the fight against the British rule. Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kripalani, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Krishna Huteasing, Capt. Lakshmi were some of the illustrious names that became synonymous with freedom movement of India. Raising the age of marriage for girls through Sarda Act, providing the right to vote, introducing compulsory education, creating equal opportunities for growth are some of the steps taken towards women empowerment. Still, certain major issues like equal pay, equal representation in the politics, treating women with dignity, severe punishment to those who perpetrate violence against women, legal protection to the victims of harassment are yet to see the light of implementation. With educational institutions opening its portals to women, there was a marked improvement in their status and role and a profusion of literary works is one of the many aspects of women empowerment.

Indian women writers took to poignant narratives in depicting the issues pertaining to the 'other self' and effectively captured the mood of the societal mores in different hues and genres.

Indian women autobiographers of the twentieth century, reflect in their writings a firm commitment to move away from the margins that they were relegated to in society. Armed with education and endowed with a fiery spirit to stand up to any discrimination, the Indian women autobiographers give a graphic account of the kind of wars they had to wage to claim their rightful place under the sky. Whether it is the legal help offered by Cornelia Sorabjee with a missionary zeal to the purdah women or the clash of values and conflict of interests that tossed Amritha Pritam out of her secure self, or a fire brand Kamala das who would not blink twice to strip the society of its hypocrisy much to the embarrassment of her family members, all these introspective accounts reveal feminine resilience, that is the summum bonum of woman's inner strength.

Cornelia Sorabjee in her autobiographical account, "India Calling" narrates the uphill task she had undertaken against severe odds in the name of

tradition, religion and patriarchal domination in her pursuit to offer legal aid to purdahnashin or the segregated women of the upper class who were more often at the mercy of the relatives to stake their claim on property. The genuine humanitarian in Cornelia Sorabji wedded to the cause of providing legal help to women was a feminist who never buckled under the oppressive patriarchal societal norms of the day while carrying out her duty. Chandani Lokuge sums up the spirit of Cornelia Sorabji in the following words.

....in her unwavering commitment to her feminist ideals, and unfettered by contemporary. British or Indian conventions, Sorabji reaches out for the promise of gender-free liberalism and individualism introduced to her in her childhood by her mother and father, and develops an independence with which she could openly and equally participate with men in social and public life. With relentless dedication to her cause she flouts every convention that hinders her progress and gains recognition in exclusively male worlds not quite ready to accommodate women of her caliber.

Savitri Devi Nanda, in her gentle way refuses to be cast into the conventional woman image and in her silent yet steadfast way carves a career in medical profession in England and retains her feminist ideals and identity. She moves out of the margins that women of her day were relegated to, thanks to the support she gets from her father, and braces herself to move towards her cherished goal.

Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, Nayantara Sahgal sum up the spirit of Maya Angelou and refuse to be the caged birds of convention. While deeply respecting the need for self-worth, these autobiographers, hailing from educated families with a social standing uphold feminism in precept and practice. Their autobiographical writings reflect their individualistic stance on feminism and the growing need to for feminine self-assertion for a healthy social set up.

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