

# Feminism in Indian English Literature

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**Abstract** – *“When women are the advisor, the Lord of creation don’t take the advice, till they have persuaded themselves that it is just what they intended to do, then they act upon it and if it succeeds, they give the weaker vessel half the credit of it; if fails, they generously give herself the whole.” These are the quotes of America’s treasured novelist and author of Little Women, an outspoken, a woman who showed grit and determination and an early women suffrage supporter. It can even be the muttering voice behind the screens in almost every household around the world.*

**Keywords:** Women, Feminism

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## INTRODUCTION

India today is at the cusp of a paradigm conversion in its growth and its position in the world. For approximately it took around two centuries for social reformers and missionaries in India to scale up the endeavour of bringing up women out from their confines and constraints. The dramatic growth in female literacy from 9% in 1951 to 65.46% according to 2011 census, the 33% allocation of female representation in Parliament, the proposed female nationalised banks, the bills and the new laws ensuring female security, gender sensitisation and dissemination of information all aim to accelerate the overall processes that promote all round development of women.

The question is has these over all developments reflected in literature? Has the feminine subjectivity framed in words too? Have they materialised and brought out changes in minds of Indian women?

A peep into the past will display the graphing up of women empowerment in literary fields. There was a time when the works of the Indian women were considered undervalued because of patriarchal assumptions. When male writers used to deal with heavy themes, women on the contrary dealt with their own experiences within the enclosed domestic arena mainly due to the lack of exposure. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup>c that women write-ups geared up but they mainly concentrated on our country’s freedom struggle. Over the years the world of feminist ideologies began to influence the English Literature of India.

Indian women writers have given a diverse shade to our literature. When we discuss about literature it’s not only about novels but also about poetries, short stories

and dramas. Before the evolution of novels, several women writers composed songs, short stories and plays. With the passage of time, women writers have incorporated recurring female experiences in their writings and it has affected the cultural and language patterns of Indian literature.

## RESEARCH STUDY

Indian writing gained momentum with authors like Sarojini Naidu who has enchanted readers with her writings. The participation of women in India’s independence produced aggressive works in the same genre. In the 20<sup>th</sup>c, women writing were considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements, especially in the last two decades. Feminist themes have also been used by Nayantara Sangal and Rama Mehta. Regional fictional themes have been penned down by Kamala Das, Anita Nair and Susan Vishwanathan. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Susan Namjoshi and Anuradha Marwah Roy used realism in their themes. In the novels of our times we experience the inner burnings of women, bold and fervours topics, unexplored female psyche which once had no accessibility exercised brilliantly.

Interestingly, women writers have a unique perspective of life because they challenge the confined spheres. Anitha Desai once remarked in the course of an interview that she has been making statements about women emancipation in the texture of her novels. In ‘Cry, the Peacock’, she has juxtaposed the alienation of Maya, the protagonist to other positive characters like her mother in law and Nila, her sister in law who are bold and independent to manoeuvre their lives instead of falling into depression. “Unlike Markandaya’s Rukmani and Ira

who appear justified for their rebellion yet suffers punishment anyway, Fernando and Desai's women successfully defy traditional mores."

Male and Female Characters in Anitha Desai's *In Custody*. Ms. Desai has portrayed the complexities between man and woman relationships in *Voices in the City* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* "Essentially a writer of existential inclinations, Anitha Desai examines certain pertinent facts of this school of thought (existentialism) through her protagonist, creating the predominant themes like alienation, quest and conflict with all her mature and sensitive story telling panache."

## DISCUSSION

How can we forget the remarkable Kamala Das who displayed feminist ethos in her poems? While grazing through her poems we confront bold images, a crude exploration and lamentation of female sexuality. She was much ahead of her times when society was rigid and obstinate to voices of change. Das, an iron lady, was a courageous woman to explore genocide and politics in her poetry, giving her work a strident aggression and contemporary edge. "Her poetry was controversial and honest in the contemporary times.....she is the first woman in a male dominated society to write courageously." said Suresh Kohl who co-authored a book of poems with her titled 'Closure'. It was this openness that gave Das a cult status in India like Sylvia Plath in the West. Her poem *Introduction* witnesses this resentment and refusal

.....Then I wore a shirtAnd a  
black sarong,

Cut my hair short and ignored a lot of this  
Womanliness.

Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife.

Be embroidered cook or a quarreller with servant.

The psyche of women of different strata caught in their existential struggle for life has been a fertile ground for many authors irrespective of genders. Anitha Nair belongs to this segment of novelists who have marginalised women. The lady writer poses a taboo question on the role of contemporary Indian women. Her works echoes a discourse on feminism.

Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* finally discovers her inner source of strength, capability and dynamics despite the gruelling experiences she encountered. The title itself is very much indicative of the crude content of the work. Ladies Coupe, being a special compartment for women with second class reservations for overnight train journeys in India. Akilandeshwari, the bread winner of the family, aged 45, sacrifices her happiness for them, educating her brothers, marrying off her sister and letting her stay with her, digesting the sarcastic remarks from her own blood.

The train journey in which she encounters five more women: Janaki, who feels insecure with her husband's love; a Margaret, who teaches her cruel-pedophile-arrogant husband by destroying his self esteem; a young girl Sheela, who can see thru people's psychic; a Prabha devi, who oscillates between being docile & being adventurous; and then we have a Marikolundhu suffering cause of several twists, turns and innumerable surprises life threw at her. We come across a bunch of female characters whom we meet daily. Ms. Nair had managed to study intricately the body and soul of typical Indian society and women in special.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Shashi Deshpande is of the view that in calling her novels feminist, one straitjackets the works and imprisons them with the label. She feels that her novels are open examinations of the experiences of people in the framework of feminist concerns; they are novels like any other with a gamut of issues and experiences". We can identify ourselves with Jaya, Indu, Sumi who are strong, intelligent, brilliant educated urban woman who speak out, pose decisive questions, introspect and put forward in a literary microcosm the plight of women in India at large.

The recipient of Sahitya Academy Award delved into the predicament of every woman in this hypocritical society where she is rendered a second grade position but is expected to be the lynch pin of the family. Deshpande has portrayed the turmoil of a woman fighting within herself. The friction between mother and daughter relationship is based on gender-bias and lovelessness depicted in *The Dark Holds No Terror*. The daughter Saru is deprived of love and affection which is abundantly bestowed to her brother Dhruv. She blatantly outrages "A kind of shame engulfed me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother." Shashi Deshpande '*The Dark Holds No Terror*'

## CONCLUSION

Yet another stream of world is presented by the non resident Indian Jhumpha Lahiri who portrays a vivid Ashima in 'The Namesake'. Ashima lives in a land where people think and live freely. Nithin Sawhley comments in *Glass Ceilings* that "There is a fascinating anti feminism statement as Lahiri shows how traditional gender-roles, often looked upon as subordinate in the Western world, brings a quiet sense of empowerment." Brilliantly, Lahiri steers us away from thinking about Ashima in the Western context by reminding us of her transitional identity, unwittingly drawing out the concept of transnational feminism (rather a varied and complex topic).

The list of Indian women authors also comprises of popular names such as Bharathi Mukherjee, Nergis Dalal, Shobha De, Indhira Goswami, Malathi Chendur, Ruth Jhabvale and many more. They explicate a

protest as an outburst of reservations and contaminations. There is an excitement when reading Indian works, a feeling of our own reverberations rippling through the lines, a shadow pursuing us and who knows may be to become 'the golden peacock again'.

## **WORK CITED**

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More on Women Writers in Indian English Literature  
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