

# Feminist Movement in Indian Literary Works

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## INTRODUCTION

The feminist movement, "includes any form of opposition to any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex." (2), so says David Bouchier in the "Introduction" to his book The Feminist Challenge. The desire for equality with men on the social and political fronts took the form of an organised movement in the west. It includes both the struggle for women's equal rights as well as the aspirations and strivings towards the all round liberation of women, which is considered as emancipation.

In the words of Gerda Lerner in her book The Creation of Patriarchy, "It (feminism) is not always a movement, for it can be a level of consciousness, a stance, an attitude, as well as the basis for organized effort." (237)

The feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization by the dominating males of the society which leads to women's subordinate status and their consequent oppression. Sushila Singh in her article "Recent Trend in Feminist Thought: A Tour de Horizon" in Feminism and Recent Fiction in English opines that

"As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep - seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of 'raising of the consciousness' of an entire culture". (22)

Before India attained independence, conventional Indian women who were not really concerned about their oppression and equal rights did not feel the need for an organised rebellion. The first stage of the feminist movement, the organised fight for women's rights of equality with men which has continued for almost two decades in the west is not required in India. It is because by the time Indian women had become really conscious of woman's rights, they had been guaranteed social, legal and political rights after independence. Thus it is the second stage, or the all round liberation, or emancipation of women which includes emotional, intellectual and moral liberation of women that becomes

the prime concern of the feminists in India. The Indian feminists are more humanists than the feminists of the west.

Though the liberation of women is a concept that gathered force in the latter half of the twentieth century, India has a much earlier history and tradition of intellectually emancipated women during the Vedic period. There were Vedic women like Ghosha, Vach, Lopamudra, Maitreye and others, who were free to pursue scholarly studies. They were called 'Brahmavadinis' who, besides their intellectual and spiritual pursuits, involved themselves actively in the administration, finance, agriculture and crafts of their age. A girl child was welcomed into the midst of her people. She could undergo the same ritualistic observances as men. She had the freedom of choice of either marrying or staying single. She could choose her sexual partner. Men treated her with equality and respect. This glorious Vedic tradition of equality of those women with their men was lost later.

When the nomadic Aryans became permanent settlers, women were relegated to doing just household chores. They were kept out of religious and ritualistic performances, their education and intellectual development was never insisted upon. Perhaps due to their physical frailty and biological functions of procreation that involved them more, women ceased to take up more masculine jobs. Their status decreased, they were considered inferior to men. With the codification of laws by Manu, the subordination of women was assured for centuries to come. Manu's idea that a woman does not deserve freedom, that she has to be protected in her childhood by her father, in her youth by her husband and in her old age by her sons put the seal of male domination and tyranny over women and their socially sanctioned oppression.

Thus the present concept of women's liberation is not a new one to an Indian who is familiar with ancient Indian history and tradition. The efforts to achieve women's

emancipation, can be seen as the effort of Indian women to win back their past glorious Vedic tradition of equality with men. As 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." (5) The name feminism conjures up an extremely radical, rebellious, anti-male attitude in women. But it need not necessarily be so. Though in western countries feminists emphasize a separatist culture that avoids the influence of men, in India, feminist position does not include any negation of man, nor the influence of men in the progressive strides taken by women.

This fact becomes clear when the role of women during the Indian freedom struggle is observed. English education that was popularised during the British rule helped in making Indian men reflect on the oppressive conditions of their women in society. Men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who struggled for the abolition of sati, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, and a host of others clamoured for reforms to put an end to the practice of child marriage, ill treatment of widows and ban on widow re-marriage. These men, while trying to remove such evil practices, were also involved in educating and raising the status of Indian women. M.K. Gandhi, the leader of the National Freedom Movement, was a great supporter of women's liberation. In Women and Social Injustice he says:

"These questions of liberation of women, liberation of India, removal of untouchability, amelioration of economic condition of the masses and the like resolve themselves into penetration into the villages and reconstruction or rather reformation of village life." (10)

Gandhiji was concerned about liberation at the grass roots level. But he also gave an impetus to his ideal of 'stree-shakti' when he called upon all Indian women to come out of the confines of their homes and contribute their mite to the freedom struggle. It was taken as a challenge by many women to break their centuries old, confined existence. Among the Indian middle class women who were educated, this led to an awakening of their inner selves, and the consequent arousal of a feminist consciousness. Feminism or the concept of liberation for women from their traditional restraints in society has yet to percolate down to the lower strata of Indian women who are not sufficiently educated. For many Indian woman, it is a question of stark survival. And yet, due to the efforts of the social reformists and the gaining popularity of higher education and the resultant economic independence

among girls, the concept of equality and liberation is slowly gaining ground in the Indian soil.

A feminist perspective requires us to have a brief overview of the major western feminist trends that have influenced the women of the East also, especially Indian women. Western critics have mainly delineated seven varieties of feminist thought: Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, Radical, Psycho analytical, Existential and Post-modern feminism. There are also other categories of western feminisms like individual feminism, relative feminism, cultural feminism, and lesbian separatism. The concept of feminism or women's liberation is never static. According to the changing times, the outlook of the feminists changes. What was once considered as part of a radical stand in feminism may in course of time become a moderate view. So also, the type of feminism adopted by a particular group of people depends a lot on their socio-cultural and regional background, and the particular type of oppression that they have to face due to their culture and tradition as well as their geographical locality. Thus, we have the democratic liberal feminists of England and America, like Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller, Marxist feminist of Russia like Alexandra Kollontai and American socialist feminists Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Zilla Eisenstein.

We have the French feminists like Simone De Beauvoir, Helene Cixous and Nancy Chodorow. There is the black feminist ideology which they prefer to call 'womanism' that deals with the specific problems of black African women. There is also the Scandinavian variety of feminism that gives more importance to the 'difference' between man and woman rather than the similarity emphasized by feminists who follow the androgynous paradigm like Virginia Woolf. Going by these facts, we could possibly isolate a typical Indian variety of feminism that is an offshoot of the Indian cultural ethos and its past traditions. The main western models of feminism are:

## **LIBERAL FEMINISM**

This follows the line of argument that men and women are equally rational. Since both men and women have equal standing as rational moral agents, both are qualified to fulfil social and political roles at any level.

Liberal feminism belongs to the category of women's rights feminism. It was initially organized with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792. She was later followed and supported in her ideas by Maria Steward, the Grimke sisters, and in the modern period by Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Molly Yard (NOW) Faye Wattleton, Barbara Jordan and Patricia Schroeder.

## **SOCIALIST - MARXIST FEMINISM**

In this type of feminist ideology, there is seen a definite demarcation between the private and public spheres of activity maintained by capitalists for their own interest. If this dichotomy between private and public is brought down, according to these feminists, women would become more equal to man. This line of argument is seen in Marx, Engels, Gilman, Kollontai and Eisenstein.

## **RADICAL FEMINISM**

This is the type of feminism that recognises man as the source of all oppression. The radical feminists criticize the whole sweep of culture as male dominated. They distinguish cultures that are ruled and tyrannized by males as 'patriarchal'. They are described variously as 'anti-male', 'anti-intellectual', and resisting affiliation with the 'male-stream', based on a study of women's oppression. Their accounts of the pervasiveness of misogyny and violence against women have been one of the most powerful contributions of radical feminism to the domain of feminist theory. They are by nature essentialist, they base their arguments on the need to form a separate women's culture, or lesbian separatism, having a separate set of values different from that of men. Examples of radical feminists are Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet, Eva Figs, Susan Brownmiller, Juliet Mitchell and Adrienne Rich.

## **PSYCHO ANALYTICAL FEMINISM**

Psychoanalyst theorists like Freud and Lacan have been criticized for their emphasis on the gendered nature of identity acquisition. Women, and their psychological responses are studied only in relation to man. Inspired by Freud and Lacan, feminists turned to studies of madness and 'avante-garde' poetry; a woman who speaks outside male culture has to be either mad or an artist who creates fiction. Such feminists are Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. Both Irigaray and Cixous called upon women to use a different language for themselves based on the experiences and sensations of their bodies. It should be different from the language of men, which is the one commonly used. Such a language would go beyond the realms of masculine rationality and logic, it could be a language of dreams, representing the unconscious that has been repressed in the women's psyche. Feminist psycho analytic theorists see a woman's developmental process as different from that of a man.

## **INDIVIDUAL AND EXISTENTIAL FEMINISM**

The concept of feminism set forth in Simone De Beauvoir's The Second Sex is existential and Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch is individual that goes to

radical extremes. De Beauvoir's book had a great influence on the radical feminists, though it was published two decades before the advent of radicalism. In The Second Sex, there is an implicit call by Simone De Beauvoir, to woman to assert her autonomy in defining herself against men. John Charvet in Feminism describes the essence of Beauvoir's ideas thus:

"The goal is not so much to claim that man has his rights, nor to participate with men in a common socialist liberation, but to win her existence as free subject by defining her own identity, giving herself a past and creating for herself solidarity with other women". (100) Beauvoir considers marriage as harmful when taken as a career for women, motherhood also should not be imposed upon. Gainful employment is a must for woman though a vote and a job will not guarantee her personal emancipation. Values in society need to be reassessed to accommodate the aspirations of women. Man is not seen as eternally hostile to woman. Germaine Greer, like Beauvoir objects to the idea of women being viewed as a stereotype of the 'Eternal Feminine'. She feels that such a passive woman is sexless, castrated, a eunuch. She traces the source of oppression to the nuclear family that makes great demands on women. Like Betty Friedan, Greer speaks about the frustrations of middle class women. While Friedan emphasises gainful employment outside the home, Greer's emphasis is on liberating the sexuality of women. The chief means of liberating women is to replace compulsive and compelled behaviour by the pleasure principle.

Individual feminists stress the importance of the autonomy of the women, Existential feminists like Beauvoir exhort women to aim for transcendence in their daily activities rather than being satisfied with immanence and existing as just 'the other' sex.

## **CULTURAL FEMINISM**

This is based on the basic idea that there is a dichotomy between mind and body which is substantiated by the mental capacities of women. Kathryn Cirksena and Lisa Cuklanz in their article "Male Is to Female As - Is to -" in Women Making Meaning opines:

"Since women were thought less mentally capable than men, and were normally associated with nature and thus with animal and physical world, they were devalued as less human than men." (33) Cultural feminists argue that the body cannot be so separated from the mind, and that the body should not be seen as a physical limitation to thought. They also see that different people undergo different experiences; therefore all cannot agree on one objective truth. This insight has been termed by cultural feminists as stand point epistemology'. Thus different

cultural traditions have different epistemological premises, different subgroups that are related to power positions within a society may have different insights about the same culture. Thus modern cultural feminist theory highlights the relation between social positioning, experience and understanding of the world. There is a close connection between cultural feminism and post modern feminist theories.

### POST - MODERN FEMINISM

These feminists describe the body as a 'site' at which important identity forming, yet contradictory experiences, occur. Such feminists attempt to 'theorize the body'. Besides the logic of equality or sameness and difference between men and women that is dealt with by the liberal, psycho analytical and cultural feminists, Sushila Singh notes in her essay 'Recent Trends in Feminists Thought' in Indian Woman Novelists: "Julia Kristeva suggests a third space for feminism to operate - a space which deconstructs all identity, all binary oppositions." (60) which constitutes the basis for post modernistic feminist theory. Another example of a post modernist is Alice Jardine who is wary of the term 'feminist' and considers 'feminism' which she defines in her book Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity as a "movement from the point of view of, by and for women" (20). Others who support this view are Gayatri Spivak and Elizabeth Stanton.

### RELATIVE OR RELATIONAL FEMINISM

Karen Offen, when defining feminism, broadly groups the different strands of feminisms as 'Relative or relational' and 'Individualist'. The relativist proposes a gender based but companionate, non-hierarchical, male- female couple as the basic unit of society. Whereas the individualist

arguments emphasize the individual, irrespective of sex or gender as the basic unit. ^

Relational feminists stress women's rights as those of women in terms of their child bearing and or nurturing capacities when men, insisting on women's distinctive contributions to these roles. By contrast, individual feminist thought emphasises more abstract concepts of individual human rights and celebrates the quest for personal independence, dismissing all socially defined roles.

Modern feminist trends in the west have moved beyond

the petty politics of equal rights and opportunities. We see that 'feminism' or women's liberation is a term that escapes clear definition, as it depends on the individual, one's culture, the place one belongs to, and how far one is able to practice one's feminist ideals. Indian feminism seems to follow a middle path that stands between the extreme radical feminist stance and the liberal, individual, socialist and cultural feminist stances.

This comparative study of four Indian feminist writers K. Saraswathy Amma, KamalaDas (Madhavi Kutty), Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee, concerns the delineation of the concept of a liberated woman that is being projected consciously or unconsciously by them in their fictional works. It also proposes to identify the themes, structures and language which are common to women as represented in their works. Some of these recurring themes identified in these women feminist writers are the following, as pointed out in the article 'New Horizons. Exploring the Possibilities of Feminist Literary Criticism on Indian Writing in English' by Christine Gomez:

"... woman's struggle for self realization and self definition, woman's quest for her identity, her pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level, sex-role stereotyping in society, debates about the double moral standard in society, various aspects of female experience such as domestic violence, rape, pregnancy, abortion, motherhood, being single and so on, the evolving of feminine consciousness out of female experience, the internal conflict and ambivalence of women forced to choose between new "feminist goals" and traditional "feminine" goals, between total independence and the need for romantic love and emotional fulfilment, the bonding between women forming a sisterhood or a mother- daughter relationship and the alienation of woman as an outsider, as an object, as the other." (92) This study deals with the 'Quest for Self' seen in some of the women characters and the 'Flight into Neurosis' in some others, as an after effect of the desire for emancipation. The study also examines the various Narrative Techniques adopted by the authors and their feminist Vision of life based on their attitudes to the situations and women characters presented in traditional roles.

The intention of the study is to trace the distinct Indian strand of feminism that is seen in these works. In India, the woman who is said to be liberated can be considered emancipated even if her thoughts and writings are progressive, as more emphatic actions are not easily sanctioned by the Indian social and cultural conditions; also in a sense that she has been awakened by a feminist consciousness.

The feminism in the four writers chosen for this study is not really militant feminism, it may be only at an awareness level of their consciousness. By portraying women characters with a feminist awareness, these writers reveal their own attitudes to the concept of liberation. Their writings therefore lend themselves to a feminist interpretation, which is not necessarily based on the western type of feminisms. By comparing and contrasting the fictional women and their situational responses, an attempt has been made to arrive at a delineation of the comparative degree of liberation exhibited by them. Thus we find that in one writer the characters may not be as liberated as in another writer. This difference in the degree of liberation depends on the difference in the socio-cultural background of the writers themselves. In this comparative study an effort has also been made to explain the relevance of such an Indian variety of feminism to contemporary Indian life, which would help in re-evaluating our value systems and paving the way for a more harmonious and sane existence in human relationships in the convention bound Indian sub-continent. It is hoped that this approach to the Indian women's problems is innovative enough, and a useful contribution to the area of Women's Studies in India.

#### **THE WRITERS CHOSEN FOR STUDY - THEIR SOCIO CULTURAL BACK GROUND**

K. Saraswathy Amma and Kamala Das are both writers in Malayalam. They belong to the same socio-economic background in Kerala. Saraswathy Amma was born in 1919. She was educated and completed her BA in Malayalam. She worked as a teacher for sometime and later joined the Local Fund Audit Office at Trivandrum as auditor. She remained unmarried till the end; living upto her ideals all her life. She was interested in cinema, photography and reading. She voluntarily retired from service in 1973, and died in 1975. She has written twelve collections of short stories, a collection of critical essays a novel and a play. The first story published is 'Seethabhavanam'.

Kamala Das is renowned as an Indian English Poet and a short story writer in Malayalam. She is the daughter of the famous Malayalam poet Balamaniyamma. Her father V.M. Nair was the Managing Editor of Mathrubhumi. Kamala Das has published four collections of poems in English, two novels including My Story which is autobiographical, many short stories and a few novels in Malayalam under the pen-name Madhavikutty, besides a few more autobiographical articles. She won the Asian Poetry Prize in 1963, Asan World Prize in 1985 and the Sahitya Academy Prize for her works. She is acclaimed internationally as a confessional poet.

Both Saraswathy Amma and Kamala Das belong to the

Nair community in Kerala. The Nair society follows a matrilineal system of inheritance as against the patrilineal inheritance which is the norm for almost all other Indian communities. This has shaped and moulded a spirit of independence in these women writers from Kerala. As Siby James in 'Hegemony and Culture: The case of Indulekha' in the journal Haritham opines:

" [I]e ' Marumakkathayam' (matrilineal system) gave women great freedom and status, and this was not merely conceptual as many critics now consider it to be. They had control over property and could exercise the right of divorce in marriage." (69)

The women belonging to such a matriarchal society were more brave and confident in their approach to life. They questioned conventional attitudes, desired freedom in their actions, and equality with men. Both of them imbibed their freedom loving nature from their background of comparative independence.

The Nair Ethos that gave a sense of liberty to its women is perceptible in Kamala Das in five different ways:

"...idealisation of the grandmother and the family house; in her close affinity with the other members of the family including domestic servants; in the several references to Nair customs, rituals and ceremonies; in the powerful desire for freedom and freedom to rebel; and finally in her essential domestic and religious sensibility and devotion to Lord Krishna at Guruvayoor." (85) Though this comment, according to K.R. Ramachandran Nair, in his analysis of the 'Nair Ethos'<sup>1</sup> in his book The Poetry of Kamala Das, is about Ms. Das's poetry, it is equally applicable to the themes she repeats in her autobiographical essays and short stories. She has been educated only upto the 10th standard and married to Mr. Madhava Das in her teens. She continues to write poems, stories and articles.

Shashi Deshpande was educated early at Dharwar, Karnataka. She graduated from Bombay Elphinstone College, Bombay and from Bangalore in law. She has written and published five collections of short stories and six novels all in English. The conservative patriarchal background of her upbringing has been described and satirized in her works. Her father was a Kannada dramatist. She is married and still writes fiction.

Bharati Mukherjee is a living Indian English writer from Bengal, now settled in the U.S. She is a Ph.D. holder from Iowa University. She is now a teacher in the University of California, Berkely. She has used plenty of irony and satire in making fun of Indians and the traditional Indian customs.

These four writers have been yoked together on the common platform of feminist ideas that are seen in their works. Most of their fictional works are women centred. Saraswathy Amma and Kamala Das are regional Malayalam writers. Saraswathy Amma has been selected as she was the pioneer among writers of women's problems, writing about them as early as in the nineteen forties, long before feminism became popular as a subject for analysis. Kamala Das is known internationally as a writer dealing with problems of women in a frank manner. Both these writers are compared with Deshpande, who is a typical Indian feminist writer, and Mukherjee, who writes about women in a foreign locale. This very fact that they write about adult women, makes them serious writers of women's fiction. Both Kamala Das and Mukherjee have expressed the fragmentation of personality in a woman's psyche when faced with the conflicts and pressures of living upto society's expectations, while at the same time trying to be true to one's own self. Their characters are either successful in their self quests, or end up as neurotic individuals, both as a result of their desire for emancipation. The strivings for freedom in the women characters become more difficult in the Indian context as we see in Saraswathy Amma and Shashi Deshpande, who in fact are outspoken in their ideas about liberation, with their fiction becoming almost like feminist propaganda. But all the four have succeeded in portraying the problems of the women and point to a resolution, at least partial, of the conflicts a woman has to face in society as well as when trying to live upto her ideal of a liberated woman in the Indian context.

In the study of K. Saraswathy Amma's and Kamala Das's fiction, I have had to resort to translating relevant passages from Malayalam to English. The translation of the passages from Saraswathy Amma and Kamala Das is purely my own, so some imperfections that may have crept into the translation may be excused. Only those books by the four writers that show some evidence of the feminist consciousness have been made use of. Deshpande and Mukherjee have written other types of books also. Come Up And Be Dead and If I Die Today by Deshpande, are more in the nature of detective stories. Her recent novel The Binding Vine is more humanist in approach and Mukherjee's recent novel The Holder of the World, is more historical. These works have not been used for this study, except for incidental references.