THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINISTIC ASPECTS IN INDIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS WRITING IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Indian women writers writing in English have become enlightened and exposed themselves to these new concepts. One such important concept is feminism, which inspires these educated women writers to take up the cause of the women suppressed and oppressed by tradition in general and predominantly, the educated urban middle class families. In other words, a new awareness or consciousness has been created among this particular class of educated middle class women. Some distinguished Indian women novelists writing in English like Anita Desai, Shashi DeshPande, Arundhiroy and Manju Kapur to mention a few have made it their main concern to highlight this particular aspect of feminism in all their novels.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary, Indian women novelists, Novel, Fiction, Social criticism, Alienaition, Male hegemony, Patriarchy, Enlightenment, Empowerment, Consciousness, Society, urbanization

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is generally divided into three main genres: Poetry, drama and novel. The first two genres had existed some six centuries before Christ. And the last one, the novel, made its appearance rather very late on the literary scene- only six centuries ago; and, so it is justly termed ‘novella’ the new one. It is the parvenu of literature, since it has come poor as an entertainer; but has come to stay only to flourish by leaps and bounds in all directions experimenting itself with ever new techniques unheard of before.

Novel, as a literary genre, has been imported from England into our country, sometime in the middle of the 19th century as a new genre of literature through the medium of the master’s language which, in course of time, became the medium of instruction in schools and then for historical reasons, English had become the medium of teaching in Indian schools, colleges and universities.

The Renaissance in modern Indian literature begins with Raja Rammohan Roy. Novel as literary genre was imported to India from the west and others who learnt English started writing after that. It must be mentioned here that before the novel as a genre took roots in the native soil, there were a few people who started writing poetry, one such unique poet was Toru LataDutt (1856-1877). Although certain Indians, who learnt English, started writing novels during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, they are not so important to deserve our attention. Convention recognizes Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as the first Indian to have written a novel in English and it is called “Rajmohan’s Wife” published in 1864. He has the credit of being the first Indian to have got the B.A., degree and also the first Indian to have written a novel in English.

Every original writer has the force of his or her personality, which is inevitably reflected in their writings, reflected rather unconsciously and it is too elusive to be exactly defined. Each writer is unique in his or her own way and sometimes, comparisons sound odious. But evaluation of a writer is essential to figure out in what aspects one writer different from another writer before assigning that writer the place that he or she merits in comparison with other writers. Hence, the general survey! As has been already observed, only Indian women novelists writing in English will be discussed.
K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar’s “Indian Writing in English” is a ground-breaking work which is authentic and unique. It may be regarded as the Bible of the critics as well as the students of Indo-Anglian literature. Iyengar is, indeed, the George Marshall of Indo-Anglian literature who had unearthed most interesting and least known facts and brought them to light and subsequent critics of Indo-Anglian literature cannot proceed with their work without referring to this unique work.

Iyengar observes that the young maiden Toru Lata Dutt (1856-1877), who passed away very prematurely at the age of twenty one, is considered to be the very first Indian woman writing a novel and this was written in the French language and it was translated in English, under the title of “Bianca”, or “The Young Spanish Maiden” though incomplete; and it was published posthumously in 1878 in the Bengal Magazine. It has only a historical importance as the very first novel written by an Indian woman in English and only a literary historian is interested in it as an exhibit worthy to be preserved in a literary museum. It has become a convention for the literary historians of Indo-Anglian literature to mention that Toru Lata Dutt as the first Indian woman novelist, writing in English. Moreover, Toru Dutt, who died at an early age of twenty one, practically knew nothing about the traumatic experiences of Indian women at large and the story of the novel is dominated by an element of romance;

And next, Raj Laxmi Devi deserves mention as the earliest Indian woman writing fiction in English under the title of “The Hindu Wife” or “The Enchanted Fruit” published in 1876. The novel depicts the claustrophobic, domestic atmosphere where the women have neither the freedom of expression nor the freedom of movement. For the first time, we hear a woman’s voice protesting against the suffocating social conditions that prevailed at that time. She vehemently protests in her novel against the oppressive conditions that stunt the spontaneous growth and development of their personality.

Then follows another novelist by name Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862—1894). She wrote two novels: “Saguna: A Story of a native Christian Life (1895)” and “Kamala: A Story of Hindu Wife”. Her first novel, “Saguna” was cast in the autobiographical form and she can be credited with introducing an Indian heroine into English fiction; it is important from a socio-cultural perspective. It also explores a new custom of the modern women in Indian English in the form of autobiographical mode. It is innovative 19th century classic, stating an Indian woman’s exposure of her alarming experience of cultural hybridity, sacred, and of women’s movement in the colonial encounter. And along with this, her second novel, “Kamala: A Story of Hindu Wife”, published in 1894 which became very popular at home and abroad.

In this context, Rosalind depicts,

“This is why we are not left to male writers individually, on the other hand, compassionate as they may be. The women perspective voiced through all sorts of women’s writings is more than an appreciation of all male assessment of the entire universe. ( Miles, 29)

A few Indian women who wrote fiction in English deserve mention since they have some historical importance even if they have not contributed substantially to the genre called novel; The real contribution to novel in English written by Indian women appears only during post-independence India. They exhibit certain degree of ideological zeal in projecting problems pertaining to women in general and the married ones in particular. They lived within the frame work of system that imposes certain restrictions that circumscribe their general mobility both in their domestic and social life and this is tantamount to depriving them of their basic rights. They live as subordinates, an abject life of dependence under the hegemony of what is known as patriarchy and besides tradition, a kind of anonymous authority that is omnipresent. Women in general were sandwiched between these two forces that left them almost suffocated.

Apart from the celebrated trio, the three Indian men-novelists, namely, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan who made remarkable contribution to Indo-Anglian novel during the late thirties and after, no Indian woman novelist of their stature during this period appeared on the literary scene. It is only after independence one witnesses Indian women novelists coming up in quick succession, contributing their mite to the mainstream of Indo-Anglian fiction, attracting the critical attention of their works at home as well as abroad---Of course, these women’s fiction has been punctuated by some important novels written by Indian men writing in English, but before one takes up the Indian women-novelists of the post-independence India, there is one woman writer of India writing in English who tried to present life in India as it was at the dawn of the twentieth century;
Another prominent novelist, Cornelia Sorabji (1864—1954) who studied Law at Oxford and wrote certain books with the zeal of a reformer, chiefly about widows and women in Purdahs; a few of the titles under which she wrote are: “Love and Life Behind the Purdah” (1901), “Sun-babies: Studies in the Child life of India” (1904) and “Between The Twilights” (1908) hold up a mirror to the lives of women living secluded in a world of their own, cut off from the mainstream of social life. The main theme of her writings seems to be the plight of Indian women who were caught in the tight grip of tradition and her reformative zeal is perceptible in all she had written. Miss. Sorabji vehemently condemns the barbaric practice of sati which forces the widow—often very young—to perish herself by walking into the pyre of her dead husband; and she also denounces the traditional practice of the purdah system. Lastly, there is one Muslim lady, Iqbalunisa Hussain whose book “Purdah and Polygamy” tried to present in a realistic manner the confined lives of Muslim women who spend their lives behind the purdah. This novel documents fundamentalism, fanaticism and regressive practices such as the practice of purdah and polygamy, which represents the conservatism of Muslim community in India.

Generally speaking, the growth of Indo-Anglian fiction is not consistent. Prof. Shahane observes as follows:

“The Indo-Anglian novel has in many ways a haphazard growth and its fortuitous development is partly the product of lack of clear objectives. An objective like the image of India or western reader is more often a pious platitude a genuinely realized artistic goal”. (Indo-English Fiction and the Question of form.” (Shahane, 35)

It is only after the Second World War or to be more accurate, after India attained her independence, Indian women novelists writing in English made their appearance on the literary scene. Indian women novelists who wrote novels in English, with any amount of seriousness posing the problems that mainly concern women started appearing only after independence. They actually hold up the mirror to the real issues of social nature that focus on woman’s struggle to liberate her from the suffocating clutches of tradition besides male chauvinism that manifests itself in the form of the patriarchal structure of social system.

The first renowned Indian woman novelist of this period writing in English is, beyond all shades of doubt, is Kamala Markandeya who has nine novels to her credit. They were written between 1954 and 1977. She became famous with the publication of her first novel, “Nectar in a Sieve” (1954). The first of the modern generation of women novelists was Kamala Markandeya who was undoubtedly, the most prominent one who deals generally with the lower middle class families of South India, cast against the rural backdrop and also with East-West confrontation; although she comes under the category of modern Indian women novelists writing in English, in her first novel, “Nectar in a Sieve”, she focuses on poverty and hunger of the landless peasantry suffering both from the tyranny of landlord and the advent of industrialization; Here she deals with the poor peasants of a typical South Indian village where life is stagnant; poverty accumulates, overburdening population is constantly on the increase;

R. A. Singh notifies:

Rukmini’s spiritual power, heroic deeds, love like easeness, love to her children endurance and respect for traditional ethics make her an exemplary character. (Singh, 6)

Kamala Markandaya, in all her novels, except her last novel, “The Golden Honeycomb”, which is a voluminous novel, focuses on the bad conditions of rural life and in metropolitan life, she deals with overpopulation, economic conditions and the strain and stress of life in general. And the theme of her fifth novel, “A Handful of Rice” also deals with the same problem of poverty and hunger, but it is against the backdrop of a city life.

Kamala Markandaya’s “A Handful of Rice” deals with starvation and poverty and deterioration of human ethics. As a result, the modern man prioritises to material as well as machine, hypocrisy and exploitation which results suffering from miserable and mal-adjustment, mental and emotional instability. Therefore, Scepticisms surreptitiously enhanced owing to lack of faith. The description of sex and sensuality in her novel, “A Handful of Rice” seems to have been overdone and even without that incident, the novel will not lose its tempo. It may be regarded as a blemish on the novel and in this respect, she anticipates the postmodern women novelists of India writing in English, they are least inhibited in describing erotic scenes to such an extreme degree that they border on pornography; for example, Manju Kapur as in her “The Immigrant” and Shobha De as in her “Sisters”.

It is quite fitting to conclude this novelist with an apt observation by Iyengar,
“Kamala Markandaya neither repeats herself nor turns her fiction into a formula. Here in her last two novels the theme is nothing less than the ‘quiet desperation’ in which most people living in city or the country are condemned to live and the pettiness and the horror, the pity and the heroism, that come into play in their live.(Iyengar,450)

And then comes, another illustrious woman novelist writing in English, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, born in Germany to Polish parents, Jhabvala, took an M.A., from Oxford University, married an Indian and settled down in Delhi; Jhabvala’s novels often depicts the social background of Indian middle class who have benefitted from India’s developing urbanization and industrial development, further, European emigrants who got married to Indian families.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has attained an international acclaim as an Indian novelist. She has authored eight novels to her credit. The main themes in her eight novels deal with cultural assimilation, rebellion, love and marriage, isolation, East–West encounter, pseudo-modernism in Indian society, the post-independence Indian ethos. Jhabvala’s novels are categorised into two groups. The first group consists novels like To Whom She Will (1955), The Nature of Passion (1956), The Householder (1960) etc. To the second group belong other novels like A Backward Place (1965), A New Dominion (1973), and Heat and Dust (1975).

The next Indian woman novelist writing in English is Anita Desai, a highly renowned novelist in English, has written six novels in English and a collection of short stories and the first novel, “Cry, The Peacock” published in 1963. It deals with the heroine, Maya’s hypersensitive psychology that leads to her alienation from self and she suffers from certain other complexes that ultimately drive her to murder her husband, Gautam. And in two other important novels of hers, namely, “Voices in the City” and “Fire on the Mountain” (1977) which won the Sahitya Academy award, also deals with depressive loneliness and self-alienation, have been written under the influence of Sartrean existential philosophy.

Anita Desai’s novels may be classified as being psychological; one finds that Desai deals with different themes: there is the theme of racial discrimination and cultural dominance as in “Bye, Bye Blackbird; and seeking self and obsessive self-alienation and Electra complex as in “Cry, The Peacock” and another theme that she repeatedly presents is a sense of loneliness and isolation from her fellow human beings. And these aspects of her protagonists are given expression through the stream of consciousness technique. One must admit that Anita Desai cannot be compared with any other Indian woman novelist writing in English; not that she is beyond compare! The technique that she adopts consistently and her explorations of the inner world of her characters are not to be seen in any other Indian woman novelist writing in English. She is, no doubt, unique in this respect. She is adept at description of the inner climate of the character’s consciousness; in few Indian women novelists writing in English do we find this trait as we do in Desai’s novels. It is for this reason; she is to be studied apart from other writers of the same gender. Strictly speaking, she is not a feminist writer, although the stress is on the inner world of her female protagonists caught in a psychological turmoil. It is for this reason they are termed as ‘psychic dramas’. The three novels of Anita Desai, namely, “Cry the Peacock”, “Voices in the City” and “Fire on the Mountain” represent a unique blending of the Indian and the Western. Her novels catch the bewilderment of the modern individual psyche grappling with the elusive problems.

Referring to one prominent trait of her writings, Iyengar observes:

“As we remain mesmerized by Anita Desai’s verbal artistry, and her uncanny evocation of atmosphere, her tale unflatteringly glides by and we force arendition of the veil of a happening or a memory to gain entry into the realm of personal experience and attain the desired finale of acceptance”. (Iyengar,745)

And there is NayantaraShagal, a distinguished writer of the times, daughter of Pundit Vijaya Lakshmi born in 1927, is a highly sophisticated novelist whose novels focus on the political atmosphere of the period, of the gradual fading of the influence of Gandhism and Nehruism, the rapid changes both in political and social spheres, and the steep decline in moral values. Nayantara Shagal is a renowned writer. She wrote nine novels, two biographies, two political commentaries and a plethora of articles. Her novels deal the contemporary Indian political system, the corrupted politicians and their insanity for power. She focuses determined and dedicated freedom fighters who sacrifice their lives for the sake of mother land. There is an amalgamation of two worlds throughout her works; the personal domain of man and woman relationship and worldwide politics.

And Speaking of Sahgal as a novelist, Iyengar observes:
“Mrs. Sahgal’s uncanny understanding of the ambiguous and sinister rumblings in the corridors of power in New Delhi, constitutes the strength of the novel”. (Iyengar,746)

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most noticeable Indian women novelists writing in English. Infact, in the beginning of her career as a writer, she denied to be considered as a feminist, but later, in mid-career as a novelist, she comprehends that she is an ardent feminist with a similarity. Unlike some feminist women writers, she is not a strident or militant feminist. She is not a leftist in this regard; she is not a misogynist; nor is she against the species of male gender. She has implicit faith in the institution of marriage; she is vehemently against the system which allows man to be authoritative and chauvinistic towards women; her novels enlighten a sort of women education as well as economical empowerment; all the protagonists are middle class urban educated women; In her novel, “Small Remedies”, she creates a character named Savitribai,wedded to music, comes out of the fold of her orthodox Brahmin family, defying hardbound tradition, replete with a snaggle of restrictions, leaving home and husband, living with a Muslim, her co-artist—an expert tabla-man; nor does she look back; nor does she have the least sense of compunction. She has the courage of conviction; and all this she does with a view to realizing her true selfhood and individual identity. Thus, her protagonists are determined and unflinching even in the face of the most difficult situations.

Anjana Appachana’s works give a

"Realistic account of the lives of the middle class women in an Indian city and their painful negotiations between personal aspirations and societal expectations."(Naik 90)

Lastly, Shashi Deshpande gives clarification as to her being a feminist; she is reluctant to be labelled as a feminist in the sense that critics use; she clarifies in her own words:

“If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world.”(Shashi Deshpande: Interview with M. Ratibe).

There is another novelist by name Chhaya Datar, albeit lesser known, in her autobiographical story, “In Search of Myself”, in which she describes her experiences as a social worker in a tribal community. She records the activities of the farm labourers who are mostly women; their relations with their men are characterized by silence or indifference; it is in this suffocating atmosphere, the characters evolve themselves to lead independent lives.

There is another contemporary woman novelist writing in English by name, Raji Narasimhan. She deals with evolved and liberated characters; she has written three novels: “The Heart of Standing is You cannot Fly” (1973), “Forever Free” (1979), and her last novel, “The Sky Changes” (1991). Since they are liberated women, they have ample scope to develop their personalities; they are free from patriarchal hegemony. For instance, the protagonist of her novel, “The sky Changes” goes back home after having been separated from her husband, in order to give free and full expression to the writer in her sanguinely and she declares that her body is not her jail and that it is her boat-symbolically suggesting, that she is as free as a boat that can take its voyage through the boundless seas in any direction she likes—and that she will row herself to freedom in her boat. Rajis’ protagonists try to achieve unhampered freedom and mellow harmony in relationship with their men. In other words, they try to realize perfect womanhood in their lives.

Bharati Mukherjee is another Post-colonial novelist of India, writing in English. She focuses the themes connected with Indian Women, predominantly, the impediment of cross-cultural crisis and Identity crisis. She presents her women protagonists as beings that struggle to liberate themselves as free souls and tries to discover their identity; they are out and out humans endowed with feminine sensibility. She also portrays the cultural clutter between the East and West. Her novels are: “The Tiger’s Daughter”, “Days and Nights”, “The Sorrow and Terror” and “Leave It to Me”. Her novels generally deals with the problems of migration, the position of new immigrants and their sense of estrangement and search for identity.

Then comes the distinguished writer, Gita Hariharan. Her debut novel, The “Thousand faces of the Night” had won the significant commonwealth award for the year 1993. She is a staunch feminist and her women struggle to emancipate themselves from the traditional image to have their own individualistic identity; besides being a well-known short story writer and her prose is melodious and flows fluently with harmonious ease. She stresses the relevance of the Indian epic stories in the contemporary Indian context; her women are distinguished for their intellectual fervor and one perceives the force of their personalities through the force of their intellect.
One can find the three stages—tradition, transition and modernity of her protagonist’s character in Hari Haran’s novels. The women represent a symbol of ‘a new women’ who have been evolving from the shackles of tradition to the modernity. She does not create any situation for her protagonists where they feel suffocated or alienated in the society where they live; as such, they are not confronted with problems, such as, being lonely or being alienated.

Then comes Arundhati Roy, who was born to a Bengali father and a Keralite mother in 1961. She created an international sensation with the publication of her debut novel, “The God of Small Things”. It is mostly autobiographical in content cast in the mould of a novel; and it won the Booker prize for the year 1997. Although Roy asserts that she is not a feminist writer, the overtones of the novel in general show her leanings towards feminism. The main theme of this novel is an illicit love-affair between a young married woman—mother of twins—of high caste Syrian Christian stock, and a young man of untouchable caste—a forbidden act looked upon by society as nothing less than a sacrilege to tradition which is held in highest respect as it is almost sacrosanct to the orthodox people and the sad consequences that end their lives in a tragic manner.

Sobha De, an Indian woman novelist writing in English, is a versatile genius and she is distinguished from other Indian novelists of her own sex writing in English by being most uninhibited in describing erotic scenes in such lavishly sensual manner that she has earned, not unjustly, the label of pornographic writer. This point is best illustrated by her two works: “Sisters” and “Snapshots” which represents her characteristic genius as a novelist. She deals with the lives of upper middle class educated women and realizes how the lot of them are being marginalized and deprived of their legitimate rightful place in society, since in many respects they are not inferior to men in any manner. Her novels are a revolt against traditional values and conventional norms, attempting to turn them topsy-turvy. She is, no doubt, a representative of post-modern woman. Her protagonists seek towards self-fulfillment through self-realization, come what may! They create a new socio-urban culture that eats into the very marrow of Indian ethos.

Then Kiran Desai, the illustrious daughter of an illustrious mother, Anita Desai, the most distinguished novelist, who carved a secure niche for herself among other distinguished women novelists writing in English. The themes of cultural displacement, exile, estrangement, identity crisis, racial discrimination, identity crisis are very interesting themes in Desai’s fictions.

Kiran Desai wrote two novels: the first novel, entitled “Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard” published in the year 1998 and the second novel “The Inheritance of Loss” published in the year 2006 which obtained the prestigious Booker Prize. So far she is the youngest of the Booker awardees;


Actually, Manju Kapur’s purpose in her novel’s is quite obvious; her idea is to create modern woman who by grappling with the snaggle of restrictions that impede her efforts from going forward; her protagonists deeply wish to get rid of the age-old burden of tradition and despite all the hurdles in their way, they finally liberate themselves from those shackles that prevent them from realising their own selfhood that is being stifled at every step; in this process of transforming themselves, they become metamorphosed into modern ones.

Juliet Mitchell observes:

The procedure of changing the dormant, individual worries of women into a mixed realisation of the meaning of them as social hurdles, the exposure of tense, inhibition, anxiety, the struggle for independence which can step into the political . ( Mitchell, 61)

II. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, one can say that the burgeoning presence of women novelists in India is immensely significant and exciting for anyone to overlook or ignore them. The cognizant readers of the world are finally forced to acknowledge their presence and applaud their talent. The felicitation of these novelists and their international appreciations in the form of awards and various nominations from the literary world further establishes their credibility in the world literature. The escalating response shown by the media and the publication houses has
contributed immensely towards their acceptance. The critics not only infused their criticism of these novelists with fresh insight, but they also exhibited an exceptional confidence in their abilities.

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