

Feministic Perspectives in Indian Literature

Mr Dinesh Kumar

Assistant Professor of English Dyal Singh College, Karnal

dineshkarnal1@gmail.com

Women have been considered subordinate to man since times immemorial. The patriarchal set-up firmly asserts man's superiority over women and has always tried to marginalize her. But with the rise of feminism, women have come to realize that their inferiority is the creation of patriarchy and not the creation of Gods. They have become aware of the fact that in a rapidly changing society they need to redefine themselves according to their own views.

"Feminism" is a political movement that leads to woman's political, social and psychological awareness. Feminism, in the Indian context, is a byproduct of western liberation in general and of feminist thought in particular. In the words of Chaman Nahal:

"I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group or ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my ideas of feminism materialize." ⁽¹⁾

Feminism is a call for liberation of women from the conventional shackles of patriarchal civilization. A feminist critic demands not for distinction between male and female, but for equality. There is focus upon what is absent rather what is

present, reflecting concerns with the silencing and marginalization of woman.

In ancient times, woman in India had a very high and respectable position in the society. Our religious books like Vedas indicate that men and women have equal rights. In fact, women were credited with higher status in the Rigvedic period. Our ancient Hindu scriptures (Puranas) ascribe to this view:

"Marriage without mutual consent of the Bride and Bridegroom is also attended with troubles." ⁽²⁾

Religious ceremony was considered incomplete without wife. But, in the middle ages, women were subjected to male domination in every class due to a relatively insecure society.

Although the place of women in society has differed from culture to culture and from time to time, yet one fact common to all societies is that women have never been considered equal to man. B.Rajan is of the opinion that a cow stands higher than a woman in a Hindu hierarchy. Swami Vivekanand once points out to an audience of American woman:

"In the West the woman is wife. The ideal womanhood in India is motherhood ... that marvelous, unselfish, all suffering, ever forgiving mother." ⁽³⁾

On the subjection of women, Bankim Chandra Observes:

“In all societies the women are backward as compared to men; it is the selfishness of man which accounts for it Even the wage earning servant maids have some freedom, but the wife and the daughter and the sister had none.” (4)

The feminist writers in Indian writing in English like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Bharti Mukherji, R.K. Narayan etc. are aware of woman's life, her problems and make use their works as a weapon to fight against shackles of patriarchal civilization.

R.K. Narayan's The Dark Room (1938) ⁽⁵⁾ depicts a story, which is the sort of thing that takes place in every society where the old double standards are still valid and the women are economically so desperate that they just have to endure what they detest and scorn. Savitri's whole life with her father and her husband has been a doll-life in which her own personality has been suppressed and her worth as an individual ignored. Savitri says in despair:

“Things? I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's her husbands or her son's” (6).

On the other hand, R.K. Narayan's Rosie, in *The Guide* (1958), (7) represents a class of a new woman who had the opportunity of being released from traditional confinement to join schools and universities. Her education made her aware of her individuality which makes her

seek permission from her husband to pursue her art. Rosie is the new woman in transition, though she has been exploited by Raju for his monetary purpose.

The problem of gender discrimination in India should not be viewed hence as a problem that pertains to women alone. Just as Minorities and Dalits are exploited, women too are exploited because they happened to be biologically weaker. This is a social evil like any other. Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (8) combines the issues of gender and class. Geeta, the protagonist in the novel, is successful in her attempts to setup a school in the Haveli for the mistress, the maids, and the children of the servants. However, adhering to the gender of adults in a Haveli, women and admitted to Geeta's classes, men are not. Geeta, the highborn daughter-in-law of the family, cannot teach the law class males even though she may accept service from them.

Thanks to the progressive outlook of Raja Rammohan Rai, Mahatma Gandhi and certain other social reformers who with their sensitive and penetrative heart not only peeped into the psyche but also had guts to raise their voice openly against the discrimination, and all sorts of injustices and cruelties against woman folk. Gandhi Ji brought a sea change in the Indian scenario by making woman politically and socially aware. Gandhi Ji summarized his views on women's rights in marriage as follows:

“If the husband is Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar, so is the wife. A wife is not a servant; she is a friend with equal rights, partner in dharma. Each is the gure to the other A husband and a wife have equal

rights in what either earns. The husband earns with the wife's help, even if she does not more than cook for the family A wife has the right to live separately from her husband if he ill treats her..... I do not admit any differences between men and women except those created by nature, which all of us can see.”⁽⁹⁾

In the 21st century education set-up, the influence of the western culture and struggle for freedom brought about a change in the status of women. With the change in social scene, woman comes forward to raise her voice against inequality, injustice and oppression.

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