

## Feminism in Indian Literature

Harshita Chhikara

Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages,

M.D.U. Rohtak (Haryana)

Email- [harshita.hc18@gmail.com](mailto:harshita.hc18@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Women have been a baggage of our culture, they are half the human race yet they have been treated as secondary or subordinate or “other” to men. Their voice is suppressed by the dominant patriarchal voice, but literature provides them a medium to express and articulate their sufferings. Feminism and its various branches explore the numerous factors affecting and evoking a feminine psyche. Literature is known to be the mirror of the society and the contemporary issues could not have been left, so is the women’s condition. The theme of women’s predicament figures prominently in the contemporary Indian English novels. The present paper endeavors at screening different feminist ideologies which are considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements. A woman’s role is not limited to the household boundaries, they have paved their ways through ancient times to the modern. The Indian society is deeply rooted in patriarchy and hypocrite and still has miles to go. The portrayal of women in Valmiki’s Mahabharata to Anita Desai’s Voices in the City, these writers have chosen issues faced by women in the male dominated world. Therefore, considering the essential role of women in our society there is still a need to look and improve their status. These ideologies explain feminine subjectivity and what actually feminism is. Feminism in Indian literature has somehow proved successful in putting restriction to the suppression of women in silence, helped breaking that silence and making that silence their weapon and silence ultimate becoming their voice. It is in this sense of the concern and its faithful reflection through literature that has given voice to the silenced and suppressed women. The paper discusses the term feminism in the contemporary Indian context and its role in Indian literature.

**Keywords:** Feminine, Subjectivity, Suppression, Indian Context, Male Dominance.

**Introduction:** When talking about feminism, one is reminded of Jane Austen, who wrote several female-centric novels and set the standards too high for females in the male dominated world, especially in a country like ours. Austen said –

I was quiet, but I was not blind,

that holds true for much of the female-centric literature in India. Women writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Bharti Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Anita

Desai, Arundhati Roy, Mahashweta Devi, spoke eloquently through their writings and proved the idiom “pen is mightier than sword” right, which is truly reflected in their works. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie rightly defines a feminist in book We Should all be Feminists as –

My own definition of a feminist is: a feminist is a man or a woman who says ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better’.<sup>1</sup>

Indian feminism is a hard nut to crack and equally difficult to comprehend. It is so because of the duality which persists within the very fabric of the Indian society and its culture. On one hand goddesses are held high, idealized and worshipped, and unfortunately, on the other hand male chauvinism rules the roost. Arundhati Roy beautifully spoke on this irony/duality –

We truly do live in the Age of Irony, in an age when satire has become meaningless because real life is more satirical than satire can ever.

Feminism is a quest for the identity. To speak of “Feminism” as a theory is nothing but its reduction. The essence of the movement is somehow being lost in the existential crisis of the theory itself, in the “mud” of life. Janet Richards rightly asserts –

The essence of Feminism has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that woman suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex, the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism.<sup>ii</sup>

Feminism in Indian literature has its own uniqueness just like the country; wide, varied and heterogeneous. Some of the seminal works by woman writers have been discussed below.

### **Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence:**

That Long Silence won Deshpande the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. It is a path-breaking novel with its protagonist

Jaya, being a housewife and mother of two, striving for her identity, exploration into female psyche, understanding of the mysteries of life and making this strife an ever evolving and life-long process. She revolts in silence, which is her weapon. Deshpande in the novel builds up a strong feminist character, Jaya, beginning from a girl who is hammered with the lesson that a husband is –

A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. This followed logically. And so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies.<sup>iii</sup>

The self-confident woman who is of the opinion –

To achieve anything you've got to be ruthless.<sup>iv</sup>

The novel ends with the brave words and accomplish the factor the factor that self-realization is not an easy process –

But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible.<sup>v</sup>

This makes the feminist stance of Shashi Deshpande clearer, just like the words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna which appeal to her character Jaya after she gains knowledge, “Do as you desire”.

### **Manju Kapur's The Immigrant:**

The Immigrant is an absorbing, bit surprising, novel of character. Manju Kapur leaves an aftertaste with this novel. It is beautifully composed and astute, and also

makes the small moments alive. Nina sees herself as off the shelf when the proposal arrives. Ananda is a dentist in Halifax, Canada. The two get married and she leaves her home and country to build a new life with him. And as it unfolds, marriage is much more than just courtship. She discovers truth about her husband- both sexual and emotional- her fragile life in Canada begins to unravel. The novel is mesmerizing account about the complexities of arranged marriage and NRI life.

The women's group described in the novel, that encouraged her to be angry and assertive, is quite a delight to read. The motif that when failure is a sign to move forward in life, is been described sagaciously throughout the novel by the novelist. The ending of the novel is equally assertive and motivating –

When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Meena Alexander's Manhattan Music:**

Manhattan Music is a postcolonial tale set in New York. The novel examines the Indian diaspora and focuses on the protagonist's attempt at an American assimilation while holding onto her native identity. The two female characters, Sandhya and Draupadi, dominate the novel. In the novel Sandhya is found pondering over the struggles she faces in her life. Throughout the novel she tries to fix herself, pull her broken pieces

together and compose herself. She tries to find herself, her quest for her own self is central in the novel. In her this quest for identity she tries to westernize herself and destroy her Indian identity.

She marveled at the changes that came over the natural world. People should be able to change as naturally as that. What if crossing a border one changed color, shape even? And if this happened to every single human being in the world? What if metamorphosis were built into the bodily system? Then who could one throw stones at?<sup>vii</sup>

The novel mirrors the identity crisis of various characters who are trying to fit in themselves, trying to be who they aren't inherently and trying to accept the reality. Sandhya too goes through all this and it seems at last as if she may be growing into an independent woman.

A dragonfly, dark as a water weed, hovered over the place where her mouth was etched so delicately on water. She noticed another dragonfly on a water lily, struggling out of its translucent pupa, the large eye coverings left behind in the crumpling skin, the new body gleaming with moisture... she was no longer fearful of the shadows in the trees, of the sharp cries of a strange bird with long tailfeathers. She thought she heard a creature snort near her. She stood her ground. There was a place for her.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Bharti Mukherjee's Jasmine:**

In Jasmine, Bharti Mukherjee unfolds the life of the titular character fighting for herself, her dreams and her identity, while she takes up her journey from Punjab to

California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Her rough journey is symbolic of a person being ignored and surviving the void created by the society. But Jasmine adapts herself no matter the circumstances are. Her journey is that from being a novice to a self-sufficient person. She swims against the tides and paves path for herself other than the path made for her. She comes out as a survivor, fighting the circumstances that are totally against her. She resembles Janie of Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston.

Jasmine rejects the astrologer, being just seven year old, calls him “crazy old man” and considers the scar as a boon rather than a bane –

‘It’s not a scar’, I shouted, ‘it’s my third eye’. In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middle of their foreheads. Through that eye they peered out into invisible worlds. ‘Now I’m a sage’.<sup>ix</sup>

Jasmine murdering Half-face is her self-assertion. She is the perfect image of vengeful Durga slicing her tongue.

She luckily meets Lillian Gordon who helps her adapt an American lifestyle. It is Lillian who teaches her “let past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you.”<sup>x</sup> Jasmine just like her creator Bharti Mukherjee, has an experience of many lives in a single lifetime.

There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves – in the images of dreams.<sup>xi</sup>

Her journey from Kali to Jazzy, and Jase to Jane is a journey of self, quest for one’s identity and struggle for survival. She adapts therefore she survives, as proposed by Charles Darwin in his revolutionary book Origin of Species, “survival of the fittest”. Those who adapt to the environment survive and those who don’t, they die. Jasmine is an adapter and hence she survives.

My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for... With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, traveling light.<sup>xii</sup>

Her inner struggle unfolds through her monologues, she discovers herself anew each day –

I still think myself as a caregiver, recipe giver, preserver.<sup>xiii</sup>

The heroine of the novel transforms herself in as many worlds she lives in. she is fighter and a survivor-

It isn’t guilt that I feel, its relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me re-position the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove.<sup>xiv</sup>

**Conclusion:** Feminism, thus, as portrayed in the above works varies from author to author but the essence and motive remains the same, quest for

identity. Everyone have their own perspectives but the underlying truth remains the same. The question at hand is the existence of women as “other”, which needs to be shattered. Feminism is not just about identity but about equality, about women being treated as equals, as fellow human beings. It is the need of hour in the era of globalization that women be treat as equal counterparts and being recognized for who they are and their capabilities.

Hence, the feminist movement has a long way to go. We need to stop theorizing feminism rather bring it to practical use, which in its truest sense will prove some good for the women at large. Indian society is a developing society, which still needs to push its limit because to push the limits is to improve. The feminist writing, like it always has been, should mirror the real life, because that is how it will bring about a change and literature has the potential. Feminism varies from person to person and therefore should be all-inclusive and ever-emerging. Viola Davis, the only actress to have won an Emmy, Tony and an Oscar, truly averted –

Do not live someone else’s life and someone else’s idea of what womanhood is. Womanhood is you. Womanhood is everything that’s inside of you.

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