



Feminism in Indian Novels

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Abstract: Women are often subjugated to distinctive kinds of afflictions daily. Feminism is the belief in full social, economic and political equality of women. It largely rose in response to western traditions that restricted the rights of women but feminist thought has a global manifestations and variations. Feminism is a social, political movement. It changes the way that people see male and female rights (mainly female) campaigning for equal ones. Much like their western counterparts, Indians robust tradition of feminist writers has stood up for the cause and added powerful voices to the movement. Many of the nuances of gender, religion and caste struggle in the Indian context can be understood through the keyway research writings of Indian feminist writers.

Keywords: campaigning, distinctive, feminism, manifestation, subjugated

I. INTRODUCTION:

Human experience has chiefly been a masculine or what may be called a 'malist' experience. Hence, the cumulative image humanity offers is tilted, distorted one with female voice denied with equal force, with the woman remaining behind arras. *"Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hand,"*¹(Protest by Jane Austin in Her Novel, "Persuasion.")

From Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft, from Simone de Beauvoir to Jane Austen and beyond, women have been demanding their rights in a male-centric world. Feminism is a protest movement launched by the women of the West for equal social, political, legal, moral cultural rights with men. It is a movement by fist-shaking, foot-stamping, rights-demanding women opposed to androcentric or male supremacist ideas.

It is an anti-masculinist movement of the women, by the women and for the women. It is also called Aphraism after Aphra Behn, a 17th century feminist, political activist and abolitionist. This movement recognizes the *'inadequacy of male-created ideologies'* and works towards the spiritual, racial, economic and social equality of women who are *'sexually colonized, historically neglected and biologically subordinated'*. It refers to the conviction that our production of culture and meaning like our consumption of culture and meaning influences our sex/gender systems. *"In turn sex/gender systems influence our production and consumption of culture and meaning."*²

The rise of Feminism in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries is related to the economic prosperity of the new bourgeois resulting in the use of the servants to perform domestic work. In 19th century, Feminism remained a protest movement against the suppression of women's rights, against what may be called an 'ego-testicle world-view.' In the beginning of the 20th century, it expressed itself in the Suffrage Movement. The changes in the technology and means of production and the rising demand for female labour have together formulated the structure and texture of the Suffrage Movement.

Mary Astell's *A serious Proposal to the Ladies*³ stressed the role of women's education in removing their inferiority and insecurity. Much later, Virginia Woolf accepted Astell's view that education alone can expand woman's consciousness of the world and ensure her place in the society.

Mary Wollstonecraft⁴ opposed restrictions on women's freedom for self-expression and self-development. She wrote against the demeaning indignity of systematic exclusion of women from the rights and

¹ Jane Austen in Persuasion

² Andrienne Rich in Book on Lies, Secrets and Silence (1976, P.207)

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft in Vindication of the rights of Women

responsibilities of citizenship. In the year 1788 Jeremy Bentham raised five arguments against women's suffrage: First, the traditional work done by women will suffer if they take interest in politics. Second, women will have to depend on men economically; third, men have to depend on women sexually; fourth, women cannot combine education with domestic duties; and fifth, there will be no domestic harmony if women are given the right to vote.

In 1867, JS Mill introduced amendments to the Second Reform Bill in order to give women the right to vote. The very basis of feminism is reformist. It subverts male strategies of oppression. It gives a better understanding of the women condition. As Lynda Gordon says,

Feminism analyzes woman's subordination and in analyzing it, helps to change it. Today the suppressed female voice is articulated in Indian Fiction and the dignity of woman is affirmed. She has a share of social responsibility and a greater readiness to author her own authority. Rosalind in *As You Like It* puts on a man's garb and goes about looking for her lover. Even Sita, an off-quote example of anti-feminism, had the guts to resist social conventions. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* is concerned with the physical suppression of women. The result was: in French Feminism we see greater sexual expression; in England women have been reclaimed into the male world order; in America they enjoy greater freedom of speech. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics*, Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* explore the woman question and in exploring it, expose the myth of superiority.

'Our country belongs to its men', observes Aunt Lila in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*. And so did, for hundreds of years. Father and husband treated women as their property that can be owned, controlled, disposed of the way they liked until Gandhi came. Gandhi gave a new direction and dimension to the Feminist movement in India. He freed women from passivity, servility, domesticity. He held that men and women are partners, sharing equal duties in social life and equal rights in political field.

Traditionally, India had a male-dominated culture. Indian woman 'covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and reticence in Literature as well as in life which had no autonomous existence. The woman's voice is an insurgent, subaltern voice. In *the development of the Indian English Fiction*, observes A.V. Krishna Rao, the feminine sensibility has achieved an imaginative self-sufficiency which merits recognition in spite of its relatively late manifestation. A woman writer imprisoned within her social dogmas and stigmas had to choose her literary canvas from a selected area of experience with certain vistas remaining beyond her reach. These vistas hitherto forbidden to her are being creatively explored and candidly delineated. There has been a spurt of new women writers like Namita Gokhale, Kamala Das, Shobha De etc. The shadow-figure, the tagged self has now come out of her solidarity confines of domesticity and what Andrea Dworkin calls, 'masochistic passivity,' The UN anti-war slogan of the 60's was, 'Make love, not war'. The anti-masculinist slogan of the Indian woman today is, 'Make war, not love'.

The Indian woman today is no longer a Damayanti or a Damini or a Nora or a Candida or a Joan of Arc. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pundit Eshwar Chandra Vidya Sagar and political revolutionaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru lent a new dimension, gave a new direction. Thus, Feminism as a new way of life, a new perspective came into existence in India with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman's role in the society. Indian women writers have turned inward to explore the private rather than the public life of the individual. So, their literature has largely become confessional and personal and their subjective style has been labelled feminine, even though men, too, employ it.

Feminism in Indian fiction has been a series of counters and ordeals on the part of woman to strike roots, to belong and assert her identity in a transitional society. Woman is born free, but she is in chains. She has become the 'subordinate sex.' But not always and everywhere. All women do not conform. They rebel. They reconcile. Hence, Nirode assistant in India has them that he has a man who has been as successful as it has a has seen them in *Voices in the City*, they are Kali as well as Durga symbols of destruction as well as creation.

In India woman has been 'woe-man' from the beginning barring the Vedic period when she enjoyed the pride of place with Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra who walked shoulder to shoulder with men. Even Sita, Savitri, Shakuntala and Draupadi who appeared at a later period could not be said to be passive, submissive, docile and servile, for while Sita in the *Ramayana* resisted the demonic aggressiveness of Ravana, Savitri snatched a century from the grim grip of Yama, Lord of Death, Shakuntala in the *Mahabharat* proved the strength of her nerves by meeting the challenge of *Dushyant*, Draupadi displayed the female ferocity by washing her hair in the blood of Dushasana who had attempted to disrobe her in the court of the Kauravas. It is said, *yatra naryastu pujoyante ramanti tatra devatah*, the Gods themselves the place where woman

is worshipped, woman so indispensable to man's life, an adviser in work, a slave in service, a partner in noble deeds, an earth in tolerance, a mother in affection, a harlot in bed and a friend in enjoyment.

***Karyeshu mantri, karaneshu dasi
Dharmeshu patni, kshamaya dhariti
Sneheshu mata, shayaneshu veshya
Range sakhi, Laxmana! sa kotu me.***

But slowly with Manu's male-dominated code of conduct enunciated in *Manu Samhita*, the woman in India was dislodged from her pedestal until finally during the Muslim rule, she disappeared behind the *Purdah*. Life became a lengthy street where she walked everyday with her basket (Furush Farrokhzad, 1970) It was only when Gandhi gave his clarion call for India's independence that women broke their chains, walked hand in hand with men, raising their little fingers against the unmitigated autocratic rule at home and abroad.

Sarojini Naidu left home and led the way to Salt Satyagraha just as the little girl in her 'Village Song' preferred the free life in the forest to the prison house called the world:

The bridal song and the cradle songs have cadences of sorrow. / The laughter of the sun today, the wind of death tomorrow. / Far sweeter sound the forest notes where forest streams are falling. / O, mother mine, I cannot stay, the fairy folks are calling.

This protest was voiced in many forms in Indian English Fiction. Not only women writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Sashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya but male writers like Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Manohar Malgoankar etc., dwell on tortured womanhood.

Tagore brought woman out of the kitchen into the parlor. His *Damini* is the symbol of feminine strength, a woman who throws a challenge to the orthodox, high bound Bengali Society through her remarriage. Yet, Tagore's woman remains 'half-human and half-dream.'

Mulk Raj Anand places a woman in a traditional socio-cultural milieu of a stifling conventional Hindu society where she is doomed to a life of degradation and dehumanization, a life of mental subjugation and conditional responses. Anand's men fail to recognize what Jung calls 'anima' or the female principle, the inherited collective image of woman lying in man's unconscious with the help of which he apprehends the nature of woman in his fictional world. Men remain hollow and women unredeemed, dumb creatures caught in the Darwinian world of the survival of the fittest unable to pull their weight beyond the biological. Anand's *Lajwanti* is a prototype pathetic image of Indian womanhood shrunk half-size, while his Gauri explodes the Sita myth into a thousand fragments and retrieves the female species through her symbolic emancipation on the road to Hoshiarpur, and the spurious righteousness of masculine hegemony disintegrates in the face of Gauri's new found freedom.

R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1972) projects the lop-sided family life of Ramani where there is little understanding between husband and wife. Savitri makes an unsuccessful attempt to run away and live a life of her own, but ultimately comes back to the life she had left behind. Her 'spirited protest' ends in a 'gratuitous home-coming.' Narayan marks man-woman relationship on the marital plane in *The Dark Room* and *The English Teacher* and on the extra-marital plane in *The Guide*, *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The Painter of Signs*. In *The Guide*, Rosie rises on her own feet when Marco and Raju fail her, acquires an independent identity, no longer a dancing girl pandering to the tastes of all and sundry, while in the *The Painter of Signs*, Daisy dictates terms to Ramani, she asserts her right to follow her own faith: There are millions of women.... I am not one of them.... If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you. It will be an unhappy thing for me, but I will leave you.' She echoes the words Yojanagandha had said to Raja Shantanu in *The Mahabharat*.

Malgoankar's Maharani in *The Princess* and Sundari in *A Bend in the Ganges*, too, struggle against the tyranny of tradition. Hiroji, her husband, consigns the Maharani to the dark loneliness of the palace, her son called her 'bitch' but she exercises her right to live life in her own way in preference to an animal existence, to the life of a 'leper kept in segregation'. She marries a Muslim and leaves the country.

But, more than me, Indian women novelists turned towards the woman's world with greater introspective intensity and authenticity. They launched an aesthetic voyage within to explore the private consciousness of their women characters and measure the pressure of the inner weather.

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* probes deeper into the aching void of Sita's life. A highly sensitive, over-emotional, middle-aged woman already saddled with four children and expecting the fifth, Sita continually breaks into violent eruptions of emotions, suffocated by the vegetarian complacency and insularity of her unimaginative husband. Sita's 'a cripple without crutches. Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain (1977) IS a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall'. Ila Das is 'an old animal that has been made to run before the hounds, 'that last little broken bit of crazy 'shrivelled, starved stick'. This was the Indian woman. This was her life. This was our attitude:

***Pita rakshati kaumarye bharta rakshati yauvane
Rakshanti sthavire putrh na stri svatantryam arhati
(Manusmriti)***

'The father looks after her during childhood, the husband protects her during youth and the sons take care of her when she grows old. The woman is never fit for freedom'. And this freedom Desai's woman yearns from the sheltered, overprotected life of her husband's home. Sita welcomes the storm to give her 'a sensation of flying, of being lifted off the earth release and liberty'. Monisha longs to thrust her 'head out of the window,' but 'the bars are closely set'. She is condemned to live a 'one-dimensional 'life: 'They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth in me. Sita wants to break loose 'the barbed wire of prudence, caution, routine and order that throttle, choke and enslave her. She revolts against the subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness of her husband's family. Like Nanda Kaul's, Sarla's aspiration have been shattered in *In Custody*⁵. She is reduced to ceaseless passive waiting: 'Sarla never lifted her voice in his (Deven's) presence-countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion.' Sita sees women 'chopping, slicing, chopping, slicing. If meals were not being eaten, then they were being cooked or cleaned up after or planned'. Monisha goes down on her knees to touch her mother-in-law's feet, while another pair of feet appears to receive my touch, then another. How they all honour their own feet!' The repression, prohibition, exclusion and domination of Desai's women can be linked with the dynamics of the spirals of power and pleasure which reinforce one another as Michel Foucault has it.

In the novels of Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, women are not a goddess or an automaton, they move from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion, from weakness to strength. Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* (1971) sensitively presents a woman's irrational fears and intolerable tensions in Indian society when she dissolves a marriage 17 years old. A society that looks upon divorce as 'a disease that left pock mark's does not recognize a woman's apart from her husband's. The disintegration of Simrit's inner world is reflected in her frightening dream of a fall from the balustrade to the pavement below. While no one took any notice of a fall and the cars and people kept going by, she picks herself up in panic and is relieved to find she did not fall apart: "It is the inside that has gone to pieces, and I'll just have to go along very carefully from now on...." The pain, a leper-like thing, detached itself from her and walked beside her to the end of the pavement, the end of the road and beyond." She will have to pay a huge amount of tax on an income she can't even use. She cannot live alone either on the economic or on the emotional level. She sees her life with Som as no different from her present one: 'May be, she had always been an animal, only a nice, obedient domestic one, sitting on a cushion, doing as she was told. And in return she had been fed and sheltered.' Now she looks like a liberated woman, liberated from a marriage where there was neither companionship nor partnership. Yet it is not a liberation. She only steps out of the sheltered world of Som into the shadow of Raj. And Simrit who never accepted a world where men did things and women waited for them acquiesced into one who will take orders again. Simrit passes from one man's world into another man's and an artificial power structure looks like a natural one. The *status quo* is affirmed. Simrit submits to male superiority and male dominance and the Novel which began with a feminist text ended with an anti-feminist texture.' In olden times there was a husband and there was a wife', observes Una Stannard⁶ sarcastically, 'one who commanded and one who obeyed? They were two. Now they are one, the husband in whom the wife is totally merged and who, therefore, obeyed not because her husband was her ruler but because she was one with him.

In *Rich Like Us* (1985) Sahgal transcends the personal introverted world of *The Day in Shadow* underscoring the arbitrariness of the power distribution in gender roles. With a wife and a newly born infant back in India, Ram courts Rose in England and marries her. Ram for whom wives are things to be used and not discarded but kept aside for future needs discards Rose for Marcella. And 'in the utter stillness, the thin sobbing sound of pure grief no one was meant to hear froze Mona's tears in Rose's eyes. In this male world where men pass orders and women carry them out, when men create situations and women live them, the only hope of women is another woman-sisterhood. Mona and Rose become sisters. Mona looks to Rose for comfort and Rose to Sonali for solace. Sonali is the only woman who is free to live in her own way, free from subjugation and subordination but she too pays heavy price: She remains single all her life. On the other hand, Ravi 'had never fought a battle for freedom, never had a sari throttling his legs, making walking in the wind and running to catch a bus a threat to life and limb, never had his mother set up a howl when he went and got a haircut. He had no idea what the simplest subjugation were all about. I, who did, had no intention of chaining myself to any doctrine when I had just lost some of my claims'.

While Nayantara Sahgal deals with urban upper-class women, Sashi Deshpande delineates the middle class educated women to show what man had made of woman. Deshpande's women are anti-matriarchal. Saru in *'The Dark Holds No Terrors'*⁷ is discriminated against by her mother who values her son above her daughter. Saru looks forward as a role of a wife, but what does she find? Against her parent's wishes, she marries Manu, a boy from the lower caste, to secure the love lost in her parental home. But once she sets herself up as a doctor, she is cut off from her children and her husband. She fails as mother and wife. Manu's superior's male ego asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults upon Saru. 'I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. Maybe one day, I will be walled alive within it and die it a slow, painful death,' Saru sighs. She wants to leave the profession but Manu will not allow since it will tell upon the family purse. She wants to live with her father, but her father will not allow as it will tell upon his family prestige. Since hers was an arranged marriage, she is an unwelcome guest to her father who is an unwilling host.' there can never be forgiveness. Never any atonement. My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood.' This is not only the picture of Saru, this is the state of every Indian womanhood, the dumb driven cattle of the country. When Manu arrives, she begs her father not to open the door. But then she reflects: 'Can her father's home be hers? Is it all a fraud then? the eternal cry of....my husband, my wife my children, my parents? Are all human relations doomed to be a failure?' Saru realizes she is her own refuge: All right, so I am alone but so's everyone else. Human beings they are going to fail you. But because there is just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we are sunk'. With this realization, she asks her father to tell Manu to wait: 'I will be back as soon as I can'. She submits like Indu in *Roots and Shadows*⁸. When Nature threatens to go away, Indu says: 'Going? Why did I feel at once like a deserted, abandoned child? Why did it always have to be someone else for me?'

Jai Nimbkar in *Temporary Answers* presents her new woman in *Vineeta* who resents when Abhijit returns home on hearing, she was ill: 'I do not want to be a child, and I had encouraged him to treat me as one. Why else had he come back?' And when the novel closes, she tells him '.... give me a real chance to deal with my problems in my own way.'

Shobha De projects woman as a creative force that controls the dynamics of the society. Her Karuna revolts against the marginalization and trivialization of the wife by the husband in *Socialite Evenings* (1989) She opposes what Evelyn Tension calls three Ms: Marriage, Motherhood and monotony. She refuses to marry for the second time. In her first marriage, proved unsatisfactory and unsuccessful, what guarantee was there that her second husband would treat her well? She tells her mother: 'I like and respect Girish. We share a lot in common interests. But I'm not sure I'll make a good wife to him or he a good husband to me. Perhaps we both far too selfish for marriage. I can't make any sacrifices---not now.' She is not prepared to make any sacrifices so long she is able to stand on her own legs.

Kamala Markandaya's *Possession* (1963) Lady Caroline Bell not only deals with her problems in her own way, she solves Valmiki's problems in her own way. She lords over him. She becomes the oppressor and he the oppressed. The stereotyped sex-roles have been reversed. Caroline is the consequence of Markandaya's anti-sexist, anti-patriarchal rage. In her, Markandaya sees a domineering possessor, an active victimizer of

an adolescent male reminiscent of the enslavement of the Negroes by the Whites in the 18th and 19th centuries.

If Caroline possesses Valmiki by money and strength and Ellie and Annabel by their youthful charms, Anasuya does it by her kindness and sympathetic understanding. *Possession* is a woman's world where the male is manipulated, purchased, commanded, exploited and taken around as a pet. In inverting the sex roles, Markandaya thinks far in advance of her time and perhaps warns us the consequences of a female-dominated world. As it is said,

Yatra stri yatra kitavah yatra vale prasasitah

Rajan, nirmulatam yati tad geham Bhargavovravit

A House run by woman, a servant or a boy goes to ruin, so says Bhargava, O King!

Bhabani Bhattacharya's Kajoli in *So Many Hungers* save herself from dependence on her grandfather, her husband, from prostitution and sets herself up as a newspaper hawker. One can set up an order through defiance, through the myth of protest. In her *Letter to the Levellers* IN 1982, a woman wrote that in this Society the nearest any of us reach freedom, honesty and spontaneity with others is in bed with a lover on the street hurling beer cans at the police (Quoted by Lynne Segal, 1983). One is driven into a corner where there is no way but to hit back, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the land, to break up the 'truth' with laughter as Helen Cixous (1875) has it. This is how Nayantara Sahgal's women oppressed by marriage, by political circumstances, by accidents of history help themselves in the following works of Nayantara Sehgal: *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1962), *The Day in Shadow* (1971), *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) and *Rich Like Us* (1985).

In Raji Narasimhan's *Forever Free* (2009) the woman protagonist Shree hits back. In Uma Vasudev's novel *The Song of Anasuya: A Novel* (1978) Anasuya uses men and discards them as Sister Carrie in Dreiser's novel discards Charles Drouet and George Hurstwood in order to 'optimize the business of living.' Rama Mehta's alternative model is conformity. In *Inside the Haveli* (1977) a girl from Bombay, Geetha, is married to a Rajasthani family where the door is locked upon her, but she does not walk out like Ibsen's Nora (In fact, Ibsen has no alternative model. He makes Nora to walk out but does not tell us what happened then). With her tolerant good nature and patient understanding, she changes her father-in-law, her husband --- everyone; like Rukmini in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a sieve* (1954)

While Gloria Steinem suggests the fifth world for woman, Julie Kristevo allots a third space for feminism, the space which deconstructs all identity, all binary opposition. Relational feminists believe in a gender-based but egalitarian society. They believe in 'equality in difference' They do not tend to overlook the biological and cultural distinction between man and woman what Catherine Mackinnon calls 'difference, difference makes. In her book *Equality and Rights of Woman*, Elizabeth H Wolgast supports this bi-valent approach to feminism. If autonomy is purchased at the cost of womanliness, the *avant-garde* French feminists reject the goal, prizing *la difference*. Individualist feminists, on the other hand, emphasize the individual male or female as the basic unit of society.

II. CONCLUSION: -

Recent trends in feminist thought seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but no sexual dualism. It is pro-woman but not anti-man. Hence Evans Gardner prefers Socracism to Feminism.

Thus, feminist thought is humanist thought. To Virginia Woolf, feminism is the antonym to Fascism: 'Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman's rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not us.' (Three Guineas, New York: Harcourt, 1963) She proposes an outsider's society based on the women's ethic that is positivistic, holistic, anti-materialistic and life-affirming. Such an ethic must become the basis for a new public morality for the constitution of a 'left-handed' world.

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