

FEMINISM AND WOMEN WRITERS IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial women have been treated as a vulnerable section of society. It is indeed an irony to see that they have never enjoyed the kind of opportunities as enjoyed by males. The condition of women has been pathetic in our male-dominated society. As a result, they have to face more challenges in their lives. Gradually, women realized that as human beings, they should also enjoy equal rights and opportunities with men. Even in the field of literature, they were never taken seriously in the patriarchal social construction. They became victims of gender discrimination. This feeling gave rise to a movement called Feminism. It gathered momentum in the 1960s. The movement basically aimed at achieving equality with men in terms of opportunities, rights, and participation in all spheres of life. Increasing number of women writers started projecting the plight of women in their works. Women's liberation and emancipation became important. The pioneer writers of this area, who have produced commendable works and need to be mentioned are Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter. They openly discussed the plight and problems faced by women and diverted the attention towards woman as reader and woman as writer. The gender discrimination was openly discussed. The Indian woman writers were not far behind they also presented their perspectives regarding the pathetic condition of women under male hegemony. Today, the worth and works of women writers are being acknowledged and acclaimed worldwide. Their talent and potential are getting recognition everywhere in all spheres of life.

KEYWORDS: *Patriarchy, Gender Discrimination, Hegemony, Feminism, Liberation*

INTRODUCTION

As students of English literature, the important writers that we study are Aristotle, Chaucer, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, Arnold, Browning, G.B. Shaw, T.S. Eliot and so on. This clearly shows that male writers have always occupied a prominent position even in the field of literature and the absence of female writers become conspicuous. In our patriarchal society, the condition of women was vulnerable and pathetic. They have been treated as a marginalized section of society. It is indeed ironical to see that women with a lot of talent and potential were denied the opportunities that were the prerogative of only males. As a result, women always had to face more challenges to assert their position. They became conscious of their identity and demanded equality with males in almost all spheres of life. This feeling gradually strengthened and took the form of a movement known as Feminism. It became a popular movement in the 1960s.

Feminism, as a movement, basically aimed at women's emancipation and empowerment. It dealt with the projection and participation of females in literature and the gender difference. This movement was in many ways, literary

from the beginning. A large number of feminist writers exposed the marginalization and plight of women under male hegemony. Writers like Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, Susan Gubar, Helen Cixous, Julian Kristeva, Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, etc. challenged the injustice of gender-based social construction and brought a perceptible change in the general perception of women's position in society. The commendable contribution of the pioneers like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, J.S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, *The Origin of the Family* by Friedrich Engels, etc. needs to be mentioned here. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the early writers who said that gender roles were not natural but social as they were constructed by the society. The other important works that played a vital role in building the very foundation of this movement that gathered momentum in the 1960's were *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, *Sexual/Textual Politics* by Toril Moi.

Gradually, an increasing number of women writers started representing the section of society that has been marginalized on the basis of sexuality, language, caste, and religion in their writings. It has to be noted that as students of English literature, most of the writers prescribed in our syllabus or rather, we study are males like Aristotle, Chaucer, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Congreve, Pope, Fielding, Wordsworth, Keats, Arnold, Browning, Tagore, G.B. Shaw, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and so on. These writers projected women characters in their works but from their own perspectives. A long list of important women characters could be cited like Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, heroines of Shakespeare who were no doubt more than mere decorations, Belinda in *Rape of the Lock*, Richardson's *Pamela*, Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Isabel Archer in Henry James's *The Portrait of A Lady*, Candida in Shaw's *Candida*, etc. So woman characters were always important and occupied the prominent roles in the stories but from the male's point of view. And women still waited and wanted the society to understand their problems and plight. Gradually, women writers started projecting the lives of females in a comprehensive way in their works. In most of their stories, the women writers preferred to depict the everyday life of the ordinary woman negotiating her daily chores and challenges.

The women writers also faced many challenges in the male-dominated society. They did not have ready sentences for them to use. The feminist viewpoint was ignored in literary criticism due to the superiority of males. Masculine dominance did not allow any space for the perpetuation of women writers and their ideology. According to David Lodge, "Contemporary feminist criticism obviously derived its original impetus from the Women's Liberation of the late 1960s, Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) being pioneering books in this respect" (330). He further says, "the initial effort of feminist critics was to revise orthodox 'male' literary history, exposing sexual stereotyping in canonical texts and reinterpreting or reviving the work of women writers" (330). Feminist criticism is widely different from male-centric criticism as it is concerned with various aspects and issues of females. Peter Barry says, "in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mindset' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality" (117). More attention was given to construct new canons of women writing in which even the neglected women writers got due prominence.

Feminism was basically a belief that aimed at achieving equal rights and opportunities between men and women whereas, feminist criticism aims at interpreting women's text and discussing their experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature. Here, the two important points that needed to be pondered over were 'woman as the writer' and 'woman as

reader'. The feminine note in fiction, the women's perspective gradually found an expression in the works of women writers like Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, etc. Virginia Woolf belongs to that category of the writers who explored the outlook and nature of the woman and registered their suppression and experiences in their works. Various feminist critics have analyzed her novels extensively from very different perspectives. *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *Three Guineas* (1929) are the works that are her major contributions to feminist theory. Woolf is principally concerned with the problems and material disadvantages of women as compared to men. Her first text focuses on the social and historical context of women's literary productions while her second work discusses between male power and professions like law, education, medicine, etc. In *A Room of One's Own*, she also presents the notion that while women are indeed the victims of men, they also collude in their own professional and domestic victimization by acting as a mere 'looking glass'. As Harry Blamires puts it that in this novel, she "tussled with some of the problems specific to the woman writer. She insisted that the lack of a 'room of one's own' and the kind of financial and social independence it represented put a brake on women's ambition in literature"(374). *Three Guineas* is another important work that analyses militarism, fascism, and legal injustice as they are all the product of patriarchy, in particular, due to the early sexual division within the family. Woolf's general contribution to feminism is her recognition that gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed. She very well understood and examined the problems and challenges continuously faced by women writers. She believed that women had always faced social and economic obstacles in their destination of literary aspirations.

French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir's work meticulously distinguishes between sex and gender and sees an interaction between social and natural functions but without any notion of biological determinism. Beauvoir has been a very influential writer. Her views regarding the inferior position of women in our patriarchal society were radical. She held the opinion that biologically, women are unequal to men, but this sexual difference that is unalterable and really should not be made a ground for women's injustice and inequality. She argued that woman is constructed as such by the society as she puts it in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman;... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature ... Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as in Other"(267). She always emphasized the importance of the woman as an individual. She says, "For women, it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings". She never favoured any kind of feminism that only advocated women's femininity because that would underestimate the potential of woman as an individual. She laments the fact that throughout the past woman has been denied the human right to participate in the process of creation and invention, rather it has only been the prerogative of only a male. Unfortunately, a woman has been made an object by the male

Another significant development in the field of feminist criticism took place due to the contribution of Elaine Showalter. In her work *A Literature of Their Own: British Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1970), she discusses the diversion of attention from 'woman as reader' to 'woman as the writer'. The term 'gynocriticism' has been coined by Showalter. It suggests the study of the text by women writers. Further, she also describes how the three different stages of feminine, feminist and female have been represented by the women writers of the West. In the feminine phase that extended from 1840 to 1880, the women writers tried to adopt the artistic standards and norms already established by the dominant male writers. In the proceeding feminist phase that extended from 1880 to 1920, the women writers strongly asserted themselves and protested against the injustice done to them in the patriarchal social construction. In the last phase,

i.e. the female phase extending from 1920 onwards, the women writers voiced themselves up and discussed and projected their own experiences and opinions in their works. Indeed it was a kind of search for their own identity.

The next landmark work of Showalter was her article, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*. In this article, she has successfully made an attempt to study the different aspects of feminist criticism and has also dealt with various problems and obstacles faced by it in the male-dominated society. She has also discussed here that the gynocritics use four different models to study the feminist criticism based on the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural difference. A woman's physical or biological difference from a man makes her feel, think and experience differently. This, at times, put restraints in her creative writing and she becomes more conscious while writing. The next model of gynocritics is based on women's writing and women's language. Women critics and writers feel offended with the language system constructed by males. They feel uneasy and uncomfortable when they are bound to speak or write in the male-dominated or masculine language system. They had to put their efforts in constructing a language system where they could be comfortable. Women writers had to develop and cultivate linguistic and stylistic devices that spontaneously expressed feminine sensibility and individuality. This kind of feminist language would surely impart them an identity and a remarkable status in the field of literature. Women's psyche also plays a vital role in women's writing. A woman's writing is affected and influenced by her troubled or tormented identity, her sense of loneliness as an artist, her feeling of alienation from male writers and critics, her need for the female audience, her apprehensions about the reactions and feedback of male readers and audience and so on. Sigmund Freud has said in his essay, *The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming* that the unfulfilled desires and dreams mainly form the plots of women's fiction. The last point is that it becomes necessary to analyze the writings of women in the light of the cultural context. There is obviously no denying the fact that the cultural experience of a woman is different from the cultural experience of a man in the patriarchal society. Culture determines the style and nature of women's writing. It is also responsible for developing and influencing the perception and perspective of a woman writer.

The history of Indian women novelists in English begins with Toru Dutt who unfortunately died at an early age of twenty-one. Her novels deal with the autobiographical projections of the novelist – the sweet and sour experience that she gathered in her short span of life. Initially, when she decided to get her poems published, she faced many difficulties in the patriarchal society. But later on her works were universally praised and appreciated and she became an established poetess in the field of Anglo- Indian poetry. Even after the western influences, she was fascinated by the Hindu myths and legends. A genuine Indian note was perceptible in her works like *Lotus*, *Savitri*, *Lakshman*, etc. She has praised the ideal of Indian womanhood in *Savitri*. Her first book that was published, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* consists of translations from French poets. *The Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* is her other popular work.

Like Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) who started writing after her death, was also an eminent poet and was among a handful of Indian poets who wrote in English with distinction. She was lovingly known as the "Nightingale of India". She was the first female governor of an Indian state and the first woman president of the Indian National Congress. Her first work, *The Golden Threshold* was published in 1905. It received favorable critical comments in the West. She mainly drew her images from the Indian mythology and folklore. A realist in her approach, she celebrated the life of reality with its sorrows and sufferings. She accepted life with all its drawbacks and limitations. She has captured the very spirit of India in her works. Her major themes were drawn from Indianness, nature, life, and death, love, spring, etc.

Another prominent woman writer came to limelight after her novel, *The God of Small Things* received the prestigious Booker Prize for literature. The story of the novel revolves around the village, Ayemenem in Kerala where the writer had spent her early childhood days with her mother, Mary Roy who was divorced by her husband. Mary Roy had to face many challenges, trials, and tribulations in her life. As the Ayemenem House was completely a patriarchal set up where all males were hardcore conservatives so, the condition of the women folk in the house was pathetic. All this is vividly projected through the character of Ammu in the novel *The God of Small Things* who represents Mary Roy, the mother of the writer. The novel is autobiographical where the writer has beautifully presented how the central character, Ammu has to bear the brunt of patriarchal persecution.

These novelists are particularly exploring the concept of the strong woman who acknowledges her feminism and chooses to live by it. A few of the modern women writers in English contributing in this area are Namita Gokhale, writer of *Things to Leave Behind* (2016), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who wrote *Palace of Illusions* in 2008. Divakaruni presents beautifully and meticulously the plight of women protagonist in her novels. Kamala Markandaya's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, made her a lovable writer of great fiction in both, theme and technique, matter and manner. The novels of Ruth Praver Jhabvala ring the note of two things in her novels – urban middle-class Indian life tinged with domestic problems of an average joint Hindu family and an ironic study of the confrontation between occidental and accidental attitudes. *Heat and Dust* is her important novel that won the prestigious Booker prize in 1975. Nayantara Sahgal is a novelist of politics. Anita Desai dwells more on the protagonist's mental state and brings out the hidden depths of the human psyche to the surface. The important novels to her credit are *Cry, the Peacock, the Voices in City*, etc. Manju Kapoor, the author of *Difficult Daughters*, succeeded in winning the famous Commonwealth writer's prize for the Eurasia region. Gita Hariharan, a modern woman novelist strongly believes in the theory of woman's liberation from the bondage of male domination.

Thus, this brief survey of women writers in English clearly shows that women have made their permanent mark in the field of English literature. Today, they are being conferred not only with national but international awards. They have proved their worth and their works are now being praised and appreciated on the global platform. In most of their works, the women writers have tried their best to free the female mentality from the age-old domination of males. If this endless effort on the part of women for the sake of women go on, the days are not far when they will be equated with men in all respects and in each and every field of life. So the thing that is required today in our society, for its betterment, is a reciprocal and friendly relation between both the sexes in the true sense.

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