

## BREAKING THE SILENCE: A STUDY OF FEMINIST VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

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### Abstract

Indian contemporary literature has emerged as an effective means for protesting patriarchy, voicing feminist issues, and elevating the voices of women's hardships and ambitions. Indian contemporary fiction features a wide variety of female heroines that challenge social norms, overcome obstacles in their personal and professional lives and exercise their agency. These strong female protagonists that defy expectations, defend their rights, break the taboos and pursue independence are portrayed in these tales. In addition to reflecting India's shifting gender dynamics, these stories stimulate conversations about women's portrayal, identity, and rights. With a focus on themes of gender inequity, self-discovery, empowerment, and resistance, this study examines how contemporary Indian writers portray the experiences of women. In this study, the changing roles of women in Indian society are examined through the works of authors such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Indian Fiction, Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Representation, Social Change

### Introduction

Gloria Steinem has aptly remarked that a feminist is anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men. Feminism, a significant movement in the contemporary world, addresses the place, status, and identity of women, which are key concerns in India as well. Women's roles in life have long been rigidly divided into three categories: mother, wife, and daughter. She had no distinct identity as a human being in any of these tasks, and she was required to follow set norms. Similar to women worldwide, Indian women are speaking out for their freedom and seeking to end the unfair limitations placed upon them as well as the increasing discrimination against them. She wants to be seen as a complete human being rather than just a male relative's helper. Over time, feminism in Indian literature has changed from depicting women in a passive manner to highlighting their perseverance and strength. Traditional Indian literature frequently depicted women as obedient and limited to household duties. Modern Indian fiction, on the other hand, features strong, self-reliant female characters who challenge patriarchal systems and pursue their own identities. The purpose of this essay is to examine how contemporary Indian fiction depicts feminist issues, how women are now portrayed in literature and how both male and female writers use their writing to promote feminist ideas.

### Feminism Then and Now

In literature 'feminism' refers to a mode that is concerned with the nature of female experience. Feminism has its origin in the history of women's oppression across the world. In so called developed countries, women are ridiculously tyrannized. They enjoy a secondary

place regarding cultural, religious and social life. However in India, woman has a place of honour. She is considered as Shakti, mother. If we study the history and legends of the past, we will know the reality that in olden times this subordination was never favoured. Initially women were enjoying a high status in the society. There were twenty Brahmavadinis who composed the hymns of Rigveda. There were many women scholars such as Gargi, Gosha, Godha, Vishwavara, Apala, Maitreyi and Lilavati. Even in the cultural history of India there are many instances of women who were held high as Laxmi, Devi, and Shakti. The anthropological studies and archaeological surveys brought to us a number of striking facts. Even in the West, women enjoyed a much advanced status during the ancient times where matriarchy was the rule. This is only one side of the coin which is glorious, but the other side is the worst. The woman who is considered as 'Mata' is being continuously exploited by man. She is only a puppet in the hands of man. In the medieval age women were the worst sufferers at the hands of men and were confined to hearth and home. Her only work was to nurture the children. As far as the culture and religion are concerned they are awarded an inferior place. In India 'mother' is regarded as divine and is compared with God, the beginning of all beginnings. Mother, from the very beginning of the creation, has been worshipped for selfless love, devotion and care who nurtures not only her children but the whole society.

The Indian society is convention bound where women live to marry, bear children, and look after the family. Till marriage she has to be pure, has to secure her virginity and after marriage she has to try to become a good wife and good mother. In the great Indian epic Ramayana, Sita had to face the entire audience who suspected her purity, after conquering Lanka when Rama returned to Ayodhya. However, we cannot deny the fact that her identity is seen in relation to her husband, Rama. She is repeatedly glorified as 'Mata Sita', as a wife she becomes a puppet in the hands of her husband. The different religions also give emphasis on the secondary position of women. The Koran, for example, emphasizes the superiority of men over women. Even Judaism could not give equal status to women. Thus we find the difference between woman's idealistic concept and her situation in reality. The young and beautiful girls had to become instruments to satisfy the carnal lusts of the male. The responsible factor for her seduction is perhaps her physical weakness. Many Indian girls had become the victim of Muslim invaders who supported 'Purdah' and polygamy.

Hindu culture never supported 'Purdah' but they would have more than one wife. For instance in Ramayana King Dashrath had three wives. With the polygamy, there was another evil tradition i.e. barbaric Sati system prevalent in India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy revolted against Sati system and tried to stop this evil system. The condition of women was very miserable which they themselves were not aware of for a long time. But they began to show some signs of awakening due to Indian Renaissance, the new education, political struggles and the ever-increasing Western impact. The leaders encouraged their forward march which was mild and tempered. The most important leaders of India had complete faith in the equality of men and women and tried hard to improve their condition and destiny.

After Indian independence, the constitution willingly granted them all the rights at par with men. However, times have changed and now intellect counts for more than physical strength in the modern society. If we adopt an inclusive view of feminism, then every person who recognizes the subordination of women and aims to overcome it is a feminist whether man or woman. Feminism is an important movement in the modern world which raises the major issues regarding woman's place, position and especially the question of her identity. In India, a woman has been playing the important roles of daughter, wife and mother in life since ages. She had been assigned certain norms and had no separate identity as a human being. In all these roles she had to stick to certain rules assigned by men.

### **Indian Writers of 1990s and Feminism: Evolution of Feminist Voices in Indian Fiction**

The nineteen nineties has been a most significant decade for the Indian novel written in English which brought about significant changes in literary discourses. The novels of this time were universally acclaimed and were given prestigious national and international awards. It clearly shows our steady march towards the globalization of the Indian Writing in English.

The values of life are now changing in respect of education and material prosperity. The Indian woman begins to protest herself against the unjust restrictions imposed on her and is capable of expressing her desires. She has sought the right of a human being. Rabindranath Tagore, B. Chatterjee, Prem Chand and Sharad Chandra are all feminist writers who through their novels tried to highlight the problems and plight of Indian women.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Streepatras* is considered as the first feminist work in India. In feminist literature women's experience become the central concern. The critics made the analysis of male and female language which shows some differences that naturally exist between these two. Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal and Shashi Deshpande are feminists. These Indian Women Writers have frequently raised their voice against social and social inequality that obliged women's freedom and executed institutional isolation of women. Let's discuss these writers one by one.

R. K. Narayan, one of the most eminent writers in India, highlighted that every modern girl of society goes through the same sufferings and plight. They wish to have some status and complete freedom in their life after marriage. But Narayan never underestimated the strength of a woman. He sees immense potential in her and considers her as an incarnation of "Shakti." He, in his novels, registers the silent anger of women who thinks that their life is futile and meaningless.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, another famous writer, presents the Indian woman as pure. Her purity is combined with vitality. However, it is unfortunate that she is merely the object of universal victimization. In his famous novel *Music for Mohini*, an attractive, modern and bubbly girl Mohini who is born and brought up in a modern Bengali family is shown as the victim of the taboos of village life after her marriage with Jayadev by the Big House. His other novels like - *He Who Rides a Tiger* and *A Goddess Named Gold* also describe the tyranny of the male dominated conservative society against cultured women.

Anita Desai, in her novels, emphasizes on the difference between the upbringing of men and the upbringing of women. The leading characters of her novel are not brought up in a healthy way being either pampered or utterly neglected. In her novels, Mothers do not enjoy the status traditionally extended to them as their natural right, and they, almost invariably, fail their children. Their case is worse than their children and they require help from their children. In such conditions, women naturally turn to their husbands and families to seek their identity. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya, the protagonist craves for identity, sympathy and understanding endeavouring in her own way to make Gautam, her husband, see her needs and to respond to it. The husband, on his part, is totally blind to her emotional problems and blames her for abortion that takes place. It ends in disaster and after to know that she is to be taken to mental asylum. Monish in *Voices in the City* cannot adjust herself to the mechanical life of the city Calcutta, and suffocating the household of her husband Jiban commits suicide in the end.

Kamala Markandaya, in her novels, illustrates the endurance of the Indian woman to any injustice to serve her husband or family. Rukmani, in *Nectar in a Sieve*, takes the infidelity of Nathan in her stride. The feminists of the West may have different opinions about it but Rukmani finds expression of her personality only by losing it in service. In *A Handful of Rice* the hero, Ravi, suffers because of adverse circumstances loses his idealism and falls into bad habits. The unhappy aspect of this case is the underserved suffering it entails on his wife, Nalini. She feels that self-assertion under such circumstance is meaningless and obeys her husband meekly like a domestic animal. Markandaya's *Golden Honeycomb* also deals with the problem of female psyche and the preservation of female identity.

In Shashi Deshpande's and Nayantara Sahgal's novels, we find the questioning note and the challenging note and who are more assertive about women's identity and freedom. Sarita, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande, decides to marry a man of her choice, and succeeds in doing so. As a girl, Sarita resents everyone pointing out that she is a girl and she should be submissive to get married easily. She works to become an independent personality, so that she may not be dominated by others. In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande defines an ideal woman as a woman who sheds her 'I' and loses her identity in her husband's.

Like Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal is also concerned with the sufferings of women in a patriarchal society in which men enjoy every privilege while women have to be content only with a few. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Inder blames his wife Saroj for her past sexual relationship with her fellow classmate. At the same time he forgets that he hankers about women like Mara even when he is a married man. Sahgal pounces through Saroj that her premarital sexual relationship has nothing to do with her chastity or impurity as after her marriage she leads a decent and disciplined life.

The women characters of Shobha De have all the liberty to make their own choices and are the ace of their own lives. These new women are not at all frail or delicate like traditional women. Her women characters are free, ambitious, confident and emphatic who

belong to the rich and advanced society of Mumbai. In *Sisters*, the heroine Mallika Hiralal takes the charge of Hiralal Industries undeniably after father's devastation and maintains the business on her own terms. She does not pay head to the advice of her counselor, not even of Ramankaka who was very close to her dad and offers her his assistance with the administration of her business but she forgets his offer. Afterwards Mallika ties a knot with Binny Malhotra to save her dad's upcoming business.

Mrs. Manju Kapur has highlighted the unjust treatment given to women in her novels. Her primary concern is the status of a married woman in the present scenario. She is one of those novelists who express the denial of freedom and right to women in the conventional male-dominated society where women are restricted and suppressed that eventually results in the physical torture and mental crisis. She depicted the plight of sensitive women characters who find it very difficult to adjust themselves in the present contemporary circumstances through her novels. Her women characters are the victims of the traditional modes of existence and lack their personal identity. They try to protest but their protest turns into frustration as they are brought up in such way that they become passive, meek and obedient.

### Conclusion

After the close and thorough study of Feminism and the feminist writers, we can say that feminism is a battle of women for equality. This study uncovers the development of Indian Feminism and its advancement. Indian Writers in English have not only raised the issues of Indian women in general and but also have demonstrated their place in the universal literature. The Indian women novelists have sincerely and insightfully dealt with the women question but unfortunately, they are marginalized in most of the literature on feminism. Women all over the world are molded by social conventions that vary from country to country. Even while there is still work to be done, literature is nevertheless a potent means of speaking out against gender inequality.

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