

FEMINITY A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

A Feminine sensibility in Indian Women Novelist

(Abstract)

In India since woman is considered to be an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humanity, faith and knowledge. She should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful and devoted to her husband and his family. But the young women of today are becoming aware of biased attitude of the society. Even in West the woman education had to be utilitarian and marriage entailed a state of obedience and dependence.

The present paper studies now some of the contemporary Indian women writer's like Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Sashi Deshpande who express their feministic articulation bringing to the fore an extremely pertinent question of women's equality with their male counterpart. This paper also attempts some of the Western writers like Dorris Lessing, Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison who have used and interpreted different shades of feminism.

Key Words: women as embodiment of sacrifice, value,culture, tradition,women oppression, gender discrimination, eastern western women novelist

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There are two crucial issues that people are concerned about the liberation of women and men from rigid and limiting sex rules. One is whether there is any basis to the claim that there are biologically derived, psychological characteristic which universally differentiate men from women. The other is to understand why is it that in almost every society, women are physically, politically and economically dominated by men and are thought to be inferior to men.

Mead Claims that:

“From the time of birth, girls can begin to take on feminine identity through identification with their mother while for little boys; masculine identification comes through a process of differentiation. The boys earliest experience of self is one in which he is forced in the relationship to his mother, to realize himself as different as a creature unlike the mother. Female destiny is ordained and respective, men can choose their destiny.”(Mead:2001:87)

What Mead means to say is that the young boy looks toward an open future, he can be a sea man or an engineer, and he can stay on the farms or see the worlds with his own perspective. But young girl will be a wife, grandmother, she will keep house just as her mother did, she will give her children the same care, she herself received when she was young.

“Woman is made not born.”(Beauvoir:1968:278) In this patriarchal society a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents than is given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent personality. The decision of her career and her marriage is taken by her father, brother or mother. For her whole life she

remains some one's daughter, some one's wife or some one's mother. Her own identity does not have any existence. This kind of patriarchal practice will reduce women's status to inferior social beings. A woman holds a secondary position of social hierarchy even in the west. In India since woman is considered to be an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humanity, faith and knowledge. She should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful and devoted to her husband and his family. But the young women of today are becoming aware of biased attitude of the society. Even in West the woman education had to be utilitarian and marriage entailed a state of obedience and dependence. The position of women in any given society can be taken as a mark of the progress civilization or to use the words of Juliet Mitchell as the "Index of human advance." (Mitchell: 1973:33) In the fictional works of black woman writers of America also we come across similar yet often singularly intense renditions of the condition of black women in their roles as daughter, wife and mother.

Feminists are concerned with all kind of oppression against woman which they trace in patriarchy and they insist on acceptance of women as equal beings. Some feminists stress the social and economic disadvantages of women and seek to change and improve women's immediate circumstances and demand, for instance equal pay, equal education and job opportunities and also financial and legal independence for women. Others seek to abolish the moral and spiritual superiority of one sex over the other. These feminists fight to end the subjection of women and to eradicate the existing gender discrimination.

I want to speak in my voice

I want to speak in my real voice. (Rochester: *Beast in View*: 1944)

Feminist Literature highlights the basic difference between a boy and a girl or a man and a woman in the changed context of contemporary life. So, one of the major issue in spite of the variation in minute details recurrently dealt with by feminist writers is identity crisis.

There is lot of deification of women in the writings of India, Swami Vivekananda assigns a worshipful status to women. "Now the ideal woman in India is the mother first and the mother last." Anand Coomaraswamy Swami states: "One must consider also the representation of 'Divinity Symbolized' as feminine in Hindu and Buddhist Art, there are forms ranging from the dread image of Kali, destroyer of time, to the compassionate tender forms of "Uma and Para" One could see there is a lot of adulation and glorification of women in the myths of India. Ancient India produced philologists and grammarians like Gargi and Maitreyi. There is even a myth of creation which posits woman (Saraswati) as the creation. There are female deities who represent power (shakti), knowledge (Saraswati) Wealth(Lakshmi). But this aspect seems to have faded out in a mythological haze, for women are totally eclipsed by their constant subservient role. Now the question lies who is responsible for the oppressive and secondary situation in society not only in India but also in western countries feminism today is not just the forte of the west, but it has found its way in to literature of other countries too.

Feminism in Indian Literature, particularly in Indian English writing is a by-product of the Western feminist movement.

The present paper studies now some of the contemporary Indian women writer's like Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Sashi Deshpande express their feministic articulation bringing to the fore an extremely pertinent question of women's equality with their male counterpart. This paper also attempts some of the Western writers like Dorris Lessing, V. Woolf and Toni Morrison who have used and interpreted different shades of feminism. The core idea is that women should have same right, power and opportunity that men have. For achieving this equality Women are stepping out of the rigid roles assigned to them traditionally. They have realized the evils originating from patriarchal system of society. They are not ready to accept the Tennysonian separation of roles:

Men for the field and Women for the hearth
Man for sword and for the needle she
(The Princess, V 427)

This new ideology is reflected not only in the various political, economic and social movement but also in the literature that has been written during the last couple of decades.

The quintessential in a woman is her motherhood; this kind of essence has been capsulated in the novels of Virginia Woolf and Kamala Markandaya. They expose the inherent woes of womanhood in their distinct style and techniques. We also find dutiful wives, to have not been imparted formal education in the novels of Virginia Woolf. Women is exploited by men as though it was their birth right. Virginia Woolf and Kamala Markandaya have evocatively delineated women simultaneously from the plan of orthodoxy to the changing Modern trends in contemporary society.

Markandaya's 'Nectar in a Sieve' is a novel based in a Tamil Nadu. The peaceful lives of the peasants are disrupted by their installations of a tyranny. Rukhmani the female protagonist has been a source of perennial love and succor to their family. Women are the natural sufferer from the dark and uncertain future, the unfathomable depths of existence and the terrors of death. An Indian Woman is endowed culturally with certain traits which are invincible. Her goals and desires are vindicated by her strong family ties. Similar, sentiments have been expressed in Western Culture too, in the novels of Virginia Woolf.

Subjugation of Woman is a compulsory topic of women writer. Both Markandaya and Woolf have dwelt on this aspect. Virginia Woolf in her novel 'A Room of One's Own' illustrates that it is a woman who is expected to put aside her individuality in a marriage. She quotes :

"For the better part of history, Women were locked up and beaten, stave of anybody whose ring was forced upon her finger."(Woolf:penguin:99)

Anxiety, shame and buried confusion, as she cites is caused by our male dominated society , it very difficult for women to feel assured about discussing their own special experience. We have evidence, that this ambivalence is found in both eastern western cultures from the novels of two authors.

Rukmani in Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve" is a women born to shoulder the plough and reap the harvest. Her daughter was evicted from her husband's home and had to resort the prostitution to utilize her already emancipated body to survive. It is only due to man's in capacity to provide that a women stoops to prostitution. Rukmani's husband infidelity was a transmuted event which did not uproot her but strengthened her to with stand this emotional upheaval with greater course like mother earth, a woman is primal source of fruition. When Rukmani and her family are evicted from their home in which they have lived for thirty long years, their sorrow is intense. Her emotions are woven with the very walls of the hut and the mud of the field. Once again she buries the agonizing upheavals in her being and migrates to her son's home. Her already disturbed mind now struggles with another storm brewing in her heart, for her son had deserted his family. Symbolically they become stone breaker for their living. Finally the axe falls on Nathan and Rukmani is tragically widowed a crucial move made by the author to bring about a complete denudation of Rukmnai's life. The author has focused on the major trials of a woman like bread-winning through hard physical labor or even prostitution to stave away starvation. H.M. Williams aptly observes that Markandaya had particularly analyzed women character and suggested the un-usual poignancy of their fate. Rukmani is an embodiment of mother hood who can be compared to her western counter parts in the novels of Virginia Woolf.

In Nayantara Sahgal and Dorris Lessing's novel we find the struggle is for abolishing gender discrimination and seeking reciprocity, mutuality and harmony in life. They do not propagate a separate 'Female World' but envision an organized whole world blending female virtue, morality and valve with male

culture so as to survive from catastrophe and doom. In both Sahgal and Lessing there is a very sensitive depiction of the way women suffer due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society which gives a subordinate position to women and always treats them as second-rate citizens. The subordination of women begins even before their marriage. When she is groomed by her parents and ironically more often by mothers who are orthodox in their thinking to grow into unattractive commodity that can have many uses for her husband in future. All the stress is laid on making her specifically feminine and an attempt is made to curb her independent spirits. While some girls bow to this conditioning like Nita in Nayantara Sahgal's novel 'This time of morning' Some girls openly revolt against the kind of conditioning and take their own decisions over the issue of job and marriage. These novels uphold the feminist assertion that femininity is a cultural not biological construct.

Sahgal in her novel "This time of Morning" explores the place of women in Indian Society before marriage. Nita is the young beautiful daughter of Dr. Narang who is a queer blend of Eastern and Western culture. Daughter Western life style is part of his culture but when it came to his daughter, he would act in the most traditional manner, imposing severe restrictions on the movements of his ambitious daughter. The Narang's never send their daughter unescorted to parties. Nita's parents would not allow their daughter to smoke, to have drinks or attend club dances till she is married. When Rakesh escorts her to a ball on evening, enroute she questions these conventions.

"I would like a cigarettes," Said Nita, "You can't have one... said Rakesh. " Well, I keep cigarettes in my room" Daddy doesn't know. Isn't it silly not being allowed to do anything until one is married."(Sahgal:1999:102) Marriage seems to be a license to do things. Mrs. Narang who speaks fluent English has friends who would gather around the card table and discuss marriage plans of their daughter. Nita abhors this as "Victor low Culture" and only pines for a "little latitude, some breathing space," Betty Friedan in her book "The Feminine Mystique" has suggested that a woman can find fulfillment only in some creative work of her own. Nita too has a thirst to do something and does not want to be bound by nuptial knots as yet. She requests Rakesh to influence her parents in the matter so that she may be allowed to do job. She says "It's ghostly doing nothing" (P.32) Later her parents do allow her to take up job but for very different reason. A Minister had offered the job and they simply "didn't have the heart to refuse", a Minister's offer. But Nita looks for something more than merely a job. She strives for independent and her individual identity. Betty Friedan accuses society of considering "identity crisis" as man's problem only. "The crisis of growing up, of choosing his identity, the decision as to what one is and is going to be." Are considered only men prerogatives and women are told that "feminine women do not want careers, Higher education, political rights, the independence and the opportunities."(Friedan:2001:199) Nita's parent also want to settle down their daughter and force her to marry the man of their choice whom she neither loves nor admires. Nita feels utterly unhappy and a sense of uneasiness over powers her when she beams about her parent's decision to marry her off to a stronger partner. But the desire to be her own self leads her to commit a faux-pa, when she gets involved with one elderly man Kalyan.

Nita's pre-marital involvement is not the result of the Western liberated life style, it is an attempt to fulfill her inner desires for love and communication. With Kalyan sex comes naturally to her not because he loves her but because she has unconsciously allowed herself to love and admire him. And turn to him in her desperation at being hedged in by conventions. Sahgal strongly condemns this social convention and names this kind of marriage 'Just organized rape', she is like an "avant-garde" feminist who rejects the institutions of marriage and mother hood, she also condemns the hypocrisies of the affluent upper classes where women are encouraged to take drinks or to make in the name of freedom and modernity, but are not allowed to take independent decision in choosing their life partners.

Being born a boy is itself a privilege. Investment in the upbringing of a girl is relatively less, the major goal for her being marriage, she is looked down upon as transitory member of the family to name to future generations and is therefore more carefully and lovingly brought up and given more advantages, this is true not only of Indian Society but also of the white society in British Colonies like Rhodesia where similar

attitude prevails. Dorris Lessing in her novel "Martha Quest" shows how gender discrimination is practiced in her family while her younger brother with 'half her brains' was put in an expensive school, like a visitor from a more prosperous world." She was studying in a local school. This kind of based attitude makes herself reliant, defiant towards her parents and tries to search her own identity.

Mrs. Quest, like all mothers wants her daughter to maintain her dignity as she thinks, "a man will never marry a girl he does not respect."

In the west too traditional women bring up their daughter keeping in views the likes and dislike of men. Despite several restrictions, Martha finally rebels against her parents. Maria one day standing before the mirror, she took a pair of scissors and shrivel the bodice from the shirt of her dress. She was trying to make the folds when the door suddenly opened and her father come in. Looking at Maria he remarked "Your mother won't like your cutting her dresses to pieces" She said defiantly. "Daddy, why should I wear dresses like a kid of ten? And when mother enters the scene she argues, "I am sixteen" said Maria, between set teeth in a stifled voice.(Lessing:2001:145) Maria later puts all her efforts to take up a job without letting her parents know about it. This she does for financial independence so that she may get security and liberation. Maria is bold and defiant. She unlike Nita decides to marry a man of her own choice; she chooses a civil servant and informs her parents about the marriage ten days before the ceremony.

The two novels reveal that traditional mother whether in England or in India who want their daughter to be a "good girl" and "properly married". Lessing and Sahgal have portrayed mothers as authority figures stifling the daughter in the name of confirming to traditional values.

Thus it is evident from the novel of various Indo Anglican writers that Indian Society is torn between two extremes, on one hand he glorifies and idealizes Indian Women on the other hand he is compelled to broad over her pitiable condition. The novels under study are not free from paradoxes are inherent in the Indian social situation itself. The large numbers of novelist have concentrated on the experience and exploration of cultural clashes when East and West meet. The theme of East West cultural clash glorifies Indian Women to the point of saintliness as through her the writer speaks of Indian values. She is drawn in sharp contrast with everything that is modern because in India, modernity is often associated with westernization. Thus, whether it is Savitri of the "The serpent and the Rope" or Premala of "Some Inner Fury" or Kamala of the 'Dark Dancer' or Nalima of "Too long with West" drive hard to project the best of their culture to manifest India's timeless traditional values. Despite radical changes, the status of women, more than that of man, is bound up with the traditional wife and mother role. We find that services, sacrifices, sub massiveness and tolerance are the qualities which come to them naturally excessive endurance, and test of adjustments she makes is endless. Faithfulness and obedience perfects her, Indian Women Writers, like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal have broken new grounds. In their novel, woman is not a mere goddess or a lifeless engine of propaganda. They pass through a process of transformation which signifies for them a change from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self assertion and from weakness to strength. The need for self discovery and self understanding is emphasized. The gravity is shifting and the mythological haze will be removed to bring in bright sunshine. After going through the novels of Nayantara Sahgal, Dorris Lessing, Kamala and Anita Desai we come to the conclusion that all these women novelists envision a world which should be based on quality sharing and harmony between the two sexes, where the needs, the functions, the virtues of women are valued equally along with those of men. Their version, thus is identical with that of the feminists in the eighties like Marilyn French, Dale Spender, Lynne Sehgal who ask for a world built on equality of sexes, where male and female, masculine and feminine are valued equally and act as complementary to each other. A world built on sharing and harmony.

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