



Towards Feminist Convergence: Emergence and Evolution of Indian Women Writing in English

Dr. Azmin Chulliyil
Independent Researcher

ABSTRACT

Indian women narratives in English and their bold expressions and confessions have marked an indomitable space in the fictional map of India. It can be indisputably stated that the various feminist movements and revolutions that had happened pan India had a fair share in the magical and raw writings of women authors in the country. The bouyant activities of the movements had an undeniable impact upon the literary prowess of the Indian women writers. The changing patterns and subjects in Indian narratives and the kinds of expressions Indian authors resorted to articulate call for attention the reflections on enterprises of Indian feminist movements. This paper traces the key moments in the emergence and growth of women's movement in India and the evolution of Indian Writing in English in general and Indian Women Writing in English in particular.

Keywords: Feminism, Movements, Literature, Expressions, Indian writing in English

INTRODUCTION

Indian feminists, like French feminists, have recognised and acknowledged their differences from the rest of the feminists across the globe. The nineteenth century India attended to issues related to women's upliftment. Grave matters related to different social practices like dowry, child marriage, purdah, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc., were the prime concerns for a minor group of activists. The question of women's suffrage was raised even during 1917. By thirties, women's organisations at the national level demanded equal rights. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) reconstituted itself into a national body and established branches all over India. AIWC took the initiative to influence government policy on many issues like the problems related to women workers, rural construction, national education, social service, women's health and employment, untouchability and literacy, etc. By the late forties, the AIWC became inactive. But its liberal ideologies dominated the women's writing of the post independent period. By the fifties and sixties, writers seemed to forget the rigours of colonialism. Feminism in India sprang up from the 1970s onwards. The disillusionment, because of the extremes of emergency and an extensive need for education and equal employment opportunities for women, impelled the rise of feminism in India. Indian feminists were very responsive to and influenced by western feminisms. Women's issues were not adequately addressed as the country was facing severe setbacks under the colonial regime. Hence, many issues related to women were tackled internally, or they were considered as internal issues. The mainstream left wing parties never heeded to women's issues. The period was a peak time of people's movement. The city of Bombay was an epicentre for many upheavals. Though there were many trade unions and left wing parties functioning actively, it turned a deaf ear to women's predicament.

AT THE CROSSROADS: FEMINISM AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN INDIA

The 1920s was the starting point for 'feminism' in India. Consequently, many women's organisations were formed both at national and local levels to address the grievances related to women's education and livelihood. All India Women's Conference allied to Indian National Congress was formed with a goal for attaining education for women and to help them achieve a livelihood. Meanwhile, leftist organisation also formed National Federation of Indian Women. But, after independence, as the nation had its firm attention on nationalist agendas, the activities of feminist movements started to decline. The declaration of Emergency led to a different political situation in India. Though it had many negative aspects, it led to the formation of major and minor democratic groups. But, in the political context of the 1970s, these groups could not properly fulfill the aspirations of women (Gangoli 20). Consequently, the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the emergence of feminist groups attending to the violence against women caused by the state and the police. The trade union movements failed to provide ample attention to the problems of women since they were a minority group. The trade unions were seriously occupied with general issues like wages and working class conditions. Moreover, they argued that a focus on women's issues would exacerbate class struggles. The leftist groups accused feminists of prioritising gender over the class. Though some women within the trade unions took an antifeminist stance, others felt discomfort with the inequalities prevailing in the system. The sectarian politics and unsympathetic wave demanded a separate space for women, leading to the formation of groups like Autonomous Women's Movement. The 1970s and 1980s saw the upsurge of feminist groups in Bombay like the Forum Against Rape (FAR), which was later renamed as Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW). The forum addressed a host of issues concerning sexual harassment, domestic violence, discrimination against women in civil and criminal law, rights of working class women, women's health, reproductive rights and social activities of women, etc (Gangoli 24). The members of the FAOW later established a group called Women's Centre which was geographically, politically, and ideologically distanced from the patriarchal context. The Centre resorted to both legal and illegal methods to resolve domestic violence.

So far, the mechanism, the strategies and the functional patterns of different organisations in preindependent and post independent India, formed under different circumstances at various times, have been discussed. These organisations had a seminal role in empowering, educating and moulding women. Though they functioned with various political goals and faced many setbacks and assaults, they succeeded in improving the conditions of women to some degree. They shared a common set of observations that was sourced from their own experiences, and from that of their fellow beings. They shared a common platform, where they listened to other's confessions. It accorded them, a strength and virility to release themselves from their isolation. The period also witnessed the establishment of various research centres for women, feminist journals, and forums against the repression of women. Moreover, women's histories and writings recovered through the researches beckoned a critical engagement with the trajectories of reform movements and nationalist movements. Researches chronicled women's histories and writings, and, thereby, instigated a fresh engagement in creative writing and critical enquiry.

FEMINIST VOICES: UNVEILING THE REVOLUTION IN INDIAN WRITING

While tracing a chronological study of narratives, a woman-centered approach can be mapped out right back from the Vedic period to 300 B.C (Kishore "The Evolution"). Historical queries uncover the fact that women were held in high esteem at that point of time. The songs of the Buddhist nuns in the fifth century B.C were testimonials to the liberated spirit of women and were the first kind of poetry ever recorded. The medieval period, a time when Hinduism swept across, saw the rise of saint poets like Akka Mahadevi and Mira Bai, who came up with powerful poems reckoning their love for the divine. The historical archives brim with many talented writers, but meagre space forces to exclude many.

There were promising women writers in the British Raj who marked their firm imprints in the literary arena. The eighteenth century poet, Muddupalani, was vanished into oblivion until Nagaratnamma reprinted her poem, *Radhika Santhwanam* (Tharu 1). Muddupalani's *Radhika Santhwanam* is a coveted testimonial to the flaming expression of desire and free spirit of a woman writer. The pre independence era was blessed with impeccable writers like Lakshmi Debi, Pandita Ramabhai Saraswati, Swarna Kumari Ghosal, etc. They strongly advocated social changes through their writings. Women oriented themes were visible in the writings of luminaries like Bankinchandra Chatterji and Rabindranath Tagore, who gave life to strong and courageous female characters (Gupta 180). Urdu writers like Ismat Chughtai and Rashid Jahan wrote deliriously that shook the foundation of preconceived narratives. One of the most powerful voices in the Urdu literary spectrum, Chughtai, revolutionised the scene by writing about the contours of female sexuality. The short stories *Lihaaf* and *Quilt* are cogent credentials of this rebellious writer. Begum Rokeya Shekhawath Hossain is an exemplary writer and feminist, who fought for Muslim women's education. Her short story *Sultana's Dream*, published in the year 1905, belongs to the genre of science fiction. The story imagines a utopian world, where the women excelled in every field. Begum's *Sultana's Dream* was far ahead the century. While some writers imitated the traditional role of women, other writers wrote with a vigour beckoning vital changes in society. Studies show that pre independent India was no less rich with such estimable personages. It should be assumed that the women writers of the post independent India had their vestiges in the past.

Indian writing in English has a mighty trajectory to reckon with. Sake Dean Mahomed's *The Travels of Dean Mahomed*, written in 1793, was the first piece of work written in English by an Indian ("Short History"). By 1800, several authors started to pen down in English. In the 1900s, Tagore started to translate his works into English, making it available for a wide readership. Dhan Gopal Mukerji wrote children's books based on Indian themes and settings for American readers. The novel writing threw light on the Indian condition of lives when the trio, R.K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao, inaugurated the dawn of Indian English novel. The middle decades of the twentieth century demanded an idea of nation and the need for carving a national identity. The forties and the fifties reformulated the myths, institutions, the discursive and narrative regimes that safeguarded the popular understanding of our history, traditions, identity, and our problems. By the late sixties and through the seventies, a variety of alternate visions challenged the existing institutions, and articulated the grievances and aspirations of another India. The literary period impetrated for reflecting a new India. The women writers of the period played a seminal role in rearticulating the social and imaginative life of the public. The Orientals had been keenly looking forward to the analyses of the literary works written by the oriental themselves. Various researches carried out, from different perspectives, scrutinised how the empire is writing back. The postcolonial analyses had given fresh impetus to the qualitative researches that had been undergone. Indian English novels composed in the post-colonial period opened the conduits of creative vitality. A succession of novels that showed up re-examined the ongoing history of India and assessed the potential outcomes of bridging the gap between the East and the West in the changed socio-political and cultural settings. The decline of British Imperialism and the development of social, historical, political, and social sentience among the individuals accomplished drastic changes in Indian culture. Thus, Indian English novels achieved another façade in the post-colonial scenario as the imaginative writers endeavoured to take a glance at their past and their present life with an alternate point of view. With this new alertness, the writers started to investigate and decipher the Indian consciousness by engaging with the contemporary political and social issues. They started to perceive and comprehend the relationship between man and his surrounds from a fresh angle. They moved their attention from political issues to socially, economically and institutionally oppressed lot. Thus, the postcolonial Indian English novels were free of fervent nationalist spirit, and fretted about the issues of self-identity. It was distinctly during the 1960s that the sensibility of Indian authors groomed to a post independent sensibility. The fictions of this period turned reflective and the person's journey for self-importance in life has turned into a subject of dire enthusiasm. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* pushed Indian English novel to the vanguard of international recognition.

Apart from these male writers, the literary scene saw powerful female writers, in the sixties and seventies, like Kamala Markandeya, Santha Rama Rau, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Nayantara Sahgal, Rama Mehta, etc. It was by 1960s, that a serious investigation into the position of women in society was disputed and swotted upon. Interpretations of women's role and status in society were explicitly and implicitly questioned in women's literature. Active functioning of women's movements acted as a catalyst in this enterprise. As discussed earlier, women's movements, allied with trade unionism, working class struggles, students' protests, and organisations, worked for importuning their democratic rights. As Shahani and Ghosh had observed, the declaration of Emergency resulted in steering an act of dissent, resistance, and uproar for civil rights. The movements' activities acted as a backlash to many issues leading to various political and cultural activism which sparked a collective spirit (Shahani and Ghosh 3813). This collective spirit reflected in literature generally. The upsurge of the nationalist sentiments crafted a radical change in Indian English writing. The writers began to articulate the psychological dilemma of the characters in various capacities. Gender segregation, the heteropatriarchal normativity, male hegemony, familial issues, and the eulogised glory of tradition were perceived from an alternate point of view. In conclusion, the focal point of the writers of the period moved from

the social domain to the individual domain. Parenthetically, the women authors of the period gave a new drapery to the Indian English Novels. Their feminine sensibility opened up new vistas of human instincts, sensibility, desires, man-woman relationship, and of their place in the phallogocentric culture. Hence by 1960s, the traditional representation and interpretation of women's role and status in society started to be questioned feebly. Until then, themes related to the oppression and exploitation of women were a sumptuous fodder for Indian literature. The sufferings of women were tinged with a sacrificial tone in a romantic light. This eulogising of women's object position was an outcome of the reformist movements that formulated new patriarchies in those times.

India entered modernity through colonialism. As Chaudhuri observed, "Nationalism, nation states and feminism have to be understood as part of the modern democratic project" (25). Feminism was not in a good tie with the liberal democratic project. Though there was a clamour for equality, it was partially granted. The baffling influence of Victorian morality revamped the Indian household and titivated the seats of women as domestic selves. The education for women refurbished their ideas of being a kind wife and a supportive, super mother, providing all social comforts to the members of the family. Thus, the reformers succeeded in popularising a new model of domesticated, but educated Indian woman (Chaudhuri 25).

Indian writers in the last two decades offered a twist to the manners of conventional narratives. The arrays of works dealt with the political, social and domestic issues in a realistic and practical tone. Indian women writers wrote with a deep involvement and a self-consciousness. A group of women writers showed up on the Indian fictional field in the 1980s. Their entry swished the fixed notion and mythification of sex and the authoritative attitude of the phallogocentric culture. Bold confessions on sexual relationships, extramarital relationships, lesbianism, incest, divorce, etc., found inexpungible expressions in the writings of the Indian women authors like Shoba De, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Manju Kapoor, Githa Metha, Jaishree Misra, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Githa Hariharan. The literary scene was renewed and quickened by the opening up of new possibilities and innovative techniques to give expression to a changing social, political, cultural, economic and psychological landscape. Also, the novels written in this phase discussed issues such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, human rights, etc. Thus, the 1980s occupied a significant place in the history of the growth of the Indian English novel. The second generation writers like Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai fixed their strong foot on the experimental writing style in Indian English fiction. The Polyphonous and the circular patterns of the novels were harbingers of experimental writing in Indian English fiction. Novels written in the later period of twenty first century examined a person's character from a psychological, spiritual and emotional perspective. The writers investigated the internal nerves of characters that were rooted in family, religion, and mysticism. To conclude, Indian women's writings had a sturdy, powerful and fervent course of expressions. The nuances of language and its strong and conflating expressions are an upshot of an intense and vehement trajectory.

CONCLUSION

The genesis and growth of feminism has generated a new awareness and sensibility in the academia to explore the female expressions in many ways. Feministic enterprises strategically emphasized the rejuvenated ideological impetus to explore feminist expressions. The paper has traced the trajectories of this enterprises and examined how this awareness has led to the emergence of new discourses and approaches, utilising other theoretical underpinnings as well by seeking its endurable articulations in feminist writing.

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