



## FEMINIST WRITINGS: INDIA AND THE WEST

**DR. CLARAMMA JOSE**

Associate Professor

Dept. of English

Loyola College

Chennai, (TN) INDIA

**MRS. MYTHILI MUKUND**

Associate Prof. & Head

Dept. of English

Maharshi Dayanand College

Mumbai, (MS) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*The woman has always been the subaltern across cultural boundaries. In the present day Indian context, when the impact of Western feminism is being felt strongly, the response to feminist discourse has been varied. Feminism in the Indian context is very different from that of the West in terms of tradition, culture, class, race and gender. Women are shown to be adhering to the roles handed over to them by patriarchy. This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural oppressions in the patriarchy in the context of India and the West and analyse the male domination on literary and cultural traditions.*

**Key Words:** *Feminism, Patriarchy, India, West.*

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism begins with the appropriation of the male gaze to offer resistance to patriarchal control. Then it moves beyond appropriation to deconstruction of the stories and to the problematic of feminist representation. The history of women's subordination in any society reveals how patriarchal subtexts like religion, race, caste, class and cultural codes have been functioning to facilitate men. It is the male fear of the female power which made them create various images of the woman. In the Western tradition, any attempt by a woman to claim her individuality was rejected and she would be marginalized as a whore, a mad woman or a witch. In the Indian cultural ethos, the secular texts like *Manusmriti* and *Griha Sutras* as well as practices like 'sati, child marriage and purdah system continued to oppress women. As there could be no universal patriarchies, there could be no universal solution to the problem of women being gendered as inferior under male domination.

However, feminism in the Indian context is very different from feminist issues in the West as they are related to the traditions concerning women and the movements that have aimed at changing women's status throughout history.

**DR. CLARAMMA JOSE**

**MRS. MYTHILI MUKUND**

1 Page



As Jayita Sengupta says:

*“Carving out a historicity of Feminism in the East is far more complex than that of the West. The veil of ‘Orientalism’ cast by the colonial regime over the countries under their dominion has created diffused images of the East. The numerous cultures under the oriental umbrella have been classified into a monolithic whole of exoticism, myths, lies and riches which serve to be the pleasure haunts for the West. The socio-cultural specifications of the nations under imperialism were ignored and condescended.”*

In Indian feminist writings, it is absolutely necessary to be culture specific. The concept of patriarchy in India is a complicated one. It has undergone many transformations with the frequent invasions beginning from Aryan invasions. The various phases of women’s quests for liberation under such social changes and constraints and realization of their values and position within the social orders have been captured in their writings.

In his book on the ancient Hindu society *Lokayata*, Debiprasad points out that the ancient Hindu civilization prior to the Aryan invasion was a matriarchal society. Since this was an agricultural society, the female principle was associated with fertility and creative process and women enjoyed a social supremacy compared to men. However, with Aryans settling down on the Indian soil, such supremacy was undermined by their patriarchal order. Though there are hardly any writings at that time, it is possible to find traces of it in the folk traditions.

The earliest writing by women which comes down to us however, is *Therigatha* in the sixth century B.C. Susie Tharu and K.Lalita’s *Women Writing in India*, tells us that *Therigatha* is the earliest known anthology of women’s literature in India and possibly anywhere in the world. The work comprises of songs composed by Buddhist monks who were contemporaries of Buddha. The songs celebrate the sense of release and emancipation which was largely due to the influence of Buddha’s teachings. The songs in general echo how Buddhism in its rejection of Brahmanical authority opened up new channels of life for the people belonging to different classes, races and sects. Everyone regardless of social, sexual, class and caste differences were united in Buddhism ‘as are rivers in the sea’. However, as historians like Uma Chakraborti points out, the gender discrimination was not without opposition. Buddha himself was much against women’s participation in the Sangha as he feared that his doctrine’s life span would be reduced, if they did so. But, compelled by the women’s movement, he had to concede against his wishes. The Indian feminism hence could be traced back to this movement in the ancient times. The lyrics by these women focus on the



epiphanic experience where all painful constrictions of secular life dissolve as peace and freedom of 'nirvana' are attained.

Down the ages, we find the traces of women writing in India in the Sangam age ( 100 BC-AD 205). Many poems carry the signatures of women who have written them and some were anonymous. They recapture the feminine principles of the civilization prior to the advent of the Aryans. Usually the poems are a celebration of an unabashed personal experience of love or of women's body and her passions.

The anthology of Susie Tharu and K.Lalita enlightens us further about the women poets belonging to the 'Bhakti cult' which originated as far back as the twelfth century. The Bhakti Movement was a revolt against the domination of the Brahmanical system and the patriarchal construct in India. People from various sects, races and classes joined this movement. The writings of the women of the Bhakti cult are extraordinary in the sense that they depict a personal relationship with their God through a mystic union which was often imagined in sexual terms.

This was particularly revolutionary as women in the Brahmanical patriarchal system were not allowed to offer their devotion through the Vedic chanting of mantras to certain male deities like Narayan. The Vedas and the Upanishads being in Sanskrit were beyond the learning of the lower classes. For women belonging to the lower classes, the Brahmanical society imposed double marginalization, that of caste and gender. The songs of the Bhakti movement hence are in 'prakrit' or the spoken language of the common people. Their sense of longing to be free from strictures of all kinds was so intense that they resisted patriarchy, moved by the Bhakti cult.

With the British colonization in India gradually taking its firm foothold in the eighteenth century, the socio-economic structure of the country suffered a severe setback. The general population was devastated and the working condition of women worsened. Women who played major roles in textile and agriculture industries found themselves jobless. With their vitality shriveling up, they were subject to the triple fold oppressive system-the British patriarchal order, the Brahmanical patriarchal order and the oppressive patriarchal order of the household.

The social reform movement tried to deconstruct patriarchy, curb the rigidity of the Brahmins and recast gender. The movement focused on abolition of sati and encouraged widow remarriage and education. The Brahmo Samaj promoted the emancipation of women. The social reform for women was actually a double-edged process. It recast the feminine gender, by taking its clue from the possessive individualism of the personal law and by attempting to



break the unregimented indecorous mixing of the upper class with the lower class. It also discredited the popular culture of the Vaishnava cult which embraced women of all classes. The folk singers or artisans faced with such condescension and those subjected to extreme poverty were driven to prostitution. The respectable middle class or the upper class woman was shaped due to class consciousness. Women's writing which springs from the new concept of Indian womanhood is voluminous and has been a continuous journey from the later part of the nineteenth century till date. The writings depict in their phases of new liberation movement, the changing concept of the woman's subjectivity.

In the early nineteenth century, the issues which were commonly dealt with were the evils of purdah, the ideals of companionate marriage, the hardship of widowhood, dream of a utopian vedic community etc. Many women attempted to break away from the rigidity of the old order and at the same time reshaped their identity balancing tradition with modernity. They also participated in the freedom struggle movement. In the religious and nationalist political revival of the mid nineteenth century writers, thinkers and politicians began to use Bharat Mata in their articulation. Gayatri Sinha describes the force of the image as follows:

*"For ordinary women, as those participating in the 1930s salt satyagraha, Bharat Mata became a source of both emulation and liberation. In her solitary state outside the codes of conduct of goddess as consort and wedded to the ideal of freedom, Bharat Mata must have been in the vanguard of an idealized feminine modernity"*.

The women's liberation movement in the wake of India's freedom had taken two directions: nationalistic and individualistic. There is much historical evidence of the first directive. In the case of the second directive, there is a huge corpus of feminist literature comprising chiefly of short stories, poems and novels. The Progressive Writers' Associations were formed by the notable writers of the time.

In the post-independence era, English has emerged as the lingua franca among the intelligentsia due to the forces of syncretism ensuing from the British rule. So along with the regional voices speaking against gender oppression in their culture-specific contexts, the Indian English voice has a significant role to play in the Indian cultural consciousness. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee:

*"What it means to be an Indian is not a question that troubles the Marathi or the Bengali writer very much...The writer in the Indian languages does not often have an exposure to another culture with sufficient intensity to worry about these problems..."*



English as the common language allows the various language speaking regions with their cultural specifications to reach out to one another and consider gender issue in the country on a broader discursive plane. The issues which have been taken up for women's liberation and empowerment in the recent years and figure in women's writing in English, cover a wide range like dowry boycott, protection rights against violence and discrimination on the basis of caste, class and religion, women's political representation and so on. With the increasing consciousness of gender oppression among women and men, there has been a fresh interest in re-visioning of women's literature and recasting of the image of the woman in the Indian context.

As Madhu Kishwar points out, Indian feminism should not be equated with the Western 'ism'. She writes against the 'imported label' and refers to the term feminism as 'the international band wagon'. As the socio-historical-cultural-religious context in the Indian situation is widely variant from the Western situation, Indian feminism in her opinion requires 're-defining'. The ideas of feminism were repressed in the writings of the Western women prior to the attempts made by Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir in the twentieth century, whereas in India, women's writing from the sixth century B.C are flooded with seeds of feminism. Revisioning of the text which is one of the agendas of the Western feminist literary struggle in the recent past took place in India as early as the sixteenth century. The women writers have effectively merged feminist criticism with creativity to recreate feminist language of their own in their regional languages. The first Indian literary criticism *Stri Purusher Tulana* was written in 1885, years before Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This establishes the fact that the term 'feminism' is Western, but the urge to break free from the patriarchal constraints is universal.

## WORKS CITED

- Chattopadhyay, Debiprasad. *Lokyata: A Study in Ancient Materialism*. New Delhi: Delhi Publishing House, 1978.
- Kishwar, Madhu. *Off the Beaten Track. Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. 'In Search of Critical Strategies', in M. Butcher ed., *The Eye of the Beholder*. London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983.
- Sengupta, Jayita. *Feminist Perspectives in the Novels of Toni Morrison, Michele Roberts and Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2006.
- Sinha, Gayatri, ed., *Woman/ Goddess: An Exhibition of Photographs*. New Delhi: Multiple Action Research Group, 2000.
- Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita. *Women Writing in India, Vol. I*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

DR. CLARAMMA JOSE

MRS. MYTHILI MUKUND

5P a g e