



## FEMINISM AND ITS HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

*Feminism is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women.<sup>1</sup> In addition, feminism seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A feminist is a “person whose beliefs and behavior are based on feminism.”<sup>2</sup> Feminist theory, which emerged from these feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women’s social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender.<sup>3</sup> Some of the earlier forms of feminism have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle-class, educated perspectives. This led to the creation of ethnically-specific or multiculturalist forms of feminism.<sup>4</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

Value theory is the systematic study of values. As such, it is one of the three basic fields of philosophy along with *metaphysics* (the study of the nature of reality) and *epistemology* (the study of knowledge and belief)- General value theory, or *axiology*, addresses questions concerning the nature, meaning, and scope of values and value judgments.

Traditional value theory is, of course, *male* value theory, and it has been done as (male) theory-building is characteristically done. The standard approach is to carve out areas for

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investigation, formulate questions and a methodology for dealing with those questions, and then allow the researchers in a given area to conduct their specialized endeavor.

Thus, traditional value theory has focused on certain domains. Social philosophers discuss which social structure is the best (meaning the best for mankind). Similarly, political philosophers ask which political system is the “best.” Philosophers of law ask which legal system is most “just.” Other philosophers question the nature of art and artistic endeavor and what is a “good” work of art. Or they examine the basic concepts of religion and inquire about their meaning and function. And ethical theorists investigate the nature of “right” or “good” in respect to human conduct. 1 Feminist-considerations arose quite outside the” academic world of traditional (male) value theory. To understand the transvaluation of value theory in feminist thought, we need to understand the revolution in feminist thinking.

Feminism has a complex history as well as a philosophy. To simplify this history somewhat, it is generally said that feminist thought occurred in two waves. The first wave of feminism appeared at the start of the nineteenth century (with anticipations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) with the representative text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, by Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), and later with *The Declaration of Sentiments* of the Seneca Falls Convention (1848). The first wave gave rise to the women’s suffrage movement in Europe and the United States and culminated in the United States in women’s right to vote (1920). Then came a period of relative dormancy in the political and theoretical activity of women.

The second wave of feminism began shortly after World War II, with the appearance of Simone de Beauvoir’s now classic text, *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir’s brilliant work was a turning point in the history of feminist thought. Perhaps the key to understanding the paradigm change wrought by de Beauvoir is to see that she shifted the conceptual framework of feminism from a discussion of *equality* to a discussion of *freedom*.. According to de Beauvoir, women could not be equal, could not be anything but “the second sex,” until they were *free* to change themselves and their conditions. So with the publication of *The Second Sex*, feminism went beyond a demand for equality—it became a call for liberation.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir agrees with the existentialist claim that man is his freedom. But, she argues, it follows that woman is her freedom, too. Why, then, is woman always and everywhere subordinate to man? De Beauvoir’s insightful answer is that woman has been constituted as the Other to man’s Self; she has become object to his subject, and he has mediated the world for her.

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What peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of Other.

De Beauvoir argues that man enslaves woman because he flees from himself (that is, the burden of freedom) “by means of the other, whom he oppresses to that end.”

So, de Beauvoir asserts, woman is not now her freedom, which means that she must project herself into the future and must undertake projects. For existential ethics, choice is central to being fully human; to be free to choose to be fully human (“Man is his freedom”).

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. . . . Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that [it] involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects. The corollary to de Beauvoir’s exhortation to women to choose their freedom is: Women cannot look to men to grant them freedom. If that were the case, women would not themselves be choosing their freedom; they must seek their own transcendence.

This line of thought forms a dramatic shift from the point of view of first-wave feminism. Whereas earlier feminism was stated as a demand for legal equality, de Beauvoir’s response is that, in effect, not only must women be free to choose *not* to be the second sex, but they must choose the act of freedom: They must choose to liberate themselves. Thus the second wave is a women’s liberation movement.

Another reason for seeing de Beauvoir’s text as a watershed in feminist thought is that she explicitly grapples with two major theoretical systems that had not previously been addressed in feminist thought: Marxism and Freudianism. At the outset of her existentialist text, de Beauvoir rejects both systems as explanations of women’s situation. She denies the Freudian claim that “anatomy is destiny,” that is, that woman’s situation is the outcome of her biology. And she also denies the Marxist view that a woman’s identity is determined primarily by “the means of production” (the economics) of the society in which she lives. Feminist theorists of the second wave follow de Beauvoir in paying special attention to the Marxist and Freudian perspectives, utilizing or rejecting many of their concepts.

Although there are several distinct strains of contemporary feminism, they all bear the mark of de Beauvoir’s initial theory to some degree.

### *Goals of Feminist Theory*

Feminist theory has several purposes. The first is to understand the power different between men and women. How did it come into being? Why does it exist now? What maintains it? How do the power relations between men and women affect other power relations—for instance, race and class—and how does patriarchy reinforce other oppressive power structures?

Secondly, the purpose is to understand women's oppression—how it evolved, how it changes over time, how it's related to other forms of oppression, and finally, how to change our oppression.

In feminist theory, one issue that emerges consistently is the necessity to understand the family, because it is one of the central mediating structures between all other structures of oppression. The family is where we're internally formed, where we learn about gender, where we experience class and race systems in personal and intimate ways. Therefore, understanding the functions of the family should be one of the crucial goals of feminist theory; yet it remains an area that is particularly undeveloped.

A third purpose of feminist theory is to overcome oppression. Feminist theory is the foundation of action and there is no pretense that theory can be neutral. Within feminist theory is a commitment to change oppressive structures and to connect abstract ideas with concrete problems for political action. It is senseless to study the situation of women without a concomitant commitment to do something about it. The theorist has to draw out the consequences of the theory and use life experience as a part of her basis for understanding, for feeding into the development of theory.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Indian English Fiction*

Fiction, being the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English literature, popularly known as Indian writing in English. It is generally agreed that in India, the novel is the most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of our time. Fiction, as form of art, mirrors the social fabric and reflects the thoughts of an age. Many good Indian English novels and many more short stories have demonstrated the feasibility of Indians, writing fiction.

Since the novel provides a sort of documentation for the study of social traditions and socio-cultural change, the achievement of the Indian writers in English has been more significant in the realm of the novel than in poetry or drama, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

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Although the Indian fiction in English has been relatively delayed manifestation of the modern Indian imagination, it has always been instrumental in an artistic rendering of the contemporary social reality. It made its appearance during the nineteen twenties and thirties, when most of the vernacular literatures in India had already achieved tremendous maturity especially in the medium of fiction reflecting the universal consciousness of change.”

The term Indian English neither refers to baboo English nor indiscriminate use of Indian words in English by an Indian writer who makes his English Indian. In fact the best definition is given by Prof. V.K. Gokak, “Indian English represents the evolution of a distinct standard whose body consists of correct English usage, but the soul is Indian in colour, thought and imagery”. It shows that Indian social, cultural and linguistic set-up has affected the features of the English language as used by the Indian creative writers in English, especially the fiction writers and Indian writing in English is only a variety of English whose characteristics stem from the life and culture of the Indian people. A skilful novelist weaves the explanatory details into the pattern of the novel and converts them into a dense web.

The first ever Indian novel in English was written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who established the novel as a major literary form in India. His *Raj Mohan's Wife* was the first and the only English novel he wrote. Thereafter he wrote fiction only in Bengali. Lai Behari Dey's *Govind Samanta* published in 1874 may be considered to be the first ever important Indian novel to appear in English. It represents the emergence of the novel in India with that: formal realism which distinguishes it from romance. The last quarter of the nineteenth century, the period following the publication of *Govind Samanta*, may said to be a significant period in the history of Indian fiction in English. Though a very few good novels made their appearance between 1874 and 1900, the quarter century saw the emergence of a number of good writers of fiction in English.

### ***Early Period of Fiction***

The marvellous Toru Dutt, besides her many poems and her French novel, wrote in her teens an English novel named *Bianca* or *The Young Spanish Maiden*. Romesh Chander Dutt was a gifted novelist as well. Two of his Bengali novels were also published in English. *The Slave Girl of Agra* (1909) deals with Mughal times. Another novel *The Lake of Palms* (1902) is an intimate and reliable picture of social life in Bengal.

The various English translations of Bankim Chandra Chatterji's celebrated novels largely contributed to the literary renaissance in India during the last quarter of the nineteenth



century. His novels gave at once a standing and status to the Indian novel. Among South Indian writers, B.R. Rajam wrote an English novel *Vasudeva Sastri*. We may mention T. Ramakrishna, the author of *Padmini* (1909), *The Dive for Death* (1911) and P.A. Madhvan, the author of *Thillai Govindan*. Writers from Punjab who have attempted English fiction are Miss Sorabhi, Sir Joginder Singh and Bal Krishna. Miss Sorabhi's short stories are *Love and Life behind the Purdah*, *Sun Babies* and *Between the Twilights*. Sardar Joginder Singh's first two novels, *Nur Jahan* and *Nasrin* appeared as serials in the East and West. The *Love of Kusuma* (1911) by Bal Krishna is disappointing.

### **Middle Period: After the First World War**

Among the Indians who came to prominence in the first decade after the war, one of the most outstanding was K.S. Venkataramani. His first published book *Paper Bats* gave a few vignettes of South Indian village life. Another book of prose-poem by him is *On the Sand Dunes*, the form had by then been popularized by the Tagore's *Gitanjali*. After that Shankar Ram's three English publications are: *The Children of the Kaveri* (1927), *Creatures All* (1938) and the *Love of Dust* (1938).

After 1930, there came a sudden flowering in the Indian literature in English. A society compelled into self-awareness like that provides a fertile soil for fiction and it is no accident that the three major Indian novelists in English, viz. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao began their career during the phase. Dr. Mulk Raj Anand hails from the extreme north-west of India. His birth place is Peshawar. His important publications are: *Across the Black Waters*, *The Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *The Untouchable*, and *The Village and the Big Heart*. He is an ardent believer in the doctrine of social revolution and socialistic pattern of society. His object is not merely to shock his readers by a representation of reality but to stimulate their consciousnesses, and his concern as fiction writer has always been the redemption of the poor and the oppressed.

R.K. Narayan is little concerned with the maladies in the society and shows no desire for reforming it. All his novels are concerned in and around Malgudi, a small town in south India. His first novel is *Swami and Friends*. His *The Bachelor of Art* is a more mature work. His short stories are appearing in the columns of *The Hindu* and other journals. He is master at his own chosen grounds.

Raja Rao is deemed as the finest portrayer of Indian sensibilities. He tries to revive the ancient tradition of epics and *Puranas*. He thus stands apart from the main current of Indian creative writers in English. *Kanthapura* is his well known novel. The technique of novel is as

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old as those of, *The Ramayana*, and *The Mahabharata*. The whole story is related through an old woman of the village.

Among other novelists of the period is S. Nagarajan. His *Athawar House* gives an enduring picture of a Maratha brahmin family living in south India. Dewan Sharar wrote, *The Gong of Shiva*. It is well planned, well executed and wholly an Indian novel. A.S.P. Ayyar is also a voluminous writer. He has published two historical novels: *Baladitya* and *Three Men of Destiny*.

### ***Later Period: Post-Independence Era***

The fiction writers were deeply affected by the radical changes which were brought about by the partition of the country. Whereas poverty, hunger, death and disease form the keynotes of the symphony, movements like humanitarianism, socialism and liberalism spotlight the finer aspects of their dream for the future. They seem to stand between the two worlds — one dead, the other yet to be born.

Major writers of this era are Sudhin Ghosh, Bhabani Bhattacharya (*Music for Mohini, So Many Hungers*) and Ruskin Bond (*The Room on the Roof*). Besides these novelists, the others are Dillip Kumar Roy, Khushawant Singh, Venu Chitale, Rama Sharma, K.A. Abbas, etc.

### ***Women Novelists of the Post-Independence Period***

The very emergence of women writers during this period was of great significance. Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Veena Paintal and Nergis Dalai have added new dimensions and depth to Indian fiction in English. The emergence of these women writers marks the birth of an era which promises a new deal for the Indian fiction in English. The battle of emancipation was taken over by a few educated women themselves who, in their effort to communicate to the world their own bitter experiences as women as well as their ideals of social reform, turned writers. These women writers particularly shared experiences of Indian women in general and presented them into fictional form. Women's inner self, their agonies, their pleasures are better and more truly depicted by the women novelists. Literature which until recently was male dominated, has started reflecting the sparks that have emanated from this struggle of woman to be herself. The extent of change in her status, in life and society could be assessed by reference to her image reflected in literature in general and literature produced by her. The reason may be the flowering of the educated women who began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings.



The women novelists of the nineteenth century tried to give their characters justice by posing various problems but it was the early experimental period. Owing to lack of experience of writing, they soon turned to didacticism, sentimentalism and romanticism which weakened their novels. But it was not so with the later women novelists who emerged in the post-Independence era such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobhaa De, etc. The fiction of Kamala Markandaya is largely sociological in its focus. Her novels give a faithful account of contemporary Indian reality, she trusts that literature can play a constructive role and teach humanity through the work of writers who will lay bare the very anatomy of destruction. Markandaya shot into prominence with her very first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) which was followed by *Some Inner Fury* (1955) and continued till the *Golden Honeycomb* (1977).

As an outsider inside India, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala enjoys a double perspective. She has sometimes been described as an inside-outsider and at other times as an outside-insider. The most significant thing about her is, her awareness of man, society, human and moral dilemmas and the religious and aesthetic design that she projects through her experience. She can view the game of human affairs in an Indian family from a point of view which is both objective and sentimental. Khushwant Singh calls her the adopted daughter of India. From her first novel *To Whom She Will* (1955) followed by *The Nature of Passion* and then *The Householder* (1960), *A Backward Place* (1965), *Esiond in India* etc., till *Heat and Dust* (which won the famous Booker Prize in London in 1975), she received universal recognition in India as Indian novelist. Thus Mrs. Jhabvala, though limited in her sphere proves to be a torch-bearer for coming generations of Indian women writers in English. In this chain another prominent novelist is Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal.

Nayantara Sahgal is undoubtedly a major Indian novelist who is also an established political columnist. She takes every occasion to demonstrate her view of Indian womanhood in her fictional work. She does not view her women characters as wage earners or career women but mainly as married women, as wives, daughters and mothers and it is in these roles that they wish to experience freedom and to become aware of themselves as individuals and to be accepted as equals. From her first novel *A Time to be Happy*, till her latest novel *A Situation in New Delhi* she has exercised judicious care in picking and choosing such aspects of Indian life as suited her point of view.

Anita Desai is another luminary of this brilliant group of women novelists in the firmament of Indian fiction in English. Desai, born in 1937, of a German mother and Bengali father, is a north Indian novelist remarkable for her sensibility of inner world rather than the queer world of action. She shows a remarkable skill in her use of highly suggestive imagery and in

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handling the stream of consciousness technique. She is gifted with a sensibility which suits her aesthetic goals. Though not admittedly a feminist, Anita Desai is aware of the peculiar predicament of the Indian woman writers. She says, “Whereas a man is concerned with action, experience, and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation”.

Desai appeared on the Indian literary horizon in the year 1963, when her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* was published. Her second novel *Voices in the City* was serialized in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* during 1965. Since then she has published nine more novels and added a new dimension to the Indian English fiction.

There are some other notable fiction Writers with an impressive corpus of fiction to their credit such as Shashi Deshpande, Attia Husain, Rama Mehta, Nergis Dalai, Bharati Mukherjee and Santha Rama Rau. Again there are some emerging women writers whose output is not large, but each of them is talented in their own way like Namita Gokhale, Nina Sibal, Shourie Daniels, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Anuradha Marwah, Kiran Desai etc. Indian novel in English reached its zenith of glory when Arundhati Roy received the Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things* followed by Kiran Desai (*The Inheritance of Loss*). Roy has achieved the status of a celebrity with the publication of this maiden novel. This book along with the fiction of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai, has caught the attention of the readers for one or the other reason and the need for critical evaluation has become more urgent than ever before. The personal background and intellectual training of this novelist seem to have endowed the speciality which her fiction bears. Her high educational and intellectual standards have given a sharp edge to her observation. Her natural feminine sensibility and introspection have imparted to her observation human touch and a psychological depth. She shed her inhibitions in a marvelous fashion and showed surprise, frankness, boldness and honesty in the fictional treatment of the working of the human psyche.

Anita Desai has been rightly considered as the forerunner of contemporary woman’s fiction as she has produced novels which have evoked an enthusiastic response from critics inside and outside India. She is special because turning inward her fiction grapples with the intangible realities of life, plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil, and the chaos inside the mind. Her imagination is horrified by the emptiness of modern life just like Saul Bellow’s or Ionesco’s. During the last few decades the Indian English novel has really enjoyed the golden period. The abundant growth of the novel may be attributed to the fact that there is much more intellectual life in India now than there was before Independence.<sup>6</sup>

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