CHAPTER-2
FEMINISM AND INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS IN ENGLISH

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CHAPTER-2

FEMINISM AND INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS IN ENGLISH

2.1 Introduction

The origin of Indian writing in English by women can be traced back to the last quarter of the 19th Century. This emergence is an important milestone for feminism in India. Access to English education was one of the main reasons of modernisation of the thinking of Indian women. The broad scope for higher education inspired women to pursue English education, which made a visible impact on the status of women. Indian women came in contact with the Western culture, ideas, philosophy, literature and movements that were appealing and thought-provoking. They got an opportunity to express their Indianness in the newly acquired English language.

2.2 Early Indian Women Writers - Vernaculars & English

The struggle of Women Writers for their right to claim a niche, to make their voices heard, has a long and complex history. The status of women varied in different historical periods and in different regions. Their position changed in line with the contemporary social structure. The general situation was one of suppression and male domination in a patriarchal system. In the early-Vedic period, women enjoyed a respectable position in the society. Girls were
brought up in the same way as the boys. Girls had full freedom. Women were considered as the embodiment of beauty, culture and wisdom. Gargi and Maitreyee were the renowned Vedic scholars. Vak, Saraswati, Udbhayabharati, Lopamudra, Ghosa, Apala, Romasa, Surya, Savitri, Juhu, Yami etc were popular poets, whose verses were incorporated in the Vedas and Puranas.

However, in the later-Vedic period, the status of the women started to deteriorate. Men established themselves as the masters of the society. Education became theirs, enabling them to write ‘shastras’ to their advantage. Such writings became the law of the land. Evils like subjugation of women, polygamy, child-marriage, widowhood came into existence. This brought a halt in the creativity of women.

Then came Puranic and Smriti Ages. The system consolidated against women and became rigid. Manu Smriti was a great blow for the status of women. It clamped many restrictions on the activities of women, especially so on widows. The Smritis say that the wife should treat her husband as God, even if he has no character. The highest duty of a woman is to obey her husband and so on. As a consequence, women became submissive, illiterate, weak and dependent.
Next during the epic age, the status of women improved to some extent. They got better scope to develop their individuality. Girls got freedom to choose their husbands. When Buddhism came into existence, it revived the virtues of early-Brahmanical society of giving an honoured place to women. It opened opportunities for women to join the Bhikshuni Sangh. It gave them access to education and self-culture. It accepted their participation in public life. This gave rise to many learned women who became proficient in the sacred texts.

During the Muslim invasion of India, women lost their freedom to a very large extent. Social customs like child marriage, sati and purdah came into existence, basically to keep women away from the invaders. Condition of women became pathetic. They plunged into darkness, inaction and ignorance.

The Bhakti Movement emerged in different parts of southern India, and produced a number of women poets. History has many instances where women have broken stereotypical bondage of womanhood and taken to writing. Some of them wrote about the problems faced by women. More than 1400 short compositions in Hindi have been attributed to Meerabai. The intensity of her devotion and courage depicted in her songs, resisting every pressure to deviate from her chosen path, became a source of strength to
women. Akkamahadevi wrote nearly 350 vachanas in Kannada. She described how she broke the restriction imposed on her. Janabai wrote poems in Marathi, narrating the restrictions and hardships she had to face as a woman. Muddupalani, a Telugu poet, wrote of men, describing them as inconsistent, impatient, and unreliable.

Although feminism in India has gained momentum in the last 100 years by the new western influence, it already existed to an extent in the earlier periods, as evident from the contemporary Indian writing in the vernacular languages. Lakshmi Bajaj observes that Buddhist nuns wrote psalms about the joys of leaving behind the tedious household chores and their husbands and the word ‘liberty’ occurs very frequently in their poetry. Regional poets like Akkamahadevi, Mirabai and Bahinbai struggled against the pettiness of female roles and restraints and refused to abandon their quest for truth.

When the British arrived in India, the condition of the women was at the worst. During the British rule, social reform movements were started by the reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Maharshi Karve, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Vishnushastri Pandit. They focussed on the hardships of the women and advocated for education of women. Thus, a new awareness arose, voicing against women’s subordination. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote the first Indian novel in English *Raja Mohan’s Wife*, which deals with the
contemporary Bengali society and made woman the central figure. It narrates the story of a housewife who revolted against ill treatment. Contemporary writers in other Indian languages depicted urban as well as rural life, highlighting social evils like superstitions, subjugation of women, plight of the lower class women etc. Saratchandra Chatarjee wrote many novels in Bengali with strong women characters. Many social reformers tried to uplift the condition of the widows and encouraged widow remarriage. Ishwarchandra himself married a widow. Pandit Ramabai founded the Sarada Sadan in Bombay for the education of the widows.

English education was introduced. But only a few families educated their girls either at school or at home. The age-old social barriers were very strong and it was impossible to break them at a single stretch. Evils of the society like child marriage, widowhood, sati and woman subservience still ruled the society. So the early Indian women writers in English expressed their thoughts reflecting the existing social ambivalence. They had to balance their newly acquired western thoughts with the social condition then existed. They could not express their feelings freely to the extent that western women writers could. So, we notice that the works of the Indian women writers of the late 19th century depict their new awareness. But they do so in a hesitant manner, avoiding any friction with
traditionalists. Malashri Lal observes the following about these works:

Romantic attachments that she read in Charlotte Bronte or George Eliot were immensely alluring to the intellect but totally false to her own position as an object agreeable to an arranged marriage. Through flights of fancy the woman writer could transform some of her insistent reality. What she managed in these transformations was re-telling of her own life in one way or the other.

Prof. Alphonso Karkala notes that the Indian English women writers of this early era tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world. These women writers struggled to give form and shape to their autobiographical accounts, which attracted publishers, both in India and abroad.

Toru Dutt was the first Indian woman writer in English, who came directly under the influence of the West. But she remained traditional in her poetry. The main themes in her poetry are nature, love, family, mythology, and legends. There is only a light trace of feminine sensibility in her poetry. Toru Dutt shows a very strong attachment and affection for her family.
Sarojini Naidu, known as the nightingale of India wrote many poems, depicting varied feelings of love. She made an attempt to depict the plight of Indian Women as well.

Most of the novels of early 20th century by Indian women writers in English are also autobiographical projections. Toru Dutt’s Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden, Krupabai Sathianathan’s Saguna, Kamala and The story of a Conversion, Swarnakumari’s An Unfinished Song, Cornelia Sorabji’s India Calling and India Recalled etc are some of the noted examples of this category. The emergence of women writers in English in India is of great importance as they could communicate their own experiences as women.

Indian English novels by women took a gradual leaning towards reforms. Some of the women writers of this era became bolder in projecting feminist themes in their writings. For instance, Shevanthi Bai Nikambe dedicated herself to the cause of young married girls and widows, and fought against the exploitation of women, as in her novel Ratnabai. The novels of Krupabai Sathianathan were instruments of social reforms. Such writings reflect the birth of the new order and the writers’ awareness of a new
life for women. The theme of these novels of the early women writers was the new Indian woman emerging through the social changes. The emergence of women writers in English was very significant because it gave more opportunity to women to participate in social and public life. The formation of Indian Women’s Association in 1917 by Annie Besant was an important event in the national awakening and women’s resurgence. It stimulated the people to liberate women from their fettered life, from illiteracy and child marriage. During this time, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa’s preachings influenced the people to change the prejudices they had against about women. He started the worship of Kali as the symbol of power and strength. His disciple Swami Vivekananda worked for the cause of women, to educate women and to liberate them from their social bondage.

During the freedom movement, social reforms included the emancipation of women too. Gandhiji understood that caste differences, child-marriage, illiteracy, ill-treatment of women and purdah were the social evils that hindered the freedom movement. Although he believed that the main role of women was to be mothers and housewives, he expected full participation of women in the freedom struggle. Women participated in the Salt Satyagraha with the fullest zeal. Jawaharlal Nehru also urged women to participate in
the national freedom struggle. The Women's Corps was organised under Subhas Chandra Bose by women leaders. It was felt that without the help of women the freedom movement could never be a success. Thus the freedom movement gave ample scope for women to become aware of their importance and status. Indian women participated in Swadeshi movement, operated handlooms and produced khadi. Many women organisations sprang up like, The Women's Indian Association, Stree Dharma, Council of Women, All India Women's Conference and The Federation of University Women etc., which aimed to improve the status of women. Rau Committee was appointed in 1941, to collect data for liberalising Hindu marriage laws. After surveying the existing social conditions, the Committee recommended that the entire Hindu Law should be codified in order to enable women to get equal rights. The Hindu Code of law was drafted in 1947. Several Bills were passed to improve the legal system, to eradicate discriminations against women. Among them, the Hindu Marriage Act was very significant. It abolished polygamy and polyandry; it raised the marriage age of girls to fifteen and that of boys to eighteen; it also permitted divorce. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 conferred on women an equal share in the hereditary property of the family. Dowry Prohibition Act was passed in 1961. Women occupied important positions under the Union Government and many administrative and diplomatic
positions. They even held the positions of Governors of States, ambassadors, representatives to United Nations and so on. This improved their economic independence, thus influencing their outlook about family, marriage and conjugal relationships.

Education produced many bold women who could fight against injustice. Ganguli, Annie Jagannadhan etc were the women who fought against tradition and conservatism to liberate bonded women. Swarna Kumari Devi worked for the upliftment of poor widows and spinsters of poor families and used her writing for the spread of social reforms among the Indian masses. She wrote a novel in Bengali *Unfinished Song*, supporting women's rights. Ramabai wrote a book *Sthri Dharma Neeti and High Caste Hindu Women*, which advocated women's education and emancipation. Many journals and periodicals were edited by women on women issues. Muslim women like Amina Tyabji, Begum Abdullah, Begum Nawab Misra were the pioneers in advocating the education for Muslim women. They participated in political struggles too.

### 2.3 Awakening of Feminism

In the international context, the awakening of feminism can be traced to the middle of the 19th century. This period witnessed the emergence of a set of educated, intelligent, independent women in
the western countries, having new ideas and thoughts. They were fully convinced that women are capable of doing things as efficiently as men. This kind of awakening in women led to social revolution. They tried to redefine themselves in their writings. They started questioning the partiality and gender arrangement. They believed that more women should enter the new movement and write about their social problems. Many of them voiced their problems, experiences, feelings, desires, aspirations, and failures, in their writings. Some of them wrote about their personal lives, using their own experiences while fighting against the poor social status of and disparity against women. To avoid the possible embarrassment in their conventional surroundings, they disguised themselves in a way, as fictional heroines of their writings and exhibited their own experiences. Their literature depicted the new woman, who refused to be submissive to man. This global and revolutionary idea was coined as feminism. This word was first used by the French dramatist, Alexander Dumas, to designate the emerging movement for women’s rights. It gradually developed to be worldwide cultural movement to secure equality of women with men in all fields of life.

Feminism is an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society and conscious action by both men and women to change this situation. Linda Gordon, a noted historian, defines feminism as ‘an
analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it. Today, feminists are working towards the emancipation of women. Present-day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice. It is an endeavor to control women's lives within and outside their homes. Feminism asserts the value of women as women. It efficiently counters the systematic devaluation of women that is, there under patriarchy. It demands and fights for a just and equitable society where there is no discrimination based on sex. Thus, the concept of feminism incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international recognition.

Such movements, though by different names, had been initiated by women in England and America already. The Suffragette Movement, which was the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement, was started in late 1860s to fight for women's rights and to improve their living conditions in the society, especially in industrialised cities. The movement was deeply concerned with protecting women and children from social abuse and occupational hazards. Elizabeth Fry, who worked for prison reforms, realised the deteriorating prison conditions that exploited the lives of many women and children. She fought for better amenities of the prisoners. Margaret Sanger fought against sexual exploitation and harassment. Angela Burdetteoutts
organised charitable institutions to help the destitute women and children. More and more women engaged themselves in public activities. Their movements protested against their restricted roles in the society. This enhanced feminist awareness is apparent in their writings. Some notable examples are, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking About Women*, Elaine Showalter’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* etc. These thought-provoking books are largely responsible to instill a new awakening among women that influenced the scholars towards feminist ideas. As Elaine Showalter says,

> It was through the Women’s Liberation Movement that we began to draw connection between our own work and our lives, to note the disparities between the identifications and ambitions that had attracted us, along with thousands of other women, to the study and teaching of literature, and the limited and secondary roles granted to fictional heroines, women writers, or female scholars. Feminism involves literary experience with the fierce urgency of revelation or a great awakening.

In Asia, the feminist consciousness arose in late 19th and early 20th centuries, during struggles against foreign rule and against the local despotism of feudal monarchs. This ideology crept to many countries
including India. Post-independence period was characterised by radical, social and political changes. The joint families were replaced by nuclear families. Women became economically independent. The age-old tradition disappeared. Educated people moved to cities to find out better fortunes.

Such social and political changes initiated a new chapter in the writings of women writers in English. A new awakening emerged among the women writers. Modern women felt that it was time to assert their individuality as free human beings. They were awakened to face the challenges in order to lead a meaningful and dignified living irrespective of the public opinion. They challenged these problems through their writings irrespective of the criticism they received.

2.4 **Women Writers in English and Feminism - Post Independence Period**

In the post-independence period of India, there emerge a group of modern women writers in English, who have a distinct sense of their identity. They are not conventional, not influenced by sources like epics, myths, legends and folktales. They are well educated, bold and convincing. They understand the meaning of male domination. This period marks a change in the attitude, outlook, themes, imagery,
and, use of language – clearly differing from their predecessors. These writers articulate feminine experience and a new personal vision. They create their own literature by rehearsing relevant issues in their writings, making it a strong vehicle to carry their feministic thoughts and beliefs. They try to uncover those elements of ‘self’ which had been hidden under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. They portray their experiences and real life situations through characters specifically created for this purpose. About the recent works of Indian women writers in English, Rashmi Bajaj makes the following statement:

We have here increased social consciousness, a strong awareness of identity as woman, championing of women's cause, problems of alienation and identity crisis, daring portrayal of sex and emphasis on the study of personal relationships. 03

Many Indian women poets in English made their debut in the 1960s. Noted among them are, Kamala Das, Monika Varma, Margaret Chatterjee, Ira De, Roshan Alkazi, Sujatha Modayil, Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande, Sunita Jain, Lila Ray, Suniti Namjoshi, Mary Gupta, Indira Dhanrajgir, Shri Devi Singh, Lalita Venkateswaran, Gauri Pant, Tillottama Rajan, Chitra Pershad, Nasima Aziz, Vimla Rao, Malathri Rao, Dorothy Sinha and so on. They are poets endowed
KAMALA DAS, A FEMINISTIC APPROACH

with creative genius. They are mostly confessional. They write about their personal experiences, displaying feminine sensibility. They develop the theme of man-woman relationship. They depict frustrations of women living in a male-dominated society and they deal with themselves like love, lust, sex, sorrow, grief etc. They are the pioneers to explore some exclusive female areas of sensuality and sexuality. They do not hesitate to discuss subjects like childbirth, menstruation, masturbation, lesbianism and so on. Thus, the post-independence scenario presents a better indulgence of Indian women writers, who have carved an abiding niche in English poetry, through their wonderful creations.

The main themes and characteristics of the poetry by women help us to analyze how and why Kamala Das and others like her emerge as feminist poets. The general family background of these women poets is typical. Almost all of them belong to highly modern, educated and urban families. They are convent educated and qualified. They are different from the traditional pattern of Indian womanhood. They are not flexible to adjust to the old way of family life. They can't tolerate forced adjustment, compromise and submissiveness. This creates a natural tension. They rebel against the conventional role of women in society and struggle to assert their new identity. They do not hesitate
to express their feelings and bitter experiences in their writings. According to Sunanda Chavan,

An Indian woman poet in English evolved her full identity as a modern woman only in the post-independence period. The variety of new tensions encountered by contemporary women stimulate Indian feminine progress from tradition to modernity.

Stimulating Indian feminine progress 'from tradition to modernity' is the key phrase here, which is the end result of the poetry of these writers. They achieve this end result by expressing a 'variety of new tensions' encountered by them. Thus, the very first characteristic feature of their poetry that strikes the reader is that they are invariably confessional accounts, with a touching narration of their own self from within. Love, as exchanged between the self and the man in her life, is the most important theme used by any feminist woman poet, while coming out with her confessions. Prominent among contemporary love poets are, Sujatha Modayil, Margaret Chatterjee, Gauri Deshpande, Lalitha Venkateswaran, Roshan Alkazi, Lila Ray, Mamta Kalia, Monika Varma and so on. It is Kamala Das who begins a new trend in love poetry. Many of her poems depict her fulfillment of love experience. For example,
Now that I love you,
Curled like an old mongrel
My life lies, content
In you... ... Love

Sujatha Modayil describes that pure love fills her heart with unlimited joy and satisfaction:

I am most blest
In that I walk alone no more
You walk with me ... A Song of Joy (We the Unreconciled)

Indian women poets portray their love for other family members too. Poets such as Monika Varma, Achla Bhatia, Uma Parameswaran, Sujatha Modayil, Mamta Kalia, Sunitha Jain, Gauri Deshpande have written not only about man and woman relationship but also about filial and family relationships. In addition to being frank about love and lust, they deal with the emotional and spiritual aspects also, duly considering compassion, care, concern and respect for others. Poems of Kamala Das do depict the love for mother, grandmother, son and other family members. She adores her grandmother who loved her more than any others in the family.
The poems of Lalitha Venkateswaran deal with the various shades of love and man-woman relationship. Monika Varma’s love themes are deeply rooted in the great traditions of ancient Indian love poetry.

While dealing with the theme of love in their poetry, these poets describe love in various moods invariably extend towards man-woman relationship and the sexual tensions thereof. Eventually, they utilise sexual and erotic imageries also. They depict the theme of love and sex in a convincing manner. This attitude is developed because of the change in outlook on sex and love.

All along, the image of an Indian woman has been the one that is sanctified by our spiritual heritage. This legacy came through religious works, mythology and folklore, which carefully avoid mentioning the significance of sex in the life of a woman. Unfortunately, this legacy still holds, even today. It rejects feminine pleasures and sensations. The woman’s body becomes useful to the extent that it satiates the urges of the man and becomes a vehicle of procreation. There is no room to consider the implications of sex on the female mind. Female sexuality is still considered to be profane and vulgar. In our society, man is entitled to sexual freedom. Erotic capacity of a man is celebrated by appreciative words like ‘virile’, ‘potent’ and strong’. However, the sexual experience of a woman is
considered an eyesore, a fall, a depravity and an antithesis of femininity. Words like ‘cold’ and ‘frigid’ regulate the passivity of the female body and mind.

The modern women poets protest against de-sexing of women. They frown upon the conventional notion of Indian womanhood. For them, poetry reveals the quintessential woman. Their trump card is an exposition of female sexuality. They take the reader into labyrinth of body and sexual experiences, while depicting the feminine psyche. Contemporary Indian women poets consider sex as the essential part of human life. It is an irresistible and uncontrollable biological need. It gives them pleasure and happiness. They accept the challenging task of sharing their bodily experiences through their writings. They become free and candid in the portrayal of sex. They redefine themselves in the foreground of sexuality. The body becomes the central metaphor in their confessional poetry.

Kamala Das feels that what she gets in the name of love is nothing more than ‘skin’s lazy hungers’. She feels that man is always crazy of lust. Sexual union with him gives no satisfaction; rather it gives pain:

They said each
Of them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love ...

... The Sunshine Cat
Kamala Das describes the sex act as blissful in the following lines:

On the bed with him, boundaries of
Paradise had shrunk to mere
Six-by-two ... The Invitation

Poetry of Gauri Deshpande impresses the readers by the forthright and lyrical expression of feminine erotic impulses. For example,

I am earth
Vast deep and black and I receive
The first rain
Sweet generous
Lashing throbbing
It's smell forever in my blood
Its imprint deep within my quick
Yellow daisies burst out
On my breast and thigh
At its very touch ... Poems on a Lost Love

Most of the love poems of Gauri Deshpande describe the tensions in man-woman relationship based upon sexuality. Following lines are an example illustrating her frustrations:

We move into the inexplicable
Unintelligible darkness
Of sorrow, delay, departure, suspicion ... *The Eclipse*

*(in Poems on a Lost Love)*

Gauri Deshpande writes of sexual unfulfillment and the loss of her individuality. She revolts against the male domination. Her three volumes, *Between Births*, *Lost Love* and *Beyond the Slaughterhouse* display man-woman relationship, involving discontentment, tension and frustration. *Between Births* deals with the modern woman’s rebellion against the male domination. Her *The Female of the Species* opens itself to the female world. *Death and the Habit* deals with death. In her poem *Death*, the female persona feels that marriage is the second name of death. She is waiting for her end to come, treating it as a ‘tardy lover’ and husband. The all-pervading power of marriage in the society makes the persona succumb to this new visitor. Her poems beautifully express the frustrations that arise during simple routines of life - like love and sex.

Poets such as Mamta Kalia, Sunita Jain, Suniti Namjoshi, Margaret Chatterjee, Lalitha Venkateswaran, Vimala Rao have presented a picture of frustration in their relationships with men and in their married life. They expect physical happiness accompanied by mental and emotional fulfillment. The absence of accessories of the physical
love gives them a shock. They realise the barrenness of married life and write about their dissatisfaction in their poems.

As a feminist, Imitaz Dharkar finds repression of female sexuality the bane of the woman’s life. Patriarchal order has used the female body as a potent weapon to suppress the woman. Moral regulations, through a sense of guilt and shame, silence women’s voices. She protests against the interference of religion and social customs in the values of life felt sincerely by an individual. In the poem Battle-Line in Purdah, she expresses the conflict between the man and the woman, who can neither be lovers, nor husband and wife. Using purdah as a metaphor, she writes as follows:

She half remembers things from
Someone else’s life,
Perhaps from yours or mine
Carefully carrying what we do not own
Between the thighs,
A sense of shame ... Purdah

Women poets express the tension caused by male dominance in their poems. They are frustrated by the indifference of men towards their status. They are victims of the sexual harassment, who need to be
liberated from this tradition. They demand something more than the mere physical love. Kamala Das writes,

Woman, is this happiness

This lying buried beneath a man?

... The Conflagration

Sunita Jain is known for her candid expression. Her first volume of poetry, Man of My Desires, presents a typical feminine sensibility caught in the anguish of love and dejection. Her poetry depicts a woman caught in the whirlpool of desires, her need for love and fulfillment. She records the sensitive feelings of a love-lorn woman and how she loses her identity to adjust in a family:

I grow to your size
I chopped my wings;
Our creature existence
I thought would be
Bliss,
As you held me tight
Tightening your grip

... When you Fell, My Love (in Love Time)

Sunita Jain believes that a woman takes a new individuality to get adjusted to a man. Still she is held tightly by her husband. Women, while following the traditions of the society, have to surrender their
freedom and individuality to men. In her collection of poems \textit{Silences}, She voices out the injustice and impartiality in human relationship. She sings of the agony and anguish of love.

Sujatha Modayil is strongly aware of her feminine identity. She finds herself tossed to the common feminine destiny of suffering and her poems convey a deep sense of pain and despair caused by frustration in love. She writes,

\begin{quote}
Stones lay upon her eyes
And each day tears fell
Upon her face, a river bed
With five lines carved by misery 
\end{quote}

\textit{... Stones} (in \textit{The Attic of Night})

Mamta Kalia's collection of poems \textit{Tribute to Papa} is abound in the intensity of sexual love and passion. The poem \textit{Love Made A Housewife Out of Me} reveals the agonies of a modern housewife, the feelings of a textile designer, losing the charm of her earlier days. Another poem \textit{How Could He Do} reveals the sexual harassment of a woman at the work place by her senior. Although women are equally educated, talented and skilful, it is not at all recognised by the people in the society. They have to adjust themselves not only to their husbands but also to the other members in the family where
they lose their identity and lead a worthless existence. This is clearly expressed by Mamta Kalia, in one of her poems:

I no longer feel I'm Mamta Kalia
I'm Kamala
Or Vimla
Or Kanta or Shanta,
I cook, I wash,
I bear, I rear,
I sulk, I sag ... \textit{Anonymous}

Meena Alexander has published many critical articles. Her poetic volumes are \textit{Bird's Bright Ring, Without Place, I Root My Name, Stone Roots, House of a Thousand Doors, The Storm and Night Scene} and \textit{The Garden}. Among various themes in her poems, the themes reflecting the cry and torment of a woman's soul are predominant. In one of the poems, she says,

Light cannot mutilate
As sight does,
Only a woman
Mute in a blind land
Knows this ... \textit{Stained Words}
The helpless conditions like loneliness, boredom and humility lead some of the women poets to think of death and suicide. Death is shown as the ultimate way to escape from these problems. It is also considered as a means of salvation. Poets like Kamala Das, Sujatha Modayil, Sunita Jain, Suniti Namjoshi, Lila Ray, Christine Gomez, Vijay Goel, Thomas Gray, Nasima Aziz have chosen death and sorrow as the themes in some of their poems. Lila Ray writes,

The end was death.

The end is always death.

Does a man have the right to choose?

Sujatha Modayil expresses the idea that death is inescapable as follows:

I saw the trees stand bare,

Saw death would touch us too ... MinAelskeling (in Crucifixions)

Apart from these themes, modern Indian women writers have also become increasingly conscious of their identity crisis. They voice their concerns about their role in the society, expressing a note of dissent, wherever they find it necessary. Their interest in dealing with the problems of women and their assertion of women's point of view reflects their feminist awareness. A woman has no freedom of
thought, her participation and advice have not been given due credit. Elders in her childhood and husband later always control her. Women poets rebel against the society that imposed restrictions on them. Kamala Das expresses the following view:

Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said - be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants, fit in, Oh,
Belong, cried the categorisers

Monika Varma expresses the social restraint on women in one of her poems:

I climbed tree....Get down at once
It is unsuitable for young ladies,
The governess said

Lakshmi Kannan is also a poet advocating for self-awareness. She acknowledges the woman’s inner urges in the poem Karuppan and Karuppayi. Vimla Rao writes of the agonies of love, that love never brings comfort.

Social consciousness and concern also occupies an important role in Indian women writing in English. The poor, the slum dwellers,
beggars, poor laborers, servants, farmers, widows, dowry, violence, war, peace etc are described in many of the poems of Indian women like Mamta Kalia, Rukmini Nair, Eunice De Souza, Sujatha Modayil, Achla Bhatia, Leela Daramaraj, Monika Varma, Dorothy Sinha, Sujatha Bhatt, Mary Ann Gupta, Mary Das Gupta etc. These modern poets became aware of the social problems and the issues related to women and were bold enough to make others aware of it.

The woman poets in regional languages who deal with this new awakening are also recognised. Talakavathi in Tamil, Anuradha Potdar in Marathi, Vasantha Kannabiran, Manikonda Surya Kumari and Savithri in Telugu, Manjit Tiwana in Panjabi, Amrita Bharati in Hindi write about women and their problems like menstruation, sex, labour room experiences etc. Their imaginative efforts extend beyond the cultural expectations of womanhood.

In the post-independence period, the feminist awakening extends to women prose writers too. Novel as the main prose literary form has gained popularity among women readers as well as writers. It is a medium through which women communicate their feminist views, focusing on the injustice done to them in the society. Women voice their objections to this unfair treatment in their novels. Tales of women fighting for their respectable positions in the society, tragic
narratives, rebellion, suicide etc. are common in the novels written by women. Their themes attempt to inspire women to face the challenges and lead a meaningful life. A new kind of woman emerges as a result of various changes - honest and powerful in expressing the views and experiences. Slowly but definitely, feminism has entered into their writings. The most popular among the feminist novelists in English are Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Gita Hariharan, Gita Mehta, Nisha Da Cunha and Sharma Futehally. These novelists project woman as central figure, highlighting her hopes and frustrations. Through their characters, they present the dilemmas that are faced by the modern women in a traditional society. The female characters are portrayed as intellectuals, responsible, courageous, devoted to their duties, and longing for liberty. These characters are the representatives of the modern women.

Another feature of the women novelists is that they consistently make use of neurotic characters in their fictions. Kamala Markandaya investigates social and emotional bonds that shackle women. Her novels illustrate the ambivalence of change. Rukmini in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Sarojini in *A Silence of Desire*, Usha in *The Golden Honeycomb*, Premala in *Some Inner Fury* are all neurotic characters.
Novels of Kamala Markandaya express her feminist moral concern. In her novels, she marks the traditional attitude of the society towards women. She points out the need to believe the moral superiority of women in upholding the virtue of the family. She exhibits an awareness regarding the fulfillment of feminine identities.

Anita Desai is one of the major voices in Modern English fiction. The recurring theme in her novels is the agony of existence in a male dominated and conservative society. She creates a world of her own and analyzes the complexities of man-woman relationship in her novels, like *Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer?* etc. Several of the heroines in her novels cross the threshold to discover their ineptitude in handling the multiple pressures. Women are maddened by the gap between their aspiration to be free and their inability to cope with societal isolation. They undergo traumatic psychic experience. Sita, the heroine of *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is alienated from her husband. She calls men as animals, having only appetite and sex. But she realises that it is not easy to dissociate from such relation. In *Voices in the City*, Monisha feels suffocated in her new surroundings after marriage, due to the lack of mutual understanding between husband and wife.
She finds that she has only two options left - either to lead a worthless life or to commit suicide.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels are concerned with the plight of the modern Indian woman, who is trying to understand herself. They reflect the crisis situations faced by women in the changing social environment, focusing on the tensions in which the Indian woman is caught. Her characters are not exemplary feminist heroines, but women struggling to find their own voices. Her novels start with the confused phase of the heroines like Indu, Jaya, Kshama and Manju. Gradually these persona become more confident and assertive, exhibiting better control over their objectives and actions.

Nayantara Sahgal’s novels portray women who are oppressed by marriage and by political circumstances. Characters in her novels question the existing moral codes and values, while rebelling against the unacceptable social norms. They become aware of their emotional needs and continue to fight against the hostile environment. In The Day in Shadow, Smriti finds that her husband has totally different values that are unacceptable to her. She refuses physical intimacy and obtains divorce from him, asserting her individuality. Breaking the old tradition, she gives up intolerable subservient role and starts a new and dignified life with Raj.
There are several other Indian women novelists in English, who effectively deal with feminism. Uma Vasudev describes in *The Song for Anasuya* (1978) how Anasuya uses men as she wants and discards them. In Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977), a girl from Bombay is married into an orthodox Rajastani family. She is a representative of the modern educated woman, who is torn apart by tradition and modernity. She rebels against the oppressive situation and succeeds in changing everyone through patience and understanding. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) has a similar theme, portraying the rebelling girl under oppressive situations. Raji Narasimhan is also a feminist writer. In her novel *Forever Free*, the protagonist Shree does not find happiness in her life. She is deprived of freedom, love and happiness and breaks away from her husband to save her self-respect. She runs from one man to another in search of love and meaningful existence but in vain.

Some of the short story writers in English who emerged in the 1970s are feminist in their perspectives. Namita Gokhale expresses a woman's urge to explore her inner consciousness. The heroine is the free woman, symbol of prototype of emancipation and individuality. Shashi Deshpande, Raji Narasimhan, Nergis Dalal, Kamala Das,
Dina Mehta have dealt with women and their problems, in their short stories.

2.5 Male Indian Writers in English and Feminism

As far as the male Indian writers in English are concerned, their relative participation and involvement in dealing with the feminist problems has remained less than expected. K. Meera Bai observes:

> In Indian-English fiction too, though the 'new woman' finds recognition of her existence and support for her cause from some quarters, she makes her appearance in flesh and blood in the novels of women writers only.

Nonetheless, there are a few exceptional works by male writers too, such as, **The Old Woman and the Cow** by Mulk Raj Anand and **So Many Hungers** by Bhabani Bhattacharya, wherein, women characters and their problems have been given due importance. Writers like Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan have made full effort to understand the problems related to women in the changing society. But such male Indian writers, who assigned due merit to the role of women, and, those who succeeded in convincing the readers towards this cause by a fair treatment, are quite limited in number.
It is interesting to note that writers in regional languages also do not lag behind while portraying identity crisis in their works. Tarabai Shinde (Marathi), Kashibai Kanitkar (Marathi), Nanjanagudu Tirumalamba (Kannada), Kalyanamma (Kannada), M. K. Indira (Kannada), Shyamala Devi (Kannada), Triveni (Kannada), Tallapada Vishvasundaramma (Telugu), Bandaru Acchamamba (Telugu), Homavati Devi (Hindi), Chudamani Raghavan (Tamil), P. Vatsala (Malayalam), Varsha Adalja (Gujarati), Malini Bhattacharya (Bengali) are some of the women feminist writers in the Indian regional languages.

2.6 Conclusion

Broadly speaking, feminism is a phenomenon of social change that attempts to liberate women from the shackles and grip of male dominated society, enabling them to claim their right as free human beings. It intends to rebel against hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. The main objective of feminism is to improve the status of women and to provide equal opportunity and dignity with men. Feminism aims at compulsory education for women and improved employment. The writers, who were influenced by the feminist idea, involved themselves in expressing their ideas in their writings, which has led to the development of feminist literature.
The foregoing study reveals that many Indian women writers in English have reached a remarkable height of achievement. They have understood the techniques, tone, graft and structure and have applied them in their writings. They have chosen various themes like their male counterparts, but they have given special prominence to the role of women. They have understood the very problems and predicaments that have come in the way of the progress of women. Their works reveal various aspects of modern women's feelings and exhibit the fully awakened feminine sensibility and feminist views. These women writers are bold, frank and have shown realistic attitude towards love, sex, lust and man-woman relationships. They have created a new tradition in the Indo-English literature. Their achievements are evidently remarkable and they have gained an outstanding place in the Indo-English literature.

References


