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**Traces of Feminism in Ancient Indian Texts and
Feminist Perspectives in the Fiction of the Postcolonial Writers**

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Abstract: Feminism in India has its roots in the ancient Indian texts. Vedas and Upanishads preached supreme respect to women, as well, equal status. Manusmriti, advocated patriarchal system and authenticated the supremacy of men, due to which the status of women deteriorated over a period of time and it was reflected in Itihasas, the later Indian texts. Feminism in West is relatively a new movement when compared to ancient India. The first phase of feminist movement acclaims the credit for the white women movement of the West for equal rights, equal pay and suffrage. Western education has initialized and instigated the Indian society especially the women, realize their oppression and suppression which ultimately paved way to adapt the Feminist perspectives of the West. Postcolonial women writers worked hard for the emancipation of women in their writings. This paper humbly attempts a study of feminism in ancient India as well feminist concerns in postcolonial and diaspora writing with reference to the fiction of some of the postcolonial Indian women writers.

Key Words: ancient Indian Texts, Brahnavadinis, patriarchy, oppression, subjugation, feminism, female expression, postcolonial and diaspora writing

India has an established history of feminist consciousness from Vedic period. Ancient Indian philosophical texts disseminated equal status for women on par with men, into its society and culture. Women were accorded equal status in Vedic period in India which was later deteriorated in due course of time from Manusmriti. The intellectuality and equal status enjoyed by Rigvedic women was mentioned in ancient Indian literature. Brahnavadinis and Sadyodvahas were the learned, highly qualified women in Sanskrit texts. Brahnavadinis devoted their life to the study and practise of Vedas and remained spinsters throughout their lives whereas Sadyodvahas studied Vedas till their marriage. Women played key role in Vedic period and even ruled kingdoms as efficiently as their counterparts whereas in post Manusmriti period study of Vedas, chanting of some of the vibrant mantras and practice of many rituals were restricted for women.

In Indian context Vedas, Upanishads and ancient Indian Hindu texts considered women as co-equals of goddess trio: Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvathi. According to Hindu mythology Lord Shiva, the destructor or the transformer of the universe had given an equal status to the left half of his divine self to his consort Parvati, which depicts the concept of *dwandw*, a harmonious coexistence of male and female entities. Lord Vishnu the preserver had given a place to his consort Lakshmi in his chest "shankhasthala" and Lord Brahma the creator had given a place to his consort Saraswati in his palm.

instances from the mythological texts illustrate the dignity and respect bestowed upon their concerts and also exhibits the equal status given to them.

In the present scenario it can be interpreted as equal status for wife and husband, which should ultimately be resulted in no gender discrimination between man and women but the patriarchy and the "Manu Smriti" never allowed it in Hinduism. In the mythological texts women are considered powerful reincarnation of Shakti. Shaktism is a major tradition of Hinduism, wherein the metaphysical reality is considered as feminine deity, the goddess is supreme. But neither the Shivaitees nor the Shakteyas treated women as their equal counterparts and their interpretation of gender equality differed from that of their original preaching. Epics and Itihasas, the later Hindu texts reflected the society when women were treated as mere property. Polygamy was at its height, further worsened the status of women, compared to Vedic period.

Manu Smriti pronounced patriarchy, influenced the male psychology which over a period of time resulted in oppression, suppression, exploitation and subjugation of Indian women and cemented the evil practices like Sati, child marriages, wearing veil/purdah, culture and moral based strict rules for widows and Devadaasi system etc. Kautilya's Arthashastra strongly condemned women's liberty and preached subjugation of the fair sex, imposed illogical sanctions like they should not move out without father or husband or son's consent, indicates the existence of deeply established patriarchy. A number of restrictions are imposed on women by the patriarchy in Hinduism. In fact no religion has advocated the oppression of the marginalized sections of the society but on the flip side they are highly subjected to oppression, suppression and exploitation, the fault is mainly with the misinterpretations of the religious texts. They are exploited physically, psychologically, emotionally, sexually and forced to face unequal opportunities and gender biased social justice.

Women are not awarded a wholesome part in the social and cultural construct of the society. Even though women are equal part of the social, economic and cultural construct of the society, they are forced to encounter unequal opportunities and gender biased social justice. Moreover they are constantly imposed to strictly adhere to the moral and ethical values but they are not a taboo for the dominant male community. Women are directly or indirectly persuaded to protect their virginity whereas men have no sanctions for adultery. In India patriarchy is deeply engrossed in the minds of the people that in this large democratic country only 11.8% of women are in politics despite of their share of 49% of the population whereas it is more than 20% compared to neighbouring Pakistan, China and even a small country like Nepal. According to Economic Survey 2018 the developing country like Rwanda has more than 60% women representatives in Parliament in 2017. The survey points out the factors for the low participation are "domestic responsibilities, prevailing cultural attitudes regarding roles of women in society and lack of support from family were among main reasons that prevented them entering politics." (Financial Express)

The modern feminist activism in India owes to colonial education and colonial influence. Most of the critics state that beginning of Feminism in India can be asserted to the abolition of Sati a "watershed moment" in feminist movement. Modern women with feminist perspective started studying abroad, entered into male dominated domains like medicine, law and spearheaded the movements like suffrage. Now a-days women conquered the

also. These will humbly speak the role of feminism towards the need for gender equality. People were introduced and sensitized to Western feminist movement. Tagore's portrayal of women in Chandalika, Chitra and NatirPujainfluenced the feminist movement in India like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir in the West.

In the postcolonial world, space is recreated for women mainly due to postcolonial women writers. Women are empowering themselves, proving their efficiency in academics, administration, politics, and economy, achieving self-sustenance and becoming more independent. They are taking active role in social and cultural construct of the society. Women's issues like oppression, suppression, physical, psychological and sexual exploitation and women empowerment found the way into the writings of postcolonial women writers of India.

The female experience can be better expressed in women writing than in the predominant male expression. As literature and society are entwined deeply, the post-colonial women writers have tried an in depth analysis of female consciousness and psyche and explored the gradual transformation of the suppressed and suffering women to the status of psychologically and financially strong 'new women.' Postcolonial writers portrayed the discomfort and humiliation in married life, alienation in family, the fundamental challenge of survivability of women and girl child, domestic violence, economical dependence, traditional and socio cultural taboos imposed on women, quest for individual identity, social and gender biased justice are some of the major issues, the feminist trends that found their way into the postcolonial literature by women writers. Some of the India's most influential female writers who played a key role in changing the prevailing traditional mind set of women are MahaSweta Devi, Toru Dutt, IsmatChughtai, Kamala Das, Anita Deasi, Arundhati Roy, KiranDeasi, JhumpaLahiri, ShashiDeshpande, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Githahariharan, GayatriChakravortySpivaketc.

Mahasweta Devi, one of the prolific postcolonial writers, championed the cause of marginalised sections of the society like the tribals, Dalit women or housewives as well the naxals. Her most popular works are *HazaarChaurasi Ki Maa* (translated into English as *Mother of 1084*) and *Rudaali*. Sujata, the protagonist of *Mother of 1084*, has been portrayed as a strong woman who supports her son, Brati's active involvement in Naxal movement. In fact Brati is influenced by his mother and she moulds his character. Her family doesn't consider her even while confirming the betrothal ceremony of Tuil, the youngest daughter of Sujata or the non-observance of the death anniversary of Brati's engagement was fixed on the same day. This could be attributed to many Indian households where the opinion of women is least considered even in this space age. Readers can analyse the irrational discrimination to which Sujata is subjected at home. Sujata is aware of her husband's flirtatious behaviour, but she compromises for the sake of her children and family which is commonly found in the society. The sacrifice of women for the welfare of family is well appreciated in the patriarchal society whereas, if she tries to raise her voice or even a small shriek to protect her self-esteem will be suppressed immediately and it is the damage to women.

Anita Desai's *Where shall we go this summer?* as Sita's quest for female identity is the major theme of the novel. She is a contemporary woman that many Indian women can associate their alienation and disharmony in family life. Sita wonders about her fifth pregnancy and says "no positively". She is a contemporary woman and she has taken her own decision to go to Manori Island along with her four children and resolved "positively no" for giving birth to fifth child and questions the very basis of marriage and motherhood whereas her mythical namesake unquestioningly followed her husband Lord Sri Ram into forests for fourteen years with her own consent. Finally Sita resolves and compromises and the play ends on positive note. "The life of Sita is a study of feminine consciousness, the question of control of women's body, suffering and struggle within the frame work of conjugal life".

Kiran Desai is the winner of Man Booker prize for her most popular novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a marvellous portrayal of three successive generations of women ranging from meek, submissive and a victim of patriarchal society to the contemporary new women. Nimi is a traditional woman who suffers injustice and oppression of her husband and a silent sufferer like most other average women. The second generation women are Loli, Noni and Sai's mother. The transformation process takes place when Sai's mother elopes with a Russian and marries him, finally culminates with Sai's mother who returns to Kalimpong. Sai, the third generation woman is bold and wise enough to face the situation when she found herself betrayed.

Ismat Chughtai frankly portrayed female sexuality as subversive which expresses her feminist attitude and outspokenness. Kamala Das's poetry explores the theme of unfulfilled love and true love for which she yearns. Her poetry is intensely filled with love and passion. As she is a confessional poet she boldly expresses her emotions, truly feminine in her attitude. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is about family, relationships, innocence, rigid social classes, boundaries and caste system about the cross section of the society. Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri are some of the diaspora writers who explored the female psyche in accordance with feminist perspectives. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Feminism and Critical Theory* explores South Korean women's labour strike and tries to explain the complexity of feminism.

Conclusion:

Women of ancient India had enjoyed much liberty and equality. At a later stage religious texts were misinterpreted by the patriarchal society which is the ultimate cause for oppression of women. A gradual transition and transformation occurred in modern India due to western thought and the feminism of the West. Women found a strong voice in postcolonial literature by women writers. The transformation of women and their identity quest can be seen as they are coming up in every field equally with men and leaving their foot prints. They are much more liberated as their voice can be heard through the stone walls of social and cultural taboos and even though they are chained by the load of customs and traditions. Kishwar Naheed aptly says in her poem "I Am Not That Woman" that her voice cannot be smothered by stones and the chains cannot smother her fragrance as light cannot be hidden by darkness, which depicts the emergence of a contemporary strong new women.

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