

## WOMEN WRITINGS: A REVIEW

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### Abstract

Women's subjugation is an old style of telling tales about them. Women have been considered as submissive to men since time immemorial. Even great thinkers and philosophers have regarded women as inferior to men hence Aristotle, the great philosopher pointed out that femininity is an incomplete version of masculinity. He believed that a woman lacks qualities that are essential to men. He believed that women are defective by nature and incomplete in comparison to men. They are mentally and physically weaker than men and should passively allow men to dominate. Aristotle used biology to reinforce his claim. Aristotle opined that women are defective, because they cannot reproduce semen which contains a full human being. When a woman and man cohabit, the man supplies the substance of human being (the soul), whereas woman provides only the matter in the form of nourishment. Aristotle said that a woman is comparable to an infertile male.

**Keywords:** women's writings, legends, songs, tales, tradition.

Freud, the well known psychoanalyst was also prejudiced against women as he postulated the notion of 'Penis-Envy' in order to define female sexuality.

According to Freudian psychoanalysis, 'Penis-Envy' is a theorized reaction of a girl during the course of her psychoanalytic development. The little girl recognizes the distinction between male and female gender when she notices visible penis of her male counterparts. This deficiency instills in her a penis envy as she considers male gender superior. Rousseau defined male-female niche as well as education on the basis of his prejudiced view of female nature. He held the view that a man should be strong and active whereas a woman should be weak and passive. Fidelity, modesty, and devotion are the key attributes that Rousseau sought in a perfect woman. As far as women's education is concerned, Rousseau expressed the view that women's education must be planned in relation to men.

The educational ideals of Rousseau promoted ideology that moulds women into a patriarchal niche. He postulated the roles of women in the following terms: "To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend to him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all times, and this is what she should be taught while she is young."

This gender bias was not limited to theoretical level, rather in every realm of society women were treated as subaltern to men. Women's place in family, the basic institution of society, was secondary and marginalized. Traditional family institutions set a niche for men as head of the family whereas women were destined to play secondary roles of house-keeping and child rearing. In Greek and Roman cultures the head of the family (i.e. male) was entitled to authority and allowed to dominate over the women of the family. Similar authority was installed in the form of *Pater Familia* (the father) in Roman family institution. In Indian context the same authority of *Karta* (the head of the family) has been taken for granted. Thus the patriarchal marginalization of women started from family or private sphere and pervaded the public sphere. The ideal women were embodiment of traits that adhered to family responsibilities. Certain submissive and slavish tendencies were defined as essential features of womanhood. The defiance of this patriarchal niche would result in opprobrium and public disgrace for women. Hence, women were confined to the domestic spaces and forced to adhere to duties as docile mothers, sisters and wives. The patriarchal notion of cultural preservation also exacerbated the condition of women. Moral and spiritual sanctity of society was measured in relation to the female body. A regressive patriarchal bias is found in the notion of 'femininity' that is a "set of socially constructed characteristics applied to women. Among these characteristics are nurturing, emotional, irrational, subjective, passivity, dependency, other."

The assertion of male dominance found expression in the code of moral conduct inculcated upon women whereas men's wantonness was considered as an expression of masculinity. With the passage of time, women's marginalization took various forms such as commodification of women for sexual, reproductive and entertainment purposes. In order to "aggrandize their aggressive phallic selves" men wielded female biology as a basis of women's incarceration to domestic space. Women's incarceration was justified in the name of women's vulnerability to moral degradation.

Since women writers dealt with themes of marginalization and domestic incarceration, their works were reckoned perfunctory and below the rank of literary merit. Women writers were expected to write in decent language, and the suitable role that the patriarchy ordained was of the writers of children's literature.

The oral tradition was replete with myths, legends, songs, and fables. Initially, women's writings were the written version of oral tradition. Poetry and drama emerged as the initial written forms. The novel came out at a later stage.

A brief introduction to feminism is vital in order to interpret the texts of the four women authors. However, Rokeya's writings cannot be assessed as the outcome of western feminist discourse. Rokeya's writings were far ahead of her western counterparts as the first wave feminism "focused on the needs of middle class educated women" and Rokeya's feminist concerns encompass women from every strata of society.

The word "Feminism" is originally derived from French and it is applied to the women's movement in the nineteenth century. French dramatist Alexander Dumas first used this term in 1872 in a pamphlet *L' Hommefemme* to indicate women's movement for their rights. Feminism is a movement which desires to obtain socio-economic, moral, religious, political, educational and legal parity for women. Literary feminism is not an outcome of twentieth century women's movements. Its roots can be traced to the works of Sappho and to Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata* in ancient Greece. Aristophanes depicted women as physically and intellectually superior to men. Chaucer's depiction of the wife of Bath also has feminist implications as she "values experience over authority and was more than a match for each of her five husbands." Christin de Pisan, in

the Middle Ages, challenged the authority of male critics of her age. In Renaissance and seventeenth century, women emerged as pioneers in the literary arena. Mary Wollstonecraft advocated the enlightenment of French Revolution for women. In the nineteenth century many women writers emerged in both Europe and America.

The Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Margaret Fuller and Emily Dickinson are the prominent women writers of the nineteenth century. Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Hilda Doolittle, Gertrude Stein are some modernist women writers.<sup>^</sup> Despite a long list of women writers, women were subservient to men and they were deprived of education as well as financial liberty.

Early twentieth century feminist criticism encapsulates a variety of feminist issues such as re-writing of literary history in order to incorporate hitherto neglected contributions of women, the exploration of a female literary tradition, theories of sexuality and gender on the basis of psychoanalysis and Marxism as well as gender roles in both male literature and criticism. Twentieth century feminism also questioned various literary genres that perpetuated male dominance, for instance, the epic glorifies masculine traits and heroism whereas the lyric is sometimes emotional and feminine. The First Wave Feminists did not call themselves “feminists”. The term “feminist” was used in the late 1960s, with the emergence of second wave feminism. The Second Wave Feminism was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the US whereas in the UK it was impinged by the labour right movement. It was sometimes referred to as the “women's movement.” Mary Wollstonecraft has a significant place in the history of feminism. Her polemical work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)* presents a fit reply to Rousseau's views regarding women. Wollstonecraft claims that by omitting women, the goals of liberty, equality and fraternity will not be fulfilled.

Wollstonecraft refits the age old patriarchal assumptions that women are governed by emotions and do not have rational faculty. Virginia Woolf is also an important figure in the history of feminist criticism. Her feminist concern encapsulated the issue of men dominated language, and women's writings in the context of social and economic status. Woolf advocates economic independence for women in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. She revolted against the conventional gender norms that marginalise women in public and private spheres of society. *A Room of One's Own* contains two lectures; Woolf delivered on “Women and Fiction”. The title of the book presents a metaphor of women's space and intellectual liberation. Woolf asserts, “A woman must have money and a room of her own, if she is to write fiction.” Woolf advocates economic and psychological liberation for women in order to use their natural flair in the field of writing. In an analogy, Woolf compares fiction to a spider's web as a web cannot be spun without any support structure; similarly literature also needs grossly material things. Woolf is of the view that the economic deprivation of women is their intellectual impoverishment. She associates intellectual freedom for women with their financial freedom.

Simon de Beauvoir, who is an eminent feminist prior to the second wave feminism, is famous for her radical text *The Second Sex (1949)*. She has an ideological proximity with Jean Paul Sartre, an existentialist philosopher. Simon de Beauvoir presents patriarchal concept of “masculine” and “feminine”.

Masculinity is considered as the absolute human type and man is assumed to represent humanity in general whereas women are considered as merely negative objects. In the second wave feminism, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique (1963)* dealt with the lives of middle class US women. “The mental and emotional state of educated middle class housewives tied to home and domesticity” was the concern of Betty Friedan's book. The second wave feminism was

criticized for its focus on heterosexual, middle class and white women, ignoring the issues of Black women, working class women and lesbians.

Attia Hosain's feminist concern encapsulates both upper class women and women of lower and middle strata of society. Similarly in Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain's writings "class race had little importance and sisterhood was only one motivating force."

From 1970, feminism changed into diverse facets and various theories of feminism emerged e.g. Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Third-World Feminism, and Eco-Feminism.

Liberal Feminism is also called "Moderate Feminism". Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, and John Stuart Mill, the eighteenth century writers are considered as liberal feminists. Reason and rationality are the key attributes of liberal feminism. This is a movement that strives for amelioration of women by providing them equal opportunities in socio-political arena in patriarchal society. Liberal feminists believe that the liberal democracy has a capability to end gender oppression if women are allowed to participate in the social, political, and economic structure of society. Liberal feminists do not uphold that new political, economic and social categories should be structured in order to end gender oppression; rather women's full enfranchisement into every arena of society will eliminate gender segregation.

Radical Feminism is another school that emerged out of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s. Radical Feminists in contrast to Liberal Feminists, uphold the construction of new political, economic and social categories to end the patriarchal oppression of women. Radical Feminism propagates that the cause of women's oppression is biological and institutions of marriage and family are created in order to subordinate women's status. Radical Feminism also hits hard at the "institutionalized heterosexuality" and views it as the root of patriarchal control of women. Radical Feminism holds the patriarchy responsible for the oppression of women. According to Radical Feminists in a patriarchal system male domination exists and thus a male culture is developed.

Radical feminists want women's culture in place of patriarchal culture. Shulamith Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) argued that "women's reproductive and nurturative role is the cause of their oppression and that technology that will end women's need to be reproductive vessels and new social structures are needed to free women." Mary Daly, a white US feminist theologian in her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta ethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) propounded the construction of a new language, "a gynomorphic language" in order to displace the language of patriarchy as the patriarchy perpetuated itself through language. Cultural radical feminists glorified womanhood and emphasized that feminine characteristics should be celebrated.

The third school of feminism is Marxist Feminism that views gender oppression as a product of class oppression. Marxist Feminists postulate that the elimination of capitalism is "the means for ending women's oppression." Moreover sexual division of labour under capitalism consolidates women's marginalization. Women's labour is confined to domestic space whereas man's labour encompasses every realm of society. Women's underpayment for their work as well as their household duties that are unpaid, are highlighted in Marxist Feminism. Third World Feminism questions the notion of female identity and subjectivity under colonial domination. Moreover patriarchal imperialism and sexual/ racial imperialistic practices in literature and other socio-political and economic arena are also debated in Third World Feminism. It is impinged by Edward Said's *Orientalism* and post colonial discourse. Third World Feminism highlights the nexus of patriarchy and imperialism. It underscores the sense of "otherness" in patriarchal-

imperialistic practice to the colonized subjects, particularly to women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty is an important figure in Third World Feminism. Her essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse* (1991) critiques western feminism for “making a monolith of Third World Women.” The lives, experiences and writings of Third World women are colonized by western feminism, as the needs and cultural differences of Third World women are neglected by western feminism.

French feminist philosopher Francoise d' Eaubonne first used the term Ecofeminism in her book *La Feminisme ou la mort* (1976). D' Eaubonne stressed on a balanced relationship with the environment and the end of patriarchy. Population growth and degradation of the environment is closely linked with the patriarchal view of women as merely reproductive bodies. Rosemary Reuther in her book

*New Women/ New Earth* (1975) associated women's liberation with that of “radical reshaping” of human treatment of nature. Some eco-feminists highlight women's stronger physical, emotional and spiritual ties to nature and assert that women ethically interact with the environment in comparison to their male counterparts.

Indian literature in English consists of two types of writings. The first category comprises English writings by Englishmen about their experiences of Indian subjects, and the second category presents Indian literature in English written by the native Indians. The literature written in English either by Indians or Englishmen was called as 'Anglo-Indian' literature. Many scholars like E.F. Oaten, Professor P. Sheshadri, Dr. Bhupal Singh and George Sampson included both categories in Anglo-Indian writings. The term ‘Indo-Anglian’ was used for the first time in 1883 to describe “a volume printed in Calcutta containing 'Specimen Compositions from Native Students.’” K.N.M. Iyengar later used it in 1943, as the title of his first book. Hence, the later term ‘Indo-Anglian’ hints at the demarcation of the English writings by white and non-white writers. Indian literature in English has been targeted by some Western as well as Indian critics. It was said that since English is a foreign language for Indians, it cannot express genuine feelings and emotions. W.B. Yeats holds the view that “No man can think or write with music or vigour except in his mother tongue.” Similarly Indian critics, Iqbal Singh, M. Chalapathi Rau disparage Indian writings in English.

Kailasapathy and Anantha Murthy remark: “English with most Indians is still a language of official public affairs, of intellectual and academic debates. They do not use English for their most intimate purposes to think, and feel, bless and curse quarrel and kiss.” But the artistic excellence of Indian writers in English like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Santha Ramarau, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy and several other writers have silenced the critics of Indian English literature.

Tom Dutt was the first Indian woman who wrote in English. She presents archetypal and mythical images of Indian womanhood through the characters of Sita and Savitri. Tom Dutt's women are steeped in Indian tradition of self sacrifice and devotion. Henry Derozio, a male writer, vividly portrayed the denigrated and ghastly conditions of women owing to the inhuman tradition of *Suttee* in his long narrative poem *The Fakir of Jungheera* (1882). The poem narrates the story of a young high caste widow Nuleeni, who is rescued by her ex-lover, a fakir fi-om the funeral pyre. The poem presents a woman oppressed by asphyxiating traditions.

Raja Rao projects fundamental and archetypal images of woman in his novels. By presenting archetypal images, he espouses woman's role as a preserver and protector of home, and culture. In his novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, he gives an idealized description of woman.

Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulation of space, the knowing in knowledge; the woman is fire, movement, clear and rapid as the mountain stream; the woman is that which seeks against that which is sought. To Mitra, she is Varuna, to Indra, she is Agni, to Rama, she is Sita, to Krishna, she is Radha. Woman is the meaning of the word, the breath, touch, acts; woman that reminds man of that which he is and reminds herself through him of that which she is. Woman is kingdom, solitude, time, woman is growth, woman is death; for it is through woman that one is born; woman rules, for it is she, the Universe.

Despite idealization and glorification of womanhood, several women writers dealt with the stark reality of women's marginalization. These women writers revolted against the idea of maternity, a niche particularly emphasized by the patriarchy. They attempted to define parental responsibility. Male sexual vagrancy was criticized by the women writers as a rejoinder to the negative image of infidel women.

Am Dutt, Tom Dutt, and Sarojini Naidu were pioneers of English poetry by Indian women. In the pre-independence era, there were some other women poets like Themis, Savita Devi, Nilima Devi, Lotika Ghose and Elsa Kazi who exhibited their talents in the field of Indian English poetry. Leela Dharamraj, Kamala Das, Monika Verma, Margaret Chatterjee, Tapati Mukherji, Tillotma Rajan, Suniti Namjoshi, Sujatha Bala Subramaniam, Mary Erlukar, and Gauri Deshpande wrote with a sense of individualism and feminist concern in the postindependence era. Apart from poetry, Indian fiction in English was also produced by women writers. Tom Dutt wrote French and English novels. Both her novels *Bianco, or the Young Spanish Maiden* and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* were autobiographical projections. Due to her early death, Tom Dutt could not complete *Bianca*. It appeared in *Bengal Magazine* in 1878. Raj Lakshmi Devi's *The Hindu Wife, or The Enchanted Fruit* (1876) and Kmpabai Sattianandhan's *Kamala, A Story Of Hindu Life* (1894), and *Saguna, A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895) are worthy of mention as women writings in Indian English fiction.

Comelia Sorabji, a writer of short stories dealt with the marginalization of women. She presented the themes of domestic incarceration of women in her collection *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901). The same theme of *oi purdah* culture is also dealt with by Iqbalunnisa Hussain in her *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household*. In the post-independence era, women writers were impinged by the feminist movement. They questioned the patriarchal authority over the literary arena. With the expansion in popularity of English language in the post Independence era, more and more women writers opted for English as a mode to register their protest against the andocentric practices. Literature, written by women, presents themes of alienation, deprivation, and women's quest for identity. The themes of the novels and poetry also express social and economic exploitation of women. Women characters are shown vociferously resisting the patriarchal practices. In contrast to mythical feminine figures of Sita and Savitri who present sacrificing and suffering images of women, the feminine characters do not capitulate to patriarchal authority. With the advent of various facets of feminism, different aspects of feminism are visible in the works of modern women writers.

After the Second World War, “many women novelists of quality” contributed to Indian fiction in English. Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Santha Ramarau, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai are the prominent figures in Indian English fiction. Santha Ramarau contributed to English fiction with her two novels. *Remember the House* (1956), and *The Adventuress* (1970). Her first novel exposes the existential predicament of the narrator-protagonist through her experiences of cultural shock. *The Adventuress* is an autobiographical novel which presents the theme of East-West encounter. The female protagonists, Indira in

*Remember the House* and Kay in *The Adventuress* are portrayed as effective, realistic and individualistic in comparison to the male characters.

Kamala Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) discusses the adverse impacts of industrialization and modern technology on the rural life. *Some Inner Fury* also presents a “tragedy engineered by politics.” *A Silence of Desire* focuses on common themes of science against superstition, religion versus materialism and East- West encounter. In *A Handful of Rice*, Kamala Markandaya discusses the predicament of lower middle class people, living on the poverty line.

The novel sheds light on the problems of unemployment, mass migration from villages to cities in search of better prospects of sustenance, corruption, class-consciousness between upper and lower strata of society and the capitalist exploitation of poor. In *The Coffers Dams*, Kamala Markandaya expresses her concern for the impacts of industrialization on the natural landscape. Tribal life is devastated by ruthless industrialization. *The Nowhere Man* presents the rootlessness of migrants in the alien culture of the host country. The novel portrays the rampant racism of England in the sixties. The protagonist is burnt alive by his racist neighbour. Nayantara Sahgal has political roots and her novels deal with the Indian political situation. She is the niece of Pandit Jawahar Lai Nehru and her writings bear the imprint of Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. Having been brought up with Eastern values and Western education, Sahgal presents East-West encounter.

Her first novel *A Time to be Happy* exemplifies the alienation of a western educated Indian in his native land. Her next novel *This Time of Morning* also presents the dilemma of identity. Indian literature written by women in postcolonial era, mainly discusses the issues of female identity. Exploration of female subjectivity in order to create feminine identity free from the shackles of patriarchy is a recurring theme in modern Indian fiction by women. The women writers have used the technique of Bildungsroman, to show the process of intellectual maturity of the female protagonist. Santha RamaRau's *Remember the House* (1956), Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Ruth Pravar Jhabvala's *To Whom She Will* (1955), Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) can best present the Bildungsroman technique.

Among the post- independence women writers, some Muslim women also made significant contribution in Indian English writings. Attia Hosain, Zeenuth Futehally, Qurratul Ain Hyder, Suhaila Abdulali, Zahida Zaidi, Samina Ali, Shama Futehally are significant Muslim writers. Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951) presents the plight of a woman caught in a marriage of convenience. Zohra is married to Bashir against her wishes and leads a life void of emotional fulfillment.

Zohra is attracted to Hamid who reciprocates her feelings. Hamid courts her and enjoys her company. When things begin to get serious, he withdraws quoting morality as an excuse. Futehally's contribution lies in highlighting the subversive corruption of upper class society. Hamid did not consider morality when he started his affair. Eventually Hamid leaves Hyderabad. In a tragic ending, Zohra voluntarily nurses the victims of plague and eventually contracts the disease.

Visalakshi Menon says “Though mildly feminist, this novel does not have the anger and defiance that fired the imaginations of other Muslim women writers of this period such as Ismat Chughtai, Rasheed Jahan and Atia Hosain, though some of the concerns are common.”

Shama Futehally is another modern writer who discusses the “challenges of urbanization, corruption, generation gap, communalism after the partition, the joint family system and the nuptial storms in life.” In her first novel *Tar a Lane* (1993), Shama Futehally presents the themes

of patriarchal exploitation along the problems of India as an emerging nation. The novel deals with the ups and downs in the life of a Muslim family. Tara's character develops in the end as "a self assertive woman of India", who casts off her image of docile daughter and submissive wife. Shama Futehally's second novel *Reaching Bombay Central* (2002) presents "her troubled feelings about the increasing intolerance and communalism." The novel does not focus on any feminist issue; rather it presents the writer's feelings of insecurity and vulnerability due to the growing communal divide. She wrote another book *In the Dark of the Heart: Songs of Meera* which is widely acclaimed. Shama Futehally also translated the works of some famous Urdu poets like Ghalib, Sahir Ludhianvi, and Siraj Aurangabadi. Suhaila Abdulali's first novel *The Mad Woman of Jagore*, presents her eco-feministic concerns. She also sheds light on the plight of lower class women as well as unscrupulous exploitation of natural resources in a capitalist system. The present thesis studies the works of four women authors Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Attia Hosain, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri. Their works deal with the themes of cultural displacement and feminine identity. On the issues of cultural displacement and cultural conflict many male authors like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, V.S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Nirad Chaudhary have contributed to the literary arena. Similarly some female authors like Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal are appreciated by the critics for their presentation of the complexities of migration. Before assessing the works of four women authors, it is imperative to define cultural displacement and feminine identity. Cultural displacement in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri takes place due to the migratory experiences of the characters as her works present the lives of second and third generation immigrants. The cultural displacement in the works of the other three authors is for different reasons. Culture, in the view of Welsh cultural theorist Raymond Williams is "an individual habit of mind; the state of intellectual development of a whole society; the arts; and the whole way of life of a group or people." The fourth definition is used in order to understand cultural displacement of migrants in an alien culture, whereas the second definition of culture "the state of intellectual development of a whole society" is applied in order to interpret cultural displacement of oppressed women living in India or abroad. Women are culturally displaced as their intellectual development is curbed and their individual habit of mind is colonized by the local patriarchy in association with colonialism, feudalism and capitalism.

In Rokeya's works it is the association of patriarchy with colonialism that renders women culturally displaced and without any identity. Attia's works display the association of feudalism with the patriarchy whereas Arundhati Roy's *The God of Things* evinces the exploitation of nature and women. Feminine identity helps women to achieve liberation from patriarchy. Roles ordained by the patriarchy reduce women to a subaltern status. Women's quest is to cast aside patriarchal roles and gain freedom from the shackles of patriarchy.

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