

FICTION: A STUDY OF MODERN INDIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Britannica defines Feminism as: the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. The term “feminism” has been derived from a French word “féminisme.” Feminism didn't appear all of a sudden and made abrupt changes the society. It was a gradual process that was marked by the keen studies of the women's issues all around the globe. And when there was a sense of realization developing in the minds, Feminism started evolving as a means of raising the voice for the Equality. It can be comprehended that, “women were gradually asserting themselves to get the right to be treated like human beings; secondly, they were also by now convinced that this change in their position was possible thanks to the liberalizing and equalizing forces unleashed in the world by the capitalist-socialist combine.”

In most areas women are confined to the private sector, unlike men who have public space. Since women are explicitly created only for domestic or personal space, other aspects beyond this scope are also not considered important. Education, for example, is inevitable with instances of gender segregation where women are comparatively given fewer options for their career and personal study options. Men also hold high positions at this stage of life, when they are independent and "qualified" to choose their educational and professional endeavors, as they are to be part of the "public" sphere and to be part of the family. They are the only earners. Feminism evolved in a way to address the atrocities, differences and segregation that women face in their daily lives.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the different connotations of the terms used in feminist studies, which discussed various oppressions of women, private public dichotomy, social and political injustice, and neglect of other gender roles and gender comparisons, courageous and revolutionary feminist writers and leaders were at various stages.

Women's education had also become an important issue to be raised and the lack of education had worsened the condition of women in the preceding years and eras. Women were educated about skills that could be helpful in a "domestic purpose", for example, embroidery, cooking, etc.

Feminists involved in this form of feminism call it "radical" because they believe that oppression of women is the most fundamental and widely spread form of oppression. It exists across racial, economic, cultural boundaries and is found in many regions around the world. The patriarchal structure prevailing in the society is the root cause of the subordination of women.

Considering the rise and development of feminism in the Indian context, most critics classify Indian feminism into 3 waves. India was already battling British colonialism in the 20th century. In addition, there was a marked increase in women's movements and reforms which emerged as a political and social movement. The period of Indian feminism is periodically divided into pre-independence and post-independence years which include differences and revolutionary changes.

"*The History of Feminism and Doing Gender in India*", an essay by Rekha Pandey (University of Hyderabad, School of Social Sciences, Department of History and Center for Women's Studies, Hyderabad), marks this division of women's movements in the Indian historical context.

"For the reformers, the status of Indian women, as it was in the 19th century, was extremely low and therefore their efforts were directed towards an overall improvement in the status of women through legislation, political action and the promotion of education" (Pandey, 2015)

Yuthika Mishra in her essay "*Feminism: Diversity and Context*" talks about the first phase of feminism that began in India. "The first phase began in the late 19th century when socio-religious reforms inspired women's upliftment and gender equality," she says . The issues that inspired the movement were the social practices that harassed women. Practices like dowry, sati system, purdah system, illiteracy among women were the main reasons for the struggle and the beginning of reforms.

However, there were some prominent names that helped give a new voice to women in the reforms. Savitribai Phule was one such staunch Indian feminist who fought for the rights of women. She was one of the pioneers who gave women the right to education. To put an end to the shameful practice of female feticide and feticide " Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha" was established by him. Being a Dalit woman, she was subjected to more atrocities than other class women. However, this did not stop her reform movements and she courageously stood up for Dalit women, widows and rape victims so that these women could earn a respectable place in the society.

Savitribai Phule, along with another feminist leader, Fatima Sheikh, founded a school to encourage education for women from lower communities. Fatima Sheikh is also considered as the first Muslim female teacher of India.

“Thus, the education for girls was not to prepare them for self-reliance, independent and emancipation and to train them to follow some profession but to be good housewives, mistress of the house and stove” (Pandey; J. Kameshwari, 1987).

Ramabai Ranade, the founder of "Seva Sadan" in the Maharashtrian cities of Mumbai and Pune. Ranade herself was devoid of education in her childhood. Her husband was the first person to help her get an education and acquire skills.

One cannot forget the name of Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the forerunner of "Brahmo Samaj". She was one of the leaders who worked hard to end the evil practices of Sati and child marriage.

Anees Jung is considered an important feminist writer for two reasons. One, she enters the world of ordinary Indian women in *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* in 1987, to document and symbolically the reality of her life, a world of deprivation, oppression, hope and a sense of trust and community. And at the same time, restores new images of women. Secondly, she turns the ethnographic study of a social group located in time and space into a poetic account of the lives of these women.

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Shashi Deshpande is also one of the prolific Indian feminist writers and her works have abundant description of the plight of women. Many of his works depict women in the subjugation of men in society. "Infiltration" is a text that deals with the aspect of marital rape.

Shashi Deshpande's '*Modernism*' by Alpana Sharma Wright State University discusses the works of Shashi Deshpande. The author says, "Deshpande in his essays often returns to the isolation of the English-language female writer in India: "There was nothing, no one on whom I could model myself... I was only myself. I don't want to write like this, not like this, not like this" ("*The Dilemma of the Woman Writer*" 229)."

Alpana Sharma, in her essay, also references the statements of other critics and their views on Shashi Deshpande's works:

Alpana Sharma says, "Both Nancy Allen Batty and Saikat Mazumdar identify Deshpande as a modernist (as opposed to realist) writer. According to Batty,

"The persistent tendency to call Deshpande a realist author neglects many of the most distinctive features of his writing: his frequent use of modernist techniques such as first-person approaches, free indirect discourse, and stream of consciousness; the temporary disruption of his work; and the twentieth implicit and explicit credit in his work to existentialist writers such as Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir in the middle of the century. (xxxv)"

... For Mazumdar, this beauty emerges as a productive tension between Deshpande's social realism ... and his modernism, which is to say, fragmented expressions of a subjectivity.

Manju Kapoor is a significant addition to the canon as she is one of the few female English writers to write on the subject of division from the point of view of women. "Difficult Daughters" is one of her most acclaimed works, which received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1999. In one of his interviews, he said, "The fight for fairness, equality for a kind of more holistic interaction between the genders, something to which either gender or gender is sensitive, otherwise, if it's only one, it won't work."

Another Indian novelist Shobha De is known for her works that depict social realities.

'Speed Post: Letters to My Children', which was published in the year 1991, is one of his widely coveted works. In letter form, this text deals with the relationship between mother and children. The work deals with observations of a mother's interactions with her children and the process of growing up. There are many aspects that the mother has discussed. As a "responsible" and "nurturing" mother, interactions through letters in the text establish the social norm that expects mothers to be solely responsible for the proper upbringing of their children.

Kamala Das is a prominent figure in the Indian literary tradition who wrote under the pseudonym of Madhavi Kutty. She was born on March 1934 in pre-partition India with a literary heritage. Her grandfather-uncle Nalappat Narayan Menon was a poet and philosopher, and her mother Balamani Amma was a noted poetess. Under the influence of such eminent literary figures, Das nurtured her love for writing at an early age. She was convinced of the grandeur of her grandfather-uncle's business as well as her mother's writings which attracted her in a very good way. Her writing was largely influenced by her mother's poems about motherhood and devotion to her male counterpart. Das was educated privately till the age of fifteen and then she was married to Madhav Das, who was much older than her. In a letter to her sister Sulochana Nalapat, Das writes of how he succumbed to the will of her parents and approved of their arranged marriage. "I was persuaded to marry, and I didn't have the courage to refuse what my father wanted me to do. I haven't shown by a single word or sign that I felt trapped and disappointed"

Elsewhere, she describes arranged marriages as a mission:

"I was sent away to protect my family's

Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some

Abstractions, sent to another city to be

A relative's wife"

Madhav Das worked at the Reserve Bank of India in Bombay and was an expert in economics and rural credit projects. In 1966 he collaborated with Eleanor Margaret Hough to produce a revised edition of his book *The Co-operative Movement in India*. Das had a

strained relationship with her husband, whom she describes as follows: “As a marriage, in the traditional sense, mine was a flop. There was a silence between us that seemed endless to me, although sometimes I broke them with a word or two about my little son or the grocery bill” (187).

After her marriage, Das largely lived in Bombay with her husband, who was posted there. However, he also had stays in both Delhi and Calcutta. Before coming to Delhi, Das had suffered an internal turmoil, which was followed by a nervous breakdown, psychiatric treatment and a prolonged stay in Malabar. Das recalls this phase as the most difficult period of her life, paving the way for utter helplessness and loss of hope. It was around this time that she began to write poems and painted paintings, which depicted 'demons having intercourse with snakes' (24). Her poems and paintings reflected her state of mind as she found herself doubting the reality of the outside world.

DISCUSSION

Kamala Das became a mother at the age of sixteen and was hardly mature at the time of the birth of her third child. Initially she wrote to supplement her family income which brought with it "a therapeutic process of self-exploration and the formation of a unique identity". Later she was able to find the literary artist in herself and wrote without any constraints and financial objectives. After that, her writings were influenced by issues of female sexuality, the much-anticipated topic of sex and its 'liberating impulse'.

Das's outspoken portrayal of the sex lives of middle-class housewives received a hostile and hypocritical response. Her own father strongly opposed this and even asked the editor to suspend the publication of her fiction. Subsequently, she had to deny the veracity of her autobiography and pronounce it as part-fiction.

As a bilingual writer, Das wrote fluently in both Malayalam and English while maintaining a high standard of content and style in both languages. Her collections in Malayalam include *Mathilukal*, *Oru Pakshiyude Manam* and *Thanuppu*. In 1965, she published a collection of English poems called *Summer in Calcutta*. The book gained immense popularity as it saw the rise of a woman who voiced her selfishness by speaking about her "urge for love, the agony of her betrayal". She spoke of the feminine self, urging women:

“Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of

Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,

The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your

Endless female hungers” (Das 12)

Das's other collections of English poems include *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, *Manas*, *Alphabet of Lust* and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. She was a writer of remarkable versatility, writing across genres and often grappling with varying thematic concerns. Some of her famous stories are “Pakshiyude Manam”, “Nepayasam”, “Thanuppu” and “Chandana Marangal”. Her most received and critically acclaimed novel is *Neeramathalam Putha Kalam*.

Kamala Das is a celebrity as a poet who has traveled extensively to present her poetry at the University of Duisburg-Essen, University of Bonn, University of Duisburg, Kingston University, Concordia University and at literary festivals such as the Adelaide Writers' Festival and the South Bank Festival.

She also held high positions as Vice President of Kerala Sahitya Akademi, President of Kerala Forestry Board, President of Kerala Children's Film Society, Editor of Kavi Patrika. Das opened up new possibilities in English poetry with her poems, and in particular her two later volumes, *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). Kamala Das has a special debt on women writers. They mapped the area for postcolonial women in social and linguistic terms,' (12) writes Eunice de Souza.

Kamala Das spent her childhood at Nalapat House and was educated at a European school in Calcutta for a few years. Her father was a busy man, working in an automobile firm that sold Rolls Royces, Humbers and Bentleys to Indian princes. Her family had close ties to several British families. However, her experience at school was largely distasteful because of her bias towards Indian families. With Das being addressed as "Blackie", he was mocked for the color of her skin along with her brother. Although her parents never expressed any dismay over her complexion, her father gave her a monthly laxative of pure castor oil.

CONCLUSION

On the other hand her grandmother insisted on applying turmeric and oil on Das' skin. A reading of her autobiographical account makes it clear that Das was not a woman bound by tradition, who would conform to the traditions and norms set by the society. She had been a witness to her parents' inconsistent relationship, but it was her mother's adherence to specific ideals of womanhood that she attempted to shatter into an identity of her own. Das lived her life on her own terms and conditions. She never shied away from expressing her feelings and experiences. She tried to establish her identity as a woman, as a person, through her courage and resilience.

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