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FEMINISM : A RENEWED PERSPECTIVE



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Research Paper :

Feminism began as a need based activity because half of the population of the world is women. And they had a feeling that they were victims of gender discrimination. They had subaltern status and suffered because of male chauvinism. Their desires, aspirations and opportunities were thwarted. In many countries women were not given the right to vote. Then all of a sudden suffrage movement took place and women began to assert themselves in society. But the main thrust of feminism came in 1960's. Feminism got a new voice and vision for women. It grew from politics to society and due to which liberal feminism,

socialist feminism, radical feminism, integrative feminism also came into existence.

Earlier women were silent sufferers but modernized women formed a network and feminism developed. Women started expressing themselves in literature giving vent to their pent-up feelings and emotions and they managed to have social platforms. Since feminism began with the situation of women and analyzed those situations, the scholars and feminist began to understand and evaluate their arguments. Gender should not be a bar in the development of one's personality. This is one of the demands of the feminist. Equality of status and equal opportunities are the ends of feminism. During the sixties Canadian author Margaret Atwood wrote novels about suffering women and presented them symbolically, sometimes in the form of fairy tale technique. But she never claimed to be a feminist. Indian women also wanted emancipation. They defined themselves by a set of relationship and modes of conduct by opposing male dominance in the family as well as in the society.

Virginia Woolf, Tony Morrison in the West and Shashi Deshpande and Namita Gokhale in India gave a new edge to feminism by mapping the socio-feminine consciousness. They suggested certain approaches to life about problems of women. They all underlined the theory that women have always been at the subaltern status across geographical and cultural boundaries. They were treated as second sex. The mainstream literature never gave importance to ladies. They were represented in the literature as decorative furniture in the house. That is why women had to bring their own problems in the light by producing their own literature.

In India there were restrictions on women's freedom by misinterpreting laws of *Manu*. *Manu* categorized women with *Shudras*. They were not allowed to take education. However intelligent a girl may be, she was denied the right to education. There were no schools for girls. They became the victims of bad and wrong traditions like *widowhood*, *sati*, *devdasis* and *purdah system*. The origin of

pardah system was based on gender discrimination. Still there was no uprising among the women. Then why should women not rebel? Whatever may be the treatment of women in life and literature, women always found fault with them. Sexual harassment in the society remained one of the central concerns of women's movement in India. Now it is time to see the psycho-dynamics of female creativity in the light of social problems. Women are at the crossroads and they are in a mood to counter attack. Women need to be treated as human beings. Women's rights are human rights and literature for and against feminism came to the conclusion that feminism is a way of life. There are many women activist like *Vidya Bal, Ila Pathak, Shobhaa De, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee* and many others.

In her novel *Wife*, Bharathi Mukharjee showed the cultural shock that a newly married girl experienced when she went to live in USA. Indian culture has brought up girls in moral bindings. Such reasons can be put forward by feminist and therefore feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective.

Right from Raja Rammohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and other male social thinkers promoted the idea of *stree-shakti* and helped the cause of emancipation of women with social and political reforms. Due to their support, the discrimination based on gender is beginning to disappear in India. Among women writers Kamala Markandaya pointed out how women's emancipation hampered in India. Anita Desai explored the disturbed psyche of modern Indian women and how they craved for intellectual aspirations. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and others showed that women were passive and traditional but now they are becoming aggressive and modern. This is because of the awakening of women's consciousness.

A writer observes the society and presents the reality in his novels. If a man sees a woman in distress, he can present her problems, physical torture, mental harassment and sorrowful life in his novel. Can this not be a writing to promote

the cause of women? Ok, yes, true that women's movement started to assert themselves to gain their rights in society and to get equality with men. It started with a movement of the women of liberal thoughts and this we call feminist movement, but men can also sympathize with women.

Feminism is not a matter of gender but it is a matter of outlook. Feminism is not the prerogative of women only. Why should not a man, and why a man can't be labeled as a feminist writer. Any man or woman can be Marxist, any man or woman can be Socialist, then why should there be gender bias about feminism.

We must have liberal views regarding feminism. Liberal feminist should include all the men and women who write for the cause of women and campaign for equal rights of women. It is not necessary to have first-hand experience to write about human sufferings. Your observations are equally useful and powerful to present the point. Many dalit writers and critics argue that a non-dalit has no right to present the predicaments in the life of a dalit. This is a wrong view.

Sympathy cannot be condemned. For example Mulk Raj Anand gave a very true picture about the social status and mental framework of *Bakha*, in *Untouchable* and *Bhikhu*, the hero of *The Road*. You cannot target Mulk Raj Anand for writing about these heroes. Anand may not be a dalit by birth but he has full right to sympathize with dalits. Molestation of Bakha's sister by the temple priest is quite realistic and true to show the problems of dalits. Similarly my argument is that a feminist need not be a woman by birth. R.K. Narayan in his novel *Dark Room* sharply focused the sorrows and problems of a woman and how she was driven to commit suicide. Later on, she was saved is another point.

The bone of contention is that male writers should also be recognized as feminist. During the time when Western women also were not aware of their rights, Indian men projected gender based social problems. Way back in 19th century Baba Padmanji sharply attacked the dead habits of Hindu customs and irrational cruel treatment given to women in the Hindu code of conduct. Shaving the head of a Hindu widow not allowing her to remarry and not giving

her any kind of freedom were some of the worst rules of Hindu chauvinism. Was it her sin to be born as a Hindu woman? What remedy should be suggested for this? Baba Padmanji suggested let the victim woman change her religion and become Christian to save herself from physical and mental tortures of gender based discrimination. When his novel *Yamuna Paryatan* was published in Marathi, the Western women were not at all aware of such things. That is why one can say that a man can also sympathize with tortured women and if he gives vent to these ideas, should we not call him a feminist writer? There are levels of movement in feminism. Political aspects of feminism such as suffrage movement, social aspects such as equal status and equal opportunities, personal aspects such as using the dress-code of their liking and many such level of feminism gradually developed in the different countries at different time but India was far ahead of them in the understanding the sensibility of women. Therefore my suggestion is not to deconstruct the canons of feminism but to reconstruct the concept of feminism. That is why, I suggest let there be a new outlook to give importance to men who write for the cause of women and they should be recognized as feminist writers.