



Literature and Women's Empowerment

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Abstract:

In this paper researcher has tried to briefly discuss the role of Indian women writers in women's empowerment. Elaine Showalters' remarks are significant, "It was through women's liberation movement that we began to draw connections between our own work and our own 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 spoke to our lives and our literary experience with the fierce urgency of a revolution or great awakening¹".

Keywords: *Empowerment, Women's Empowerment, Literature*

The question of Women's Empowerment arises because since the last couple of centuries Indian women have been pushed to the margins. They have been deprived of their rights and treated inhumanly. In spite of strict laws and rights guaranteed by the Constitution, they are still victims of rape, torture, domestic violence, cruelty, honour killing, female foeticide- the list is endless. Law alone cannot change the situation. Real empowerment can come only with awareness, education, financial independence and above all a change in attitude.

There is ever a close relation between literature and society, both serve as cause and effect to each other. The social scenario finds expression in literature, "Literature reflects accepted patterns of thought, feelings and action, including patterns of expression and society's unconscious assumption²". Indian writers and especially Indian women writers have risen to the occasion and are adequately reflecting the condition of women and their hopes and aspirations in literature. Male writers have also written about women's issues but female writers are writing with an 'insider's knowledge', bringing into focus the exploitation and marginalization of women. Feminist literature is playing a major role by not only highlighting the oppression and suppression of women but is also presenting before the readers, role models. Susan Bassneit very appropriately remarks, "Feminist fiction is the most revolutionary movement in contemporary fiction- revolutionary both in that it is formally innovative and in that it helped to make a social revolution³".

Some prominent Indian women writers writing in English are Nayantara Sehgal, Kamla Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Manju Kapoor, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee etc. The focus in the writings of all these women writers is on the 'Women's Question'. They are playing a vital role in formulating and moulding contemporary social consciousness.

As a result of efforts of these writers winds of change are already blowing. Indian women across all classes are coming out of traditional roles and marching on the path of progress alongside their

male counterparts. They are asserting their individuality by challenging the taboos and degrading social norms. Today a woman is aware of the fact that she is not a commodity or dumb animal on sale. In R.W. Desai's novel, *Frailty Thy Name is (W)oman*, the central protagonist Rupika presents a stark reality of an age old tradition, "Men are valued for their brains, women for their looks, so we are at a great disadvantage unless we show the world that we too have brains as well as looks⁴".

Over the ages women have been socialized to undervalue themselves. Their voice considered less significant and their needs secondary. Feminist writers have recognized the present status of women and the need for empowerment and are projecting their struggle for power in their writings. In the novels of Shobha De, women are victims of oppression and exploitation. In the beginning they tolerate and suffer and compromise but when they feel suffocated, they try to snatch their rights.

De writes in *Shooting From the Hip*, "Every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt level control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women's destinies have been determined largely in that context aloneIt is time when they are made aware of their potential and power.. Men will have to come to terms with woman power⁵".

These writers have recognized the weaknesses of women and especially their emotional vulnerability and are showing them the path to empowerment through their writings. ShobhaDe's novels like *Sultry Days*, *Starry Nights*, *Snapshots*, *Sisters*, *Surviving Men*, all show the power game now being played by women who are as thirsty for power and social recognition as men. These women have learnt the trick of coming into power like Asha Rani in *Starry Nights*.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels women revolt against the rigid social and family set-up. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terror* is insulted by her husband because she is superior to him mentally and socially. She sarcastically lectures the school girls, "You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan, but you can never be strong. That's a wrong which will never be forgiven. They will tell you about economic independence and an independent identity. Forget the words⁶". Deshpande has bestowed her women characters with immense inner strength which is their power. Her works like *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *Roots and Shadows*, *The Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, have given us an in-depth view of "The vulnerability of women, The power of women. The deviousness of women. The courage of women⁷".

Another Indian woman writer Kamla Markandaya presents strong women in her novels who do not lose their identity and strength of mind in spite of hardships. Rukmini, the heroine of *Nectar in a Sieve* is faced by economic upheaval, husband's infidelity and children's disobedience but she remains unbroken and intact. She does not escape or withdraw. She faces life with remarkable strength.

In her other novel *Some Inner Fury*, Mira is a liberated woman and emotionally strong who chooses to live in her country rather than go after her love, Richard.

Anita Desai's women whether it is Nanda Kaul in *Fire On The Mountain* or Maya in *Cry*, the Peacock or Monisha in *Voices in the City*, are all liberated, mentally advanced, with an independent identity.

A woman is considered strong and empowered if she can make her own choices and live life on her own terms. Manju Kapoor, through the character of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, is perhaps exhorting women to be more vocal in their fight against male chauvinism, for their right to education and economic independence. In a male dominated society where laws for women are made by men, Virmati searches for self identity and desires to assert her rights.

International Journal for Research in Education (IJRE)

Bharati Mukherjee, a diasporic writer presents the problems faced by expatriate Indian women in an alien land. In all her novels, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters*, the central women characters, Tara Banerjee, Dimple, Jasmine, Debbi Di and Taralata suffer in various ways in their country of adoption but are bold and undeterred. They are often victims of racism, sexism and such other forms of social oppression. All her women are strong individuals and do not get lost in an alien culture. They are all survivors like the characters of Shobha De. Perhaps the message of women writers to women is that like the fictional characters they should also fight discrimination, violence, hypocrisy exploitation and assert their own identity. Women need to display personal courage in a society where balance is already tilted in favour of men.