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INDIAN RENAISSANCE AND INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract

The rise of women in creative writing coincided with Indian Renaissance and the rise of nationalism in India. In this paper I shall present the journey of the rise of Indian women writing .Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Sarojini Naidu (1876-1949) Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904-1948), Mahadevi Verma (1907 - 1987) are amongst the pioneers of women writers in India. The paths of their glory were not without impediments. This paper shall reveal their contribution to Literature and the difficulties that they faced to establish themselves struggling against patriarchy .They rebelled against time and established themselves at par with the men who were contributing to literature in those times.

Indian Renaissance coincided with the rise and growth of Indian nationalism climaxing in freedom for the country. It is singularly marked by the actual role of a large number of women along with that of men. The relentless fight against social oppression and prejudices and the arduous attempts at the revival of Indian art literature and culture ran parallel and sometimes got entwined with the nationalist movement. The task of women pioneers, thus, was by no means an easy one. Women had to face social prejudices and the part played by them constituted an epic saga in the political and social history of Indian freedom movement. Many of them encountered opposition at every level from household community, in work field and before the alien administration. This band of pioneers who evolved in the late 19th and early 20th century gave direction and purpose to the mass of the deprived women of the nation. The women pioneers in India's renaissance came from all sections of the society; while some belonged to fairly affluent and enlightened families. The contribution of those from middle class tradition-bound backgrounds is even more significant as they truly represented the wave of change which swept the masses; among them were housewives, educationists and exponents of art and culture. Amongst these

were many foreigners. Though born in foreign lands they had identified themselves with India. Among them were Sister Nivedita, Mira Behn Margaret Cousins, Annie Besant and Welthy H Fisher. There were those who themselves had suffered terrible deprivations and humiliations like Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. They took the cause of the oppressed women. There were others who inspired women through their creative writing. Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Sarojini Naidu (1876-1949) Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904-1948), Mahadevi Verma (1907 - 1987) are amongst the pioneers of Indian women writers in India.

Toru Dutta was the first woman writer of English in India. She was born in a prosperous and cultured family. Her grandfather, Rasamoy Datta, was a great lover of English Literature and was known for his progressive views. Her father, Gobind Chunder Dutta was a linguist and versifier. Toru was his youngest daughter. English education spread like wild fire changing the lives of the upper class wealthy Bengalis. They, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, were convinced that the greater our intercourse with the European gentlemen the greater will be our improvement in literary, social and political affairs. A new aristocratic class rose with English Education and high status achieved through administrative service. Govind Chundar brought up the children in the best possible tradition as English oriented girls. They were not sent to school but had private tutors to teach them English and Western music. Toru Dutta, therefore, wrote in English and French but it is unfortunate that Bengali Literature was deprived of her extraordinary genius. In 1869, the family left for Europe and the girls went to French school at Nice for some time. They reached London and began to turn their knowledge of both English and French into translation. Toru was busy studying as she wrote to her cousin. Omesh, "I have hardly time to write any letter, as our time is entirely given to study."¹ Except for a sprinkling of Renaissance poets, Toru avoided the classical writers as if they never existed. Her love for the Romantics came from her admiration for the French Revolution, and her belief in the principle of humanism. The French Romantic movement which began in the second quarter of the 19th Century was to break up or discard literary forms that has grown hopelessly stiff, to give strength and variety. Her poem "France 1870" revealed her passion for the country. In 1871 the family moved to Cambridge where Aru and Toru attended the so called "Higher lectures for Women." There she made friends with Mary Martin, who was Toru's lifelong friend and recipient of most of her letters. During these lectures she realised the relative freedom enjoyed by the women in England as compared to the restricted and segregated lives for women in India. Toru's mind dwelt upon the contrast,

for though she was fifteen years old, her memories of a large populous household in Calcutta were vivid. Nor had she forgotten the many social taboos, her mother and other women relatives were subject to. After two wonderful years for Toru, suddenly Govind Chunder decided to take the family back to Calcutta. This enforced separation from England haunted Toru to the end of her short life. In her imagination, England signified freedom, opportunity, and enterprise for women. Binaca is Toru Dutt's fantasy projection of life as it might have been if she had continued in England and not been compulsorily returned to India. Toru was working out her own father - daughter relationship from patterns available in 19th century England. Talented women were denied freedom by their fathers, began to lead secluded lives of creative expression and often suffered from psychopathic ailments. In a feminist leap well before her time Toru questions the basis of traditional gender psychology. After her sister's death due to consumption she wrote "Calcutta is such an unhealthy place both morally and physically speaking"². Soon her illness, too, had been diagnosed as tuberculosis and knowing that death was near, she began to learn Sanskrit and started reading it in a short span of ten months. In the great Indian classics she tried to find the meaning of the mythical figures of Sita, Savitri and Uma. Time was running short for Toru Dutta. She was in a hurry to put in as much as possible and to project India's past to the English speaking world. Deeply impressed by Clarissa Bader's French book on Ancient Indian Women she asked to translate it for the English reading public. Of the original poems in her collection *Ancient Ballads and Other Legends of Hindustan*, amongst which "Baugmaree", "The Lotus", "The Tree of Life" and "Our Casuarina Tree", deserve special mention. "Savitri" is the longest and the most popular of her ballads.

Toru Dutt passed away in 1877. She was a remarkable young woman of her time and place. Toru's work's and life provide us with rich insights into the literary social change that took place not only in the 19th century Calcutta but also in the rising voices of women's emancipation of Europe.

Sarojini Naidu was the eldest daughter of a scientist dreamer and linguist Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and her mother Sunder Devi knew enough English to converse with her European friends and write letters. She spoke Bengali with her husband, Hindi with her children and Telgu with her servants. The wide-eyed child had slowly ripened into girlhood of immeasurable potency and promise. At the age of 12 years she passed Matriculation and at 13 she wrote a poem of 2000 lines. She married Dr Govind Rajul Naidu. Her first collection of poems *The Golden Threshold* came out in 1905. The

literary world showered its praises and India recognised her as the Nightingale of India. In 1906 at the Calcutta session of the Indian Social Conference, she adroitly linked up the suppression of women's rights in India with the loss of the country's freedom.

"Does one man dare to deprive another of birthright to God's pure air which nourishes his body? How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? And yet my friends, man has so dared in the case of Indian women..... I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights. "³

Gokhale was touched, and wrote "Your speech was more than an intellectual treat of the highest order. It was a perfect piece of art."⁴

Sarojini's second volume of poems, *The Bird of Time* (1912) has a foreword by Edmund Gosse and was hailed by the reviewers. Her On reading the third volume *The Broken Wing* (1917) Gokhale, shortly before his death had asked, "Why should a song bird like you have a broken wing?" Sarojini's answer came too late for Gokhale to hear but she announced it to her readers in the title poem:

Behold ! I rise to meet the destined spring
and scale the stars upon my broken wing...

This destiny was to take her into politics and to silence her poetry. Late in March 1912, Sarojini Naidu met Gokhale after a strenuous round of speech giving in Lucknow and Poona. The ailing Gokhale did not see too many years in his future. Before him stood a vibrant woman who could magnetize the audience with the power of words. He urgently commanded "Stand here with me, with the stars and hills for witness, and in their presence consecrate your life and your talent, your song and your speech, your thought and your dream to the motherland."⁵ Gokhale witnessed Naidu's growing dedication to politics. Gokhale's death in a way determined Naidu's commitment to politics.

Sarojini Naidu first met Gandhiji in 1914 in London on his way back to India from south Africa. Back in India in 1915, Sarojini Naidu kept closely in touch with Gandhiji while the Indian National Congress re-oriented its policies towards a strong bid for self government. The theme of an awakening for the women of India was reiterated in several speeches emphatically titled, "Indian Women's Renaissance." "Women in National Life," "Address to Hindu Ladies". She spoke on diverse range of subjects pertaining to Hindu-Muslim Unity, Home Rule and Self Government. The link between Gandhiji and Sarojini Naidu steadily strengthened ahead and she was beside him during Dandi March in 1930. The poem on called "The Lotus" was dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi. Gokhale and Gandhi had determined her choice. The literary world lost a poet, the country gained a patriot.

When India became independent and Congress Ministries were formed in the provinces, she was appointed the governess of Uttar Pradesh. Her term as governor was smooth and she joked that she was a Governess who kept her children in place. The night she died she told the nurse to sing gently to her. She closed her eyes and never woke to the new day.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904-1948) was a poetess writing in Hindi. Her words shot like arrows of fire and ignited the dormant minds of the people of India fighting for the freedom of the country. She was born in Allahabad and studied at Crosthwaite Girls' School. After marriage to Thakur Lakshaman Singh Chauhan she moved to Jabalpur. She actively participated in the non-cooperation movement in 1921 and was the first woman satyagrahi to court arrest in Nagpur. She was jailed twice for involvement in protests against the British rule in 1923 and 1942. She was twice elected unopposed as a member of "Prantiya Dhara Sabha." She lived in an age of strong movements for reformation and struggle for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. She actively engaged herself in nation building after Independence. The efforts that she made for awakening the educated class through her creative and effective writing are relevant even today. In her works she focuses on the conditions of women of her times and tries to bring about a change in the attitude of society towards women. She argued for empowerment of women and claimed for equal rights for women with men in the family as well as in the social and political fields. She dealt with issues of early marriage, widow remarriage and socio-economic dependence of women in her stories. She highlighted the need for communal harmony, nationalism, honesty of purpose and character.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's important contributions are Bikhre Moti (a collection of stories), besides many poems like "Viron ka Kaisa ho Vasant," "Jaliawala Bagh main Vasant," "Senani Ka Swagat" "Vijaya Dashmi", "Vyathit Hridaya" and "Jhansi Ki Rani". In her works she portrayed "Bharat Mata" as a mother full of affection for all her children. In her poems she explicitly implored the reading public to join the freedom movement. Her vibrant and valourous poems enlivened the spirits of the men and women. She inspired many to join the freedom movement. She died in a car-accident depriving the nation of a fire brand poetess and literature shall always remember her as the most spirited lyricist who through her creative writing served the cause of the women and of her nation at large.

Mahadevi Varma was born in Farrukhabad Uttar Pradesh in a family of lawyers. She was educated at Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. She was the eldest child of Govind Prasad and Hemrani and had two brothers and a sister Shyama. She was married in 1914 to Dr. Swaroop Narain Varma at the tender age of nine. While her husband studied at Lucknow

she continued to stay with her parents and came to Allahabad University for Higher Education. She completed graduation in 1929 and Masters in Sanskrit in 1933. Mahadeviiji was appointed the first principal of Prayag Mahila Vidya Peeth Allahabad. She wanted to promote women education in Hindi. She was also a fervent women activist but not 'antagonistically feminist'. Her writings and essays mark the beginning of "feminist" writing in Hindi. Her classic work Srinkhalaa Kee Ghadiyan is still rated as one of the best collections of concise and pointed thoughts about the condition of Indian women, the cause of their pathetic condition and the possible "Indian" solution to this problem, not a forced or copied solution. The theme of Mahadeviiji's poetry is pain of separation from the beloved Supreme Being. She was one of the four pillars of Romanticism in Hindi Poetry. There is an element of mysticism in her poetry. Main Neer Bhari Dukh Ki Badri." describes her poetic identity.

The editor of Mahadevi Sahitya Samagra., Omkar Sharad remarks about her in the introduction "..... being close to Mahadevi. I have also seen the images of Lakshmibai and Meerabai together in one form." Together in her we find the mixture of mysticism and optimism. Having rebelled against the tradition and having devoted her life to the quest for learning, eventually this quest became a form of abstract worship for her. Her well known, poems- Neehar (1930) Rashmi (1932) Neerjaa (1934) Sandhyageet (1936), Deepshikha (1942), Saptaparna (1959) and Agnirekha have received wide spread acclaim. She received Jhanpith award for her anthology Yama (1936) some of her important poetical works are Geet Pravah (1970) Parikrana (1974) Deep Geet.

Mahadevi had understood and closely followed Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of life she had worked with Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, and Dr. Rajendra Prasad. She never desired to join politics. In her presidential address at Hindi Sansthan, Lucknow, she expressed her anguish over the ways the politician of the day were working.

She felt politics had become a game at the hands of those who were neither honest in thought nor in deed. She said "I can understand if someone dreams to serve the country and devotes himself for the important tasks of nation building or to serve mankind at large, but I cannot understand how a person can dream to be at the helm of affairs by snatching the highest chair in the power achieving game still think that he is a great person."

In 1956, the government of India bestowed her with the award of Padma Bhushan She was the first woman to be awarded the Sahitya Akadami Fellowship in 1979. In 1988 Indian Government bestowed her with the title of Padma Vibhushan. She passed away on September 14, 1987.

These patriotic pioneers are noted for the intense pride in their heritage and utterly selfless endeavours in their chosen areas of activity. They did not seek personal gains, position, status or security, leave alone financial benefits. It is true that women still constitute a deprived and tormented section of society. Their fight for justice will go on but unlike earlier times they could march with confidence on their self sought paths. The works of these pioneers are a source of inspiration to the innumerable women creative writers. Remembering these giants' forces us to ponder on the hardships they faced and still succeeded in achieving such great heights. They are the pillars on whom the entire creative women are proudly placed.

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