

Post-Colonial Indian Woman: Journey from Subjugation to Emancipation

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Abstract

In terms of emancipation, gender equality, female individuality and identity have become prominent themes in Indian feminist writings in the recent decades. The literary canon is dominated by men in most post-colonial countries. Patriarchal intellectuals did not pay serious attention to early feminist writings and ridiculed their radical ideas regarding women's freedom. It has become a natural social evil that a woman should not think about her freedom in India. This paper explores journey from subjugation to emancipation of Indian woman. Before independence of India, the Indian woman is not given higher education, not given social and political rights, not given economic security and she has to be dumb to ask anything for her existence. Unlike men, Indian feminist writers have been able to shine their subtle talents in the literary world. Indian feminist writers gave a new spirit to the Indian woman with the inspiring works of radical female protagonists in their novels. These works gave Indian woman new ideas, socio-political rights and economic freedom and she gained great confidence to stand with a man to show her influence in all walks of life.

Keywords: Indian Woman Problems, Post-colonial Indian feminism, Global Indian Women

Introduction

In India, women are considered as goddesses. But in fact, the Indian woman lives with slavery and that type of slavery would not exist anywhere in the world. Indian women's mental or emotional slavery is a unique one and it can't be compared with any other. Post-colonial revolutions cause many radical effects in the areas of globalization, environmentalism, transnationalism and raised the tenets of neoliberalism in all spheres of human world. This post-colonial movement too touched Indian women world, it fought against colonial treatment of slave notions of women as weaker sex. The British rule is considered more harmful and more exploitation of the country than all other rulers of India. Even after decline of their rule, still they continued to influence Indian culture through their westernized thoughts, cultures and education. This created turmoil in the culture of India. Most probably the woman, the root of Indian family system confronted with existential problems and woman identity became troublesome. Indian women became innocent victims caught between their ancient traditions and westerners' modernity.

Typical traditional problems of Indian Women

Traditional Indian woman was typical one she would not ask any freedom from any. She always needs a man, a family and children for her identity and status in Indian society. She would not be considered worthy one in the society without them. An Indian woman is always dependent. She considers culture and family traditions as her true being of representations and she protects those values earnestly. She worships her husband more than others. But all husbands are not worthy of their worship. But Indian women had been accustomed to this *pathivratha* tradition. These are typical indigenous problems of Indian woman.

In the first Indian epic "The Ramayana", Sita emphasized the importance of her husband at every situation of her life. More than all other human relations, she gave a great place of God to her husband Rama. Sita's ideal worship of Rama is considered exaggerated

by modern feminists. Some feminists even criticized and ridiculed foolish devotion of Indian wives to adamant husbands. The Indian customized woman has been entirely looked and understood from the male point of view. The ancient Indian law code of ethics Manu Smriti stated that women should be always lead their lives under the control of father, brother, husband and so on.

This orthodox patriarchal system made woman as unthinkable, unquestionable, and subservient entity to male dominated world. Tradition, culture, people and no one thought from an Indian woman's point of view. In the introduction of an edited book, *Postmodern Indian Women Writers in English*, Dr. Sandhya Tiwari states, "Traditionally the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the greater worth of male experience." (Tiwari, 2019) The culture and tradition of patriarchy created organized oppression of women in Indian society. Men enjoy more freedom according to Indian social customs. They always consider women as fickle minded, narrow minded, intellectually incapable, socially unacceptable if she is alone. Miserably, women are oppressed without the right to enjoy even the smallest pleasures, without the right to make decisions in the family. Though she dedicates herself in the service of patriarchal family and society, no one recognizes her unselfish virtue besides everybody tries to exploit her in many ways. Girls grow up ideal for marriage. They are taught patience, self-control and family service from childhood. They taught self-sacrifice, adjusting to difficult situations, and putting up with husband's misdeeds. Such commitments to women's oppression leave women naturally oppressed and depressed, living a life of dependency without autonomy.

Women were forced to love their husbands even their husbands were not deserved to be loved, were forced to give birth to their children as per the desires of their husbands' family members, were forced to have sex without their consent and eventually there was no true life of her own and she lost her soul in the service of patriarchal society. Traditional

Indian culture gave the man a position of power and relegated the woman to an inferior position. Such deep-rooted Indian customs make woman a secondary gender and an honest servant of her man and family. She has to blindly follow the orders of her husband and aunt, father-in-law, only then can she be considered a good housewife.

The ancient Indian traditional sathi system, pathivratha (complete devotion to husband) system, devadasi system, dowry system, low status of widows - they should live as lonely ladies till their death customs; female infanticide, girls not allowed to school & higher education and child marriages were created virtual prisons to women. Post-independence feminist awareness started to throw off these shackles of Indian women. Indian woman tried hard to win over all of these problems with her feminist concerns.

Post-Colonial Indian Feminism

Post-colonial Indian feminism is an offshoot from feminism at international context and it focuses on indigenous problems of Indian women. These perspectives and experiences of Indian Women are quite different from western world of feminism. It focuses on the suppression of women in the light of geographical, historical and cultural factors of India. It examines the power relations of political, economic and cultural factors which ruled feminine world with their influences and its struggle to overcome their hegemony with their neoliberalisation missions. It is the reflection of Indian women experiences and it strongly elevated their voices to be heard by the nation. It studies various issues of Indian women like gender discrimination, harassment, domestic violence, dowry deaths, sexual abuse, lack of girl education and gender pay gaps etc. They fought through literature, through politics in assemblies, through rebels in the organizations and raising their voice for justification. Dr. Sandhya Tiwari, in the introduction of her edited book "Inspirational Indian Women Achievers" stated,

"In a country whose history spans hundreds of years of exponential inequality,

where customs and culture have a strong influence on the social and political life of the people, the social mixture cobwebs make it difficult for a woman to escape discrimination and reach better opportunities to empower themselves.”

(IIWA (2018), p. xiii)

They fought for their educational opportunities and reservations. They demanded to get equal pay without gender bias. They forced law to implement severe punishments to the crimes against women. Indian post colonialism mainly considers the problems of low caste, tribal and unprivileged marginal sections of society. Indian women are also come under this category and they are marginalized by patriarchal society. Feminist critics Gayathri Spivak and post-colonial theorist Homi K Bhabha have shaped the intellectual culture of post-colonial India.

Post-Colonial Indian Women Feminist Writers

Post-colonial and modern cultural reforms have led to improvements in the social, political and economic status of Indian women in their lives. Post-colonial Indian feminist literature rose into lime light after colonial rule. It radically questioned the patriarchy and gave new thought-provoking revolutionary mindset to Indian women. Urdu novelist Qurratulain Hyder from her novel ‘Aag Ka Darya’ created powerful roles of independent and individualistic female characters, Malayalee fearless writer Kamala Das’ bold exposition of female sexuality from her autobiographical novel ‘My Story’, Bengali writer and social activist Mahasweta Devi wrote voluminous novels with feminist perspectives to show contemporary Indian feminism, and other eminent Indian feminist writers Gayatri Spivak, Amrita Preetam, Shashi Desh Pande, Nayanthara Seghal, Anita Desai, Shobha de, Arundhati Roy and other regional Indian language writers influenced greatly to change woman lives tremendously in a typical Indian way. Their thoughts, voices and narratives fought against all the oppressions of Indian woman to make her think bold enough to win

over her problems caused by patriarchal society. Not only patriarchal families and traditions but also race, class, caste and religion cause miseries to Indian women. Women have not been dared to think for themselves or fight for their rights for many years. The poignant sorrows of unfortunate wife in the Indian family circles are common themes in the works of early Indian novelists. The emotional travails of frustrated housewives and their struggle to fulfill the wishes and expectations of everyone in the family are brilliantly portrayed in their novels. Indian women who are on the path of humble life where women are torn between the four walls of family circles are dumbfounded to share their pains and true feelings with the world. Dr. Sandhya Tiwari in her article "A Critical Overview of the Evolution of Indian Theatre and the Depiction of Feminist Concerns" states that:

"Women, as per social construct and social device, were considered inferiors and had to play domestic roles in the family and familial role in the society. Cultural restrictions, traditional barriers, religious norms, poverty, illiteracy, subjugation and suppression have been the blocks on the way for women to pen down and articulate their points of views. History stands testimony to the fact that male writers have often written about women and their depiction was to their taste (Tiwari (2022), P.86)."

Feminist writers in India took that responsibility on their shoulders and powerfully shook the male world and caused a revolt in the female world. Their writings strongly expressed women's perspectives and provided a strong conceptual foundation to build confidence in women to fight her issues. There were vehement attacks on Indian feminist writings and propaganda from the intellectuals of male dominated society. Their values and ideologies were looked down upon and ridiculed in traditional social communities of India. Indian women are far behind the women of other countries to understand feminist ideologies. Their books and revolutionary ideas are underestimated by orthodox religious patriarchal people's assumptions. However, persistent Indian feminist writers such as

Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, KamalaDas, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy and other highly influential writers have elevated their female protagonists to show their individuality, identity and independence with strong defiance of patriarchy. Indian feminist writers have gained an international and national reputation for creating realistic fiction and a female perspective. They have also received international acclaim for their literary achievements. They have created energetic and adventurous heroines who can fight against the society to show their strong personality if necessary. Those heroines never allow any type of suppression on their souls and they want to live life fully without any restrictions of patriarchy. They emancipated Indian women from the shackles of slavery with their literature and worked in the spirit of the movement for women's freedom. These writers question and debunk every single system that oppresses women. Their ideas, theories and revolutions were directed towards the welfare of Indian women. These women writers took seriously and vehemently condemned every cruel social practice which subjugated women. An Indian woman is created as the main character in most of their novels, perhaps in all novels and shows a woman who rebels against cruel social evils and all social oppressive customs. They rebel against existing social setup which will not give her any liberation in all walks of life. They rebel against the existing social systems, which do not make her emancipated in all spheres. Through their novels, they brought to lime light the hidden sufferings of the Indian woman. These women writers seek to address the systems that oppress and subjugate women and seek to provide women with bold and practical solutions to grow as powerful individuals who can stand on their own in Indian society.

Struggling for survival / Women education

Indian woman had no education until the colonial period so she was crushed by the oppression of the male ego. Due to low literacy and lack of exposure to the rest of the world besides her family, she was unaware of the wisdom that governed the social, political and

economic spheres of the country in the early decades of colonial India.

Her survival became major critical problem without higher education. She needs higher education for her survival, she needs courage and support of law to stop domestic and social violence, and she needs good social support from neighboring world to live a happy life. Girls' education is discouraged in Indian families. Although some educated elites encouraged girls' education in urban areas, it was completely discouraged in rural India. The patriarchal male world is very afraid that if women become educated, they will start questioning their exploitation. In the early stages of feminism, it was not considered a revolutionary movement of women but rather a thought of disgust towards patriarchy. Political rights were not given to women because of their illiteracy and passive roles of their low status in community development in India.

Many educated women actively participated in the Indian freedom struggle, which was recognized by Gandhi and many other leaders. They realized the importance of women's role in social, political and economic fields. The French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and other Western feminist revolutions were a powerful force in evoking ideas about the importance of womanhood and female identity among the people of India, and especially among Indian women. These situations created demand for the service of women in social and economic development of the nation. It gave inspiration to the educational development of women. Then Indian female world rapidly started to develop in all spheres of professions and social life. It gained importance in social, political and economic functions of society.

Although the literacy rate of women in India is lower than that of men, in 2011 it rose to 65% literacy. It has been continuously increasing to 85% in 2016 and 87% in 2018 by the stringent efforts of girls. Women's empowerment is possible only through women's education. This is the first major achievement in this direction and it leads to making the

woman a thoughtful citizen of the country, an active participant in political and social progress, a powerfulproductive person in substantial economic development of the nation. They enjoyed equal rights and privileges from the state on par with men.

Modem Indian Woman in Global World

Globalization is the main factor that has revolutionized and broken the rusty traditional shackles of the Indian woman. The ever-increasing globalization has made Indian women completely emancipated from the shackles of slavery for centuries. It compels them to understand international feminist concerns, pursue various fields of education and professions, broaden their intellectual horizons, and inspire them to become great world leaders. There are many Indian women who have excelled as writers writing in an alien tongue, English. They overcame hardships and achieved success. According to Sandhya Tiwari,

“Indian women writers in English are victims of another prejudice, in comparison with their regional counterparts. English language, perceived to be the language of the affluent upper strata, is subjected to frequent judgement and the works of Indian English Women writers’ works are considered devoid of Indianness.” (Tiwari, (2019) pp.xi)

It established a new world order and removed all superstitions and suppressing powers that interfered with the welfare of the women and were removed from the roots of societies in all nations.

“The role of Indian women is in a state of flux as they gradually emerge from the shackles of traditional roles and social mores that encouraged patriarchy into a new world where freedom and fighting against social prejudices are acceptable and encouraged. The impact of globalization on the movement toward gender equality cannot be understated (Deb & Sen, 2016).”

Globalization has opened up new vistas for Indian women. It has welcomed many educational opportunities, professional careers and new leadership roles for Indian women. The old suppressing traditional beliefs were overcome and they started to know their true psyches, rights, knowledge to rule the world. The Indian woman has achieved endless educational opportunities with her energy and strenuous hard work and has shown her talent in all professional fields. She evolved as genius and got international acclaims with her new perspectives in literature. Breaking the gender stereotypes, she is ever ready to do any job that can be done by her counterpart male generation. She drives the flights, trains, war tanks and satellites. She has achieved a powerful image of ruling the national economy with her great share in all sectors and services.

“Since the economic reforms that were introduced in 1990, the leadership landscape of India has undergone some macro-level changes. Of the many changes, the liberalized economy of India resulted in a massive labor shift that successfully created ample job opportunities for educated and urban women (Budhwar, Saini, & Bhatnagar, 2005).”

Indian reforms in 1990s welcomed many MNCs to set up their firms in India. This created ample job opportunities in ICT, IT and BPO fields. These sectors provide more job opportunities for women than other sectors. MNCs do not give rise to regional biases and cultural mistrusts and their broader outlook of thinking banishes gender inequality. Global culture and lack of gender equality in MNCs encouraged them to get more jobs and influence India's socio-economic conditions. Their workforce participation percentage in the IT sector is almost at par with that of male job holders in the field. Indian women competed with the male generation to get more jobs and they are active in joining various fields reserved for men.

The history of Indian women is full of pioneers, who have broken gender barriers and worked

hard for their rights and made progress in the field of politics, arts, science, law etc.

Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister of India and served from 1966 to 1977. Indira Gandhi was named as the "Woman of the Millennium" in a poll which was organized by BBC in 1999. In 1971, she became the first woman to receive the Bharat Ratna award.

Pratibha Patil became the first woman President of India and held office from July 2007 to July 2012.

Kalpana Chawla was the first Indian woman who reached in space. As a mission specialist and a primary robotic arm operator, she went into space in 1997.

Kiran Bedi, joining Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1972, Kiran Bedi became the first woman officer in India. Moreover, later in 2003, Kiran Bedi also became the first woman who was appointed as the United Nations Civil Police adviser.

Anjali Gupta is the first female flying officer in the Indian Air Force to be court martialled. She used to work for the Aircraft Systems and Testing Establishment unit in Bangalore. Anjali completed her Masters of Philosophy in Sociology from the Delhi University and was first posted at Belgaum in 2001.

Justice M. Fathima Beevi became the first female judge who was appointed to the Supreme Court of India in 1989.

Arundhati Roy is the first Indian woman writer who won England's prestigious Man Booker Prize for her debut novel 'The God of Small Things' in the year 1997.

Sania Mirza, a professional tennis player, became the first ever Indian woman to win the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) title in 2005. Later in 2015, Sania Mirza became the first Indian woman to be ranked no. 1 in WTA's double rankings.

Mary Kom Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom, also known as Mary Kom is the only woman boxer who has won a medal in each of the six World Championships. She was the only

Indian woman boxer who qualified for the 2012 Olympics and became the first Indian woman boxer to win a gold medal in Asian Games in 2014.

Bachendri Pal became the first Indian woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest In 1984. Later, she led expeditions in 1993, 1994 and 1997 with a team comprising of only women in 'Indo-Nepalese Women's Mount Everest Expedition,' 'The Great Indian Women's Rafting Voyage' and 'First Indian Women Trans-Himalayan Expedition.'

Priya Jhingani with a dream to be served Indian Army became the first lady cadet to join the Indian Army in 1993.

Mother Teresa became the first Indian woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Mother Teresa founded many Missionaries of Charity, a Roman Catholic religious congregation, giving her life to social work.

Mithali Raj was the first woman to score a double hundred in Test Cricket (214* against New Zealand at Wellington, 2004). She was the first to achieve this landmark in the world.

Ira Singhal 31-year-old Ira Singhal was the first physically challenged women to crack the civil service exam in general category. She was the topper in the UPSC exam, 2014. Ira also cracked the IRS (Indian Revenue Service) exam in 2010, but was denied posting for her physical inability. But she filed a case in the Central Administrative Tribunal and won it after four years after which she was given a post. (India today March 8, 2016)

These women are great examples of the first brilliant achievements of powerful fields like politics, military, sports, aviation, aeronautics, justice, literature, administration, police force and other humanitarian services. They left no field untried. In fact, they are equal to their male counterparts. They played powerful roles in the society with their quantity and quality.

Conclusion

Indian women achieved great heights in all fields within short span of time. After

independence of India, we could see their intense efforts to develop themselves to lead over male generation. This is the need of hour to change stereotypic social attitudes of men in the perception of women. There are still many opportunities for rural Indian women to advance their lives economically and socially and to participate in Indian politics. Indeed, not in ancient times, but now the Indian woman can truly be hailed as a 'Shakti'.

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