Original Research Article

A Study of Female Characters in Indian Literature: A Feminist Discourse

Ms. Vandna Kaundal[1] and Dr. Arun Guleria[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of English, ICDEOL, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla 171005 Himachal Pradesh, India

[2]Associate Professor, Department of English, ICDEOL, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla 171005 Himachal Pradesh, India

Corresponding author E-mail: [1]vanukaundal1983@gmail.com; [2]guleriaarun@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

The relationship between feminist ideas, patriarchy, and literature is examined in this essay, with a focus on the representation of women in Indian mythologies. The discussion draws on a range of literary works and feminist views to demonstrate the pervasive influence of male-authored stories on shaping the perception of women. The essay, which features passages from contemporary Indian writers Helen Cixous and Mahatma Gandhi, emphasizes the need for women to reclaim ownership of their experiences. Special attention is paid to the works of feminist mythologist Kavita Kane, who remains and reinterprets lesser-known female protagonists from Indian epics. The objective of the paper is to illustrate the significance of feminist discourse in challenging preconceived notions about women and changing cultural conventions in order to promote a more diverse and inclusive literary landscape.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminist Discourse Deconstruction Women-Centric Writing, male-authored Narratives

Introduction

A woman is the focal point and lifeblood of any community, and God's unique creation. She is regarded in India as the embodiment of the goddess Durga since she assumes multiple forms depending on the situation. She performs a variety of roles in her life, including those of a sister, wife, mother, and daughter. She possesses many admirable traits, such as kindness, simplicity, innocence, empathy, and so forth, but she also possesses the courage and strength to take on obstacles head-on and oppose injustice

and oppression. She is similar to characters like Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Sita, and others who have shown themselves in every difficult situation. She is likened to the deities Kali and Katyayani, who have stood up for justice and equality against injustice and oppression. Since the primary focus of this dissertation is the investigation of women's representation in mythology, a general review of feminism is required. Women are sidelined in a culture where men predominate. They started to struggle against the identities-defining rules that males had imposed upon them. Their resistance to male control gave rise to the feminist movement.

A Feminist Discourse on Female Characters in Indian Literature

The fundamental goal of feminism, an ideology whose priorities differ throughout countries and communities, is to affirm that women are autonomous beings with the freedom to freely express their identities and make their own decisions. The oppression of women by a patriarchal culture has been documented throughout history. Therefore, this movement was created to elevate the status of women who hold subordinate jobs in civilizations where men predominate. It is a response to prejudice and misogyny. In the words of G. D. Barche, "Feminism emerged to be a world-wide cultural movement to secure complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights—moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so on" ("Facets of Feminism in Indian English Fiction" 9). Regarding feminism, the same idea has been presented in the *New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, which explains it "as a policy, practice or advocacy of political economic and social equality for women". In order to defend the human rights that women were first denied in a society built on a patriarchal system, feminism emerged as a global cultural movement. In all domains—political, social, educational, economic, religious, moral, and so forth—it emphasized the imperative that women have the same rights as men.

The Greek terms femme which literally means woman, and esme, which stands for "a social movement or a political ideology" (Arpita Mukhopadhyay, *Feminism* 1). Speaking of the origin of the term feminism Arpita Mukhopadhyay observes, "The exact origin of the term is uncertain and debatable, while the earliest mention of it can be traced back to 1871 when it was said to be used as a medical term for male patients who had 'feminization' symptoms in their bodies". She further asserts, "Feminism criticizes the inequalities existing between men and women in society and refuses to accept these disparities". Consequently, it is evident that the primary goal of feminism is to eliminate the gender disparities that have long existed in patriarchal society.

Feminism was a political movement that aimed to end women's subjugation and provide them equality, particularly in the West. Nonetheless, Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792), in which she writes, "I presume that rational men will excuse me for endeavoring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable," served as the movement's primary source of inspiration (qtd. in Singh 18). One of the primary causes of women's subordinate status, in her view, was a lack of education. She thus gave greater attention to the educational options available to women.

Voting rights are the primary focus of the first wave of feminism. As "the first organized movement with definite and specific aim," Susan Watkins characterizes the first wave of feminis. The movement's principal leaders were Elizabeth Cady Slanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony. One of the most well-known feminist works of this era is Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1929), in which she argues that improving women's status in society requires education, personal space, and financial

independence. In a patriarchal culture, women have been relegated to the status of "others" Men in positions of authority initiated this process by linking women with false mystery.

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the 1990s, there was a second wave of feminism. The "Women's Liberation Movement" is another name for this movement. Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, and Mary Ellman were the leading lights of the second wave. Kate Millet's 1970 work Sexual Politics, which emphasizes women's societal subjugation, is included in this period. Germaine Greer's 1970 book The Female Eunuch focuses on how social pressure and sexual repression compel women to accept their status. Betty Friedan's in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) writes that "a woman can in no way even dream about herself except as her children's mother and her husband's wife due to her long apprenticeship in gender roles" (qtd. in Singh 18). Because social standards dictate that women should only be mothers and wives, women's status in a society is therefore conditioned. In particular, the oppression and demands of society force women to accept their place in it.

The 1990s saw the beginning of the third wave of feminism. This wave encompasses women of various social classes, races, and groups, particularly non-white working-class women. It is not exclusive to upper-class Western women. This movement is sometimes referred to as the younger generation's feminism. Defining the third wave feminism Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whehelan observe, "The feminism of a younger generation of women who acknowledge the legacy of Second Wave Feminism, but also identify what they see as its limitations. These perceived limitations would include their sense that it remained too exclusively white and middle class". In addition to recognizing the legacy of the second wave of feminism, the third wave of feminism pointed out its drawbacks, such as the marginalization of women from other social groups and communities. This wave is about all women, regardless of their color, class, or neighborhood. Numerous more feminism sub-disciplines, including Black Feminism, Post-modern Feminism, Radical Feminism, Eco-Feminism, Liberal Feminism, and so on, arose in the 20th century.

Women in other nations were able to speak out for equal rights because of the influence of Western feminism. Feminists' primary objective is to free women from the constraints of patriarchy in order to improve their status. A feminist movement also arose in India to raise the status of women in the community. However, because of societal conventions and cultural legacies that contribute to identity formation, Indian feminism differs from that of its Western equivalents. Pointing toward the differences that are hidden beyond the veil of sameness Jasbir Jain in *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writing of Sashi Deshpande* (2003) asserts:

The Biological-Physiological core is the same, pain and mortality, suffering and oppression affects us in similar ways; social constructs and institutions also have developed along similar lines as family, marriage and patriarchy. But between this core of sameness and the appearance of sameness (in dress, life styles and the rest obliterating class differences) and the spread of information, which constitutes a common area of knowledge, there is a whole lot of difference, which works through myths, past histories, body language, gender and customs.

Especially, in India, women are idealized as Lakshmi, Sarswati, and Shakti but when it comes to equality they are relegated into background. In this way, the issues of Indian women differ from those of Western women. In *Postmodernist Approach to Anita Desai: A Socio-Cultural Study of Her Novels* (2010), Sujatha Rao draws a clear distinction between the issues of Indian and Western women by asserting, "In Western countries, the women's issues are mostly identity, job equality and sexual roles. In

India, for the majority, it is a question of stark survival". Indian women are docile, traditional, and somewhat reliant on men for their existence, in contrast to the assertive, independent, and educated women of the West.

In Indian society throughout the Vedic era, women enjoyed equal status and occupied a highly valued position. Women's participation was even thought to be necessary for any yagna to be deemed complete. They had the freedom to participate in debates, go to court, fight in battles, and other activities. Furthermore, there were no prohibitions against intercaste unions and widow remarriages.

However, the position of women was relegated during the Rig Veda Period. They had to follow all the strict rules of patriarchal society and to "remain under the supervision of a male" (Dominic 222). A. R. Wadia in *The Ethics of Feminism: A Study of the Revolt of Women* (1977) highlights, "An orthodox Hindu woman dare not walk in front of, or even by the side of her husband; she cannot eat anything till he has dined, and then too, nothing but leavings of his plate". This statement emphasises the predicament of Hindu women in an orthodox Indian society, which does not allow them to walk with and in front of their husbands.

Even today's society restricts women's access to food, allowing them to only eat after their husbands. Social evils like child marriages, polygamy, the sati system, the ban on widow remarriage, and the dowry system all contributed to the further decline of women's status. Women were deprived of their freedom, which is seen as an essential human entitlement. This act of deprivation limited them to home responsibilities and kept them isolated from the outside world.

Many reformists became interested in these social evils and began to question the place of women in Indian culture. In their drive for women's equality, they questioned accepted societal norms and customs, which they held responsible for women's subjugation. This endeavor gave rise to the Indian feminist movement, which protested the maltreatment of women in Indian society.

The Indian feminist movement was initiated by males such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekanand, and M. K. Gandhi. Women such as Begum Hazrat Mahal, Sarojini Naidu, and Annie Besant continued the movement. A number of commissions and committees were also formed to examine the problems that women face. In Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism (2004), Maitrayee Chaudhuri states:

Feminist movement in India was initiated by men. The men who championed the cause of women are long . . . Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Malabri, Phule, Agarkar, Ranade, Karve to mention a few who raised their voice against Hindu customs such as sati, polygamy, child marriage and dowry".

In India, feminism encompasses a number of movements calling for political, social, and economic equality. Indian feminism includes three stages. The first began in the middle of the 1800s, while the British were still in control of India. During this time, reformers became vocal about the need for women to have an education. Pandita Rambai, Tarabai Shinde, and Savitribai Phule served as this phase's principal leaders. The subsequent stage began in 1915 and continued until 1947. Mahatma Gandhi advocated for women's rights and waged a campaign for their freedom throughout this time. In addition to seeking the freedom to enter politics, the post-independence era, which is regarded as the third phase of Indian feminism, calls for equality at work and at home following marriage.

Women have historically only been given limited treatment, especially in literature, where they are portrayed as different. In all patriarchal societies, men have always authored the majority of literature, and they are seen as superior than women writers. The patriarchal dominance in literature is one of the main issues that Indian female writers are raising in opposition to this idea. Madhavi S. Mahadevan in *The Kaunteyas* (2016) insists on revising the man-made myths. She states, "But why is it always a woman? Women's stories are written in water and passed in silence. What would happen if women start to tell their own stories? Would they change the shape of the story? Would the truth become something else?". This statement emphasizes that in the writings of men women's voice does not find proper expression, whereas the voice of women is accurately expressed in the writings of women.

Men have oppressed women for all of recorded history. Men have only got as much in this world as they would like to give. They are restricted by society to being mothers and wives. In the words of Nivedita Menon, "The point is not household work and child-rearing are meaningless and dull, but rather, that both the positive and creative aspects of this work as well as the drudgery of it, should be shared equally by men and women" (*Seeing Like a Feminist* 19). The mutual engagement of men and women in small and big activities can be helpful in giving equal status to women in a particular society because, through this collaboration, women and men will be able to understand each other's pains and sufferings, and this understanding, in turn, will prove effectual in mitigating the subjugation of women.

In actuality, women's subordination in patriarchal societies is caused by societal norms and conventions. These traditions and conventions begin to play their roles as soon as a kid is born, imposing the identity of a man or woman upon it. According to Simone de Beauvoir, a woman is not born; rather, she develops into a woman. The human female's role in society is not determined by her biological, psychological, or economic circumstances; rather, it is civilization as a whole that creates this entity, which is characterized as feminine and lies halfway between a male and a eunuch. Gender disparities among humans are therefore caused by society rather than by biological, economic, or psychological considerations. Due to these differences based on gender, women have to undergo exploitation, subjugation, and loss of identity in a society based on patriarchal norms.

Conclusion

The study explores the complex world of patriarchal stories in Indian mythology, illuminating their significant impact on the way women are portrayed. This dissertation examines feminist viewpoints as demonstrated by Kavita Kane's works in order to demonstrate the transformational potential of reinterpreting and changing mythological materials. These pieces push the boundaries of conventional wisdom and advance feminist poetics by giving voice to marginalized female characters. Women can express positive self-images and dispel historical preconceptions by reimagining mythology. Retelling myths becomes a way for feminist authors like Kane to regain agency, question social institutions, and create a more inclusive literary scene that breaks down barriers of patriarchy.

References

Aki, Kader. *Mythology and Reality in Gita Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night.* Grin, 2007

Barche, G. D. "Facets of Feminism in Indian English Fiction." *Indian Women Novelists.* Ed. R.K. Dhawan. Prestige, 1995.

Beauvoir, Simon De. *The Second Sex.* Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley. Jonathan Cape, 1956.

Birch, David. *Language, Literature and Critical Practice: Ways of Analysing Texts.* Routledge, 1989.

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee, ed. *Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian* Feminism. Zed Books Ltd., 2004.

Cixous, Helen. *Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism.* Edited by Robin R. War holand Diane Price Herndl, Rutgers UP, 1991.

Dominic, K. V. *Critical Studies on Contemporary Indian English Women Writers.* Sarup, 2010.

Gandhi, Mahatama. *Speechesand Writings of M.K. Gandhi.* G.A. Natesanand Company,

1922.

Geetha, N. "Exploding the Canon: Feminist Writing and Intersexuality." *Journal of Literary Criticism* 7:2 (1994) 61.

Jain, Jasbir. *Gender Realities, Human Spaces: The Writing of Sashi Deshpande.* Rawat, 2003.

Krithika, R. "Through Another Pair of Eyes: A Chat with Author Kavita Kane." *The Hindu,* 5 March, 2020, thehindu.com/books-authors/a-chat-with-author-kavita-kane/article30990543.ece.

Lambha, Shikha S. "Author Feature: Kavita Kane." *Coffee and Conversation*. 14 january 2022. Web Accessed on 27 July 2022.

Mahadevan, Madhavi S. *The Kaunteyas.*West land Publication Ltd, 2016. Mascreen, P.J. *Stories from Mahabharata.* Kalyani Publishers, 1975.

Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. Zubaanand Penguin Books, 2012.