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PERSONAL AS SOCIAL AND HISTORIC(AL) – WOMEN AND WRITING IN INDIA**Dr. Nayana K.S.**Assistant Professor and Coordinator Postgraduate Dept. of English
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Abstract: It is evident that the women's status in India is indivisibly linked with the wider social status of India that no endorsement of women's interests is possible without submitting to the varied socio-politico-cultural and religious issues of existence and survival. Also in India, a monolithic picture of women's position is difficult to provide due to the multiplicity and complexity of its cultures and traditions. Another serious difficulty is of locating reliable sources which can help construct a profile of 'Indian woman'. This problem has been foregrounded by viewing history – social and literary – from the subaltern and feminist perspective. While on the one hand, historical documents that have been discovered and used by the 'mainstream' scholars tend to be discriminatory, on the other hand, historians who attempted to build up history, from the very beginning, only perpetuated the patriarchal stance towards women and thereby paid little attention to the role of women in history, except while referring to the exceptional women. The enterprise of writing was undertaken by women all over the world as means to self-discovery and subversion of the established patriarchal ideologies. The endeavour that gained momentum from the 1970s facilitated not only a re-visioning of the stereotypical imaging of women in literary texts created till then, but engaged in a re-presentation of women in alternative and more realistic images. The efforts of the subaltern and the feminist perspectives in relocating social and literary history in their subjective plurality deserve to be underscored.

Key words : Women's Writing; Indian woman; historicity; mainstream history; feminist perspective of history; patriarchal ideology; women's history

Introduction

A brief survey of the maturing of Indian women from the passive objects of reform to the active subjects of change right through the social reform and the nationalist movements in India only reveals the intricate paradoxes that women's movements face in the third world. On the one hand, the absence of a monolithic entity called 'the Indian Woman', and on the other, the impossibility of envisaging and achieving a secular feminism in India render the experiences of women in India the individual uniqueness which makes the issue all the more multifarious. Kumari Jayawardena has pertinently observed that "The most revealing

aspect has been the essential conservatism of what on the surface seemed like radical change. ...the movement(s) gave the illusion of change while women were kept within the structural confines of family and society." (107)

Women's history in India is tainted with extreme illogicality. While some historians make fleeting references to the lives of women during their discussions on society and economy of different periods, some draw attention to the drastic changes that occurred in their lives over centuries, while a few suggest the limitations of such changes which were incapable of transforming the formidable traditions of the land which even theoretically do not

acknowledge that women share the same space and status as men in society.

Since in the name of 'culture' and 'tradition', women have been programmed to play 'given' roles, to cognize and register one's 'real self' and not the 'given self' is to break through the very edifice of culture. Rukmini Bhaya Nair writes, "Culture itself, within this strong sociological paradigm ...is visualized as a predominantly male domain. Therefore, women's role, by definition, involves sneaking into culture, stealing into it, and breaching 'natural' boundaries" (215).

While a large number of women writers of almost all the Indian languages began to write in their mother tongue, a considerable number of them successfully experimented with the English language. The trend continued and flourished in the 20th century and several women writers occupy a pride of place in Indian literature through their radical, patient and sensitive exploration of the lives and consciousness of women in India. They are now studied from the stance that explores how Indian women writers of different cultures, writing in different languages, express seemingly varied concerns about women's lives but converge to espouse the self-esteem and 'human' characteristic in women, whatever personal history they may be part of.

It is interesting that the main focus of Indian women writers is on personal experiences; this becomes paradigmatic of gender oppression within their community, about the dynamics of man-woman relationship in family and society at large. This inclination of women writers towards the domestic and the personal is often the source of criticism against them and their work. But most of the writers believe that they should and can write only about experiences personally felt as only this will enable them to interrogate and negotiate those experiences considered 'domestic' but may become symbolic of the universal predicament. This, they feel, should explain why

their writing is largely on domestic themes. In addition, women writers in India are cognizant of the fact that the 'domestic' and the 'personal' are no more innocent and simplistic in their import but are comments and treatises on society. Consciously or unconsciously, most of the writings of women after the 1970s in India have drawn their concerns from feminism which is a "postmodern worldview...fundamentally pluralistic rather than holistic and self-contained, embracing differing and often conflicting positions" (Felski 13). She postulates that feminist literature needs to be understood by expanding feminism from the personal to the social, to see it as part of social movement aiming, "no matter on what grounds and by what means, to end the subordination of women" (13). The earlier feminist assumptions that literature is a "form of self-expression" and "a reflection of individual experience," according to Felski, are "discarded". The recent feminist literary theory, she says, focuses on "a critical negation of existing codes of representation and the search for alternative forms" (30).

As Sukrita Paul Kumar has rightly observed, the modern age does not rest content with 'knowing' the world as it is presented, but is concerned about comprehending and interpreting the 'real' world which "may strip human existence of its 'phoniness'." By cleaving through all the "smoky rings of security" and "heavy finery" and by confronting the 'real' experience, the self can emerge with "individual perception or individual vision" (35). Facilitating such inward journey to understand the inner and the outer complexities, writing has been found to be a potential medium to explore and explicate the veiled nooks and crannies of the human, particularly of woman's psyche; to re-invent and re-present social and personal history.

What women writers achieve through their writing, though not written in the jargon of history, could be considered as what Ranajit Guha argues to be possibly the outcome of

rewriting “statist” historiography, which is, bringing dignity “to the undertones of despair and determination in woman’s voice, the voice of a defiant subalternity committed to writing its own history” (12). In his essay “The Small Voice of History”, Guha questions the basis on which certain events and deeds of the past are termed ‘historic’ and certain others are not. Who and what determines the historicity of things and the reasons that underline a tacit acceptance of the same are some of the questions he posits in the essay. The ideology that “determines the criteria of the historic” is called by Guha “statism which thematizes and evaluates the past for it” (1). Such a ‘history’ is selective in both its choice of events and in the way they are presented, rather than presenting the human societies and polity from multiple perspectives without bias. Guha notes that the study of history in India, as propagated by the colonizers, was limited to a small section of “colonized elite” (3) with western education. The Westernized study of history led the Indian intelligentsia and academicians to believe that history of a country meant the history of its state system. According to Guha, in re-writing such a historiography the very narrative form of the statist discourse has to be disrupted. The statist historiography, amusingly, runs in an order of chronological and ideological coherence and linearity. It is because of this form and order that many narratives, that don’t fit in this concocted coherence and logicity of action, are brushed aside or subdued. Hence, it is this orderliness and logical importance that dictate the worth or otherwise of personalities, incidents and communities. To envisage a revision of such an orderly and univocal statist discourse makes it essential to bring in a certain disorderliness. Guha acknowledges that the outcome of such a disorderly historiography may break the shackles of chronology and an even flow of well articulated words and result in an enmeshed narrative bringing to the fore those unheard, silenced voices from the inner

courtyards of society and raise them to a level of legitimate, dignified protest against the elitist, discriminating history of ‘humankind’ (1-12).

Bernardo A. Michael observes in his review of Guha’s *History at the Limit of World History* (2002), that Guha vehemently argues against World-History (Hegel’s term) which became the amoral record of states and empires, great men, and clashing civilizations. This in turn rendered irrelevant and pushed to the margins the everyday experiences of ordinary people (or “historicality,” as Guha terms it). To perceive the limits of any institutionalized history, therefore, is to Guha “a creative engagement with the past as a story of man’s being in the everyday world. It is, in short, a call for historicality to be rescued from its containment in World-History” (qtd in Bernardo 530).

In the 1960s, utterly disenchanted and disgruntled with the status quo in their position, women involved actively in subaltern struggles of the rural poor and industrial working class. In the 1970s the United Nations drew the attention of the world towards the status of women. Centuries of history came to be considered partial and phallogocentric. The newer challenges to the task of writing women’s history came from the subaltern school that seems to have originated in Calcutta. Historians showed interest in resistance in everyday life rather than in highlighting palpable and feasible struggles and achievements. The subaltern historians were concerned basically about cognizing and articulating the stories of suppressed people. The concern is replicated in women writers’ discernment and interest in voicing those layers of woman’s psyche that remain unidentified by both the protagonists and the social system around them.

Discussing the practice and possibility of writing in their introduction to *Literature and Gender*, Supriya Chaudhuri and Sajni Mukherjee assert that

By focusing on the denials, repressions and blank spaces that made a certain kind of history possible, feminism sought to re-examine questions of authority and self-making, to expose the tensions of a concealed dialectic that runs through the apparently homogenous texture of recorded history...(1).

They project how feminists like Helene Cixous who consider the evolution of “feminine writing” (*l'écriture féminine*) as an important issue, argue that writing itself holds an ‘emancipatory promise’. Although literature is a space of contention already determined by ideology, it offers through the very act of writing the ‘possibility’ of an escape, a break from complete ideological control as one can witness in works of many women writers.

Re-writing the lives of women of the twentieth century, women writers re-present the past that involves interrogating those elements in the ‘text of life’ that are not apparent or are ignored due to our formal, institutionalized training in reading. Gillian Beer favours the word ‘representation’ for it “sustains a needed distance between experiment and formulation.... It allows a gap between how we see things and how potentially they might be” (64). Against the backdrop of the rhetorical deliberations on the subject of woman’s position in society over centuries, especially in the nineteenth and the

twentieth centuries, it is inevitable to view the ‘virtues’ and ‘strengths’ attributed to women in different periods cautiously. From this perspective, several polemical works by women present the biographical realities of their female protagonists as against the declarations made by the ‘mainstream’ history about the quality and amends in their life owing to socio-political interventions. This is not to underrate the works as mere biographies sans artistic innovation. In fact, they are far from being so. The writings are exceptional examples of works of literature that are a fine amalgam with social reality and change as their basic concern, and experimentation in the use of subject, language and technique without an extravagant indulgence in the nuances of narration.

Reading women’s writing could thereby be an attempt to re-read the socio-cultural history of India from the vantage point of women’s writing that seeks to re-write the writers’ milieu through individual lives which are paradigmatic of the general position of women in India. Such writings counter the approach of socio-cultural history which generalizes about life, underplaying the plurality of individual existence.

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