



INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE ERA

¹Dr. GEETANJALI TIWARI

¹Prof. Deptt. of English D.A.V. (PG) College of Dehradun

The image of Indian woman is well known as an obedient, submissive, self sacrificing creature of the patriarchs of Vedic period. In pre-Aryan times Indian women worked together with men in tilling the soil and reaping harvest. They participated with men in religious rituals and festivals. They were worshipped like goddesses. The Manu's Law book declared "where women verily and honoured, there the gods rejoice."¹ However, there was a turn away from the value of 'The Earth Mother' towards the increasing glorification of the male. In the 9th Chapter of **Manu Smriti** as many as twenty verses have been unsympathetically, openly and unashamedly to absolutely wrong condemnation of women. It has been asserted:

*The father protects a woman during childhood sweet
The husband during youth bright
The sons during the old age feeble
So a woman deserves not Freedom's right*
(Manu-Smriti 9.3)

It is difficult to summarise the various images of women in Hinduism and Islam through ages. The women have been described as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as godly beings on the one hand and on the other, viewed as being essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their lord and master. During the Muslim regime the Indian woman was locked in the four walls of the house and she was tortured physically, mentally, economically. In 20th Century India, however, many reformers viewed these excessive restrictions as social evils requiring amelioration. A few women become vocal about their role outside family, to have education, welfare programmes and suffrage. They protested politically and were granted limited voting right in the Reforms Acts of 1921.

Mahatma Gandhi was a great crusader for the emancipation of women in India. He held a positive view towards women and worked for their equality. He referred to woman as "The better half of the mankind". He supported their demand for the vote and positive roles in the reconstruction of Indian society. He believed that "So long as women in India remain suppressed we do not have the same rights (as men) Indian will not make real progressive."² Gandhiji's message offered to the women of India an opportunity to break away from the past with all its frustrations. Gandhiji by linking women's participation with economic rehabilitation and social reform gave the much desired content to their participation. Such a mass participation under Gandhiji's leadership gave women a sense of equality of men; an equality which was unheard of in the tradition bound Indian society.

The early 19th century social reforms and educational programmes initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar and others dealt with definite social evils. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Behramji Malabari formed associations of men, wrote pamphlets and lobbied for legislation to allow widow remarriage and to prohibit child marriage. 'The Brahmo Samaj', founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, 'the Prarthna Samaj', 'The Arya Nari Samaj', 'The Banga Mahila Samaj' etc. were various organizations and their purpose was to promote modern ideals for women, to promote Hindu ideals of womanhood and emancipation of women. Even Pt. Nehru made a poignant remark "I am sure that our real and basic growth will only come when women have a full chance to play their part in public life.....our laws are man-made, our society dominated by man, and so most of us naturally take a very lop-sided view of his matter. We cannot be objective. But the future in India will probably depend ultimately more upon the women than the men".

The independent movement in India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi was not merely a political struggle but an all pervasive emotional experience of all Indians on the nineteen twenties, thirties and forties. No Indian writer writing in these decades or writing about them could avoid reflecting this upsurge in his work. The three novelists Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, belong to this period of Indian history. They wrote their principal novels in this period which truly reflect the conditions and the problems the characterised the early decades of the 20th Century India and her people.

Mulk Raj Anand's novel '**The Old Woman and the Cow**' is a study of the condition of helplessness of a Hindu woman. Early in her girlhood, she is dependent on her parents, and after marriage she becomes the property of her husband, to be ill-treated or exiled by him for not fault of her own. In this novel the Cow like, submissive Gauri, after her marriage she becomes the property of her husband, to be ill-treated or exiled by him for no fault of her own. In this novel the Cow like, submissive Gauri, after her marriage is sold away by her mother under economic duress, of course, to a rich seth. After her adventure outside, Gauri returns quite chaste to her husband's, only to be exiled again like Sita, the queen of Rama, for fear of wagging tongues of the village gossips.

Raja Rao, advocates through his women protagonists like Savitri, Shanta and Madeleine an intensely mystic and personal solution to the dilemma of the Indian women. His collection of short stories contains sketches of the remarkably patient and doomed Indian womanhood. In '**Akkayya**' we have a typical example of self-effacing Indian womanhood. It is the high born widow who, denied a natural fulfilment of her desires as wife and mother in life, finds in silent unacknowledged heroism and ceaseless sacrifice, a meaning to her own existence.

R. K. Narayan reveals in a comic vein a wide variety of feminine temperaments in his fictive world. The transformation of the female from the conventional meek Savitri into vibrant Rosie and Daisy gives Indian womanhood newer and more vibrant role model to emulate. Daisy, in whom the high point of Indian feminism is reached by means of her intelligence, energy and violation, brings and altogether new balance of power between the sexes in Malgudi. She is unique, in that she is able to cast aside all culturally imposed feelings of guilt and shame on womanhood and sex. Narayan, however, in depriving her of personal fulfilment in marriage and domesticity, warns us about the excesses of rampant feminism would lead to a destructive or deathlike androgynous blurring of the two sexes.

Women's participation in the national movement was partially nil in the early years, but in helping with social reform their sympathy was expressed in deeds rather than in words. The first Indian woman to enter into active politics and life to see India attained freedom was Sarojini Naidu. She left home, husband and children to identify herself with the movement for freedom which had a tremendous impact on women in determining their future participation in the national movement. Many women like Sarla Devi Choudharani, Sarala Ray, Lady Abala Bose, Sharda Ben Mehta, Begum Hamid Ali, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and many others were actively associated with educational and social reform. 19th Century was marked by intense activity for social reform and expansion of education. Thus sati was abolished, widow remarriage was legalised and the Special Marriage Act was passed to legalise marriages contracted outside the established religions.

In the early decades of this century women still lived sheltered lives. The writing and speeches of Naidu presented the goals of women's movement in women's uplift terms. In her early essays (1901-1906), she tried to show that woman's roles and values had significance beyond the sphere of the family.

Naidu elevated women's value to the status of national ideals. "The true standard of a country's greatness lies...in the undying spiritual ideals of love and service and sacrifice that inspired and sustained the mothers of the race."⁷

Sarojini Naidu was a confluence of diverse currents of tradition, conjunction of many roads of influence, a concourse of many talents. A weaver of exquisite garlands of song, she was drawn into the vortex of a tremendous national struggle and unhesitatingly abandoned poetry for politics. Every inch a woman, she played; a part in the nation's affairs such as few men can play.

A number of themes stand out prominently in her poetry (1) The simple joys and hopes, fears and lives of common folk in town and country (2) the irresistible fascination which Nature, especially at Spring time, exercises over her (3) the aches and ecstasies of love and (4) the ever present challenge of suffering and loss to the human spirit, of Death to Life-these are her four recurrent themes. In her first two volumes '**The Golden Threshold**' and '**The Bird of Time**' as '**Folk Songs**' and '**Indian Folks Songs**' have folk theme.

'**The Palanquin Bearers**' is a fair specimen of the true folk song. In '**Street Cries**' the different vendors cries are appropriately linked with different human needs and moods:

"When dawn's first cymbals beat upon the sky,
Rousing the world to labour's various cry,
Then the cry 'buy bread', 'buy bread' rings
Eager street....."

The appeal of Nature, and particularly of Spring, inspire a number of Naidu's poems.

A striking image occurs in **Golden Cassia** :

'Perchance you are, O Frail and sweet,
Bright anklet-bells from the wild spring's feet.'

Sarojini plays all possible notes on the orchestra of love. In "**The Garden Vigil**", the woman, separated from her lover, finds comfort in apostrophizing the morning star-

"Glides may cold heart like a spectre
In a rose-encircle shroud"

Sarojini's poetry is the challenge of suffering and pain and death to life. In poems '**Life**', '**The Soul's Prayer**' and '**Invincible**', this theme finds expression. '**Life**' begins by dismissing as an illusion the idea that,

"Life is a stately stalactite of dreams"

Or carnival of careless joys."³ (qtd. in Iyengar, 210)

Another Indian woman writer **Toru Dutt** made marvelous contribution by writing novels both in English as well as in French. Precocious as Toru was, she had also her limitations. She lived a life insulated from the currents of the seething world outside. The memory of the death of her brother, and more especially if the death of her elder sister Aru, seeped into her sensibility. Here understanding of romantic love was largely drawn from literature, while death was something she had seen. When she turned to the writing of fiction, it was natural for her to give voice to her own experience. In the result both her novels – '**Bianca**', or '**The Young Spanish Maiden**' and '**Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers**'- become inevitably autobiographical projections. The unfinished '**Bianca**' appeared posthumously in the Bengal magazine, in 1878; '**Le Journal**' was published, also posthumously, in France and again in 1963 an English translation by Prithwindra Mukherjee came out serially in the 'Illustrated Weekly'. The story of Bianca and her sister Inez and the story of Marguerite and sister Veronique are two separate attempts to tell the same inner tragedy of sisterly love and bereavement. But, superimposed on this theme, there is in both novels the romantic love motif also. When Bianca is kissed for the first time by Lord Moore, she feels, "as if she had drunk of the heavenly hydromel of the poets, she wanted to take a deeper draught of the drink of the gods." She is intoxicated, she is deeply disturbed, she must tell her father about it. His anger on being told frightens her and she starts sobbing. The passage from innocence to experience is far from smooth.

Marguerite in the French novel is Bianca little grown up, a little less naive, but no less resigned to her fate. She loves Dunois who is unworthy of her, and makes a mess of her life by killing his brother for the love of a parlour-maid. After this disaster, Marguerite is resigned enough to come to terms with reality, she agrees to marry the patient Louis, and she does achieve growth in understanding and love in her married life, and she is content to die after bearing his child. Although Bianca is supposedly a Spanish maiden and Marguerite a French girl, they are both in Toru's delineation essentially Indian, ardent, sincere, and capable of love and equally capable of resignation.

Among other early novels by women writers may be mentioned Raj Lakshmi Debi's 'The Hindu Wife' or 'The Enchanted Fruit'(1876) and Mrs. Krupabai Sathianadhan's 'Kamala,'A Story of Hindu Life'(1894), and 'Saguna, A Story of Native Christian Life'(1895). Mrs. Ghoshal was probably the first woman novelist in Bengali, and two of her novels were translated into English as 'An Unfinished Song' (1913) and 'The Fatal Garland'(1915), a historical novel.

In 'An Unfinished Song' the heroine, Moni, changes from Romanath the Sophisticated but flawed barrister to Dr. Chotu whom she marries happily in the end. In 'The Fatal Garland' Ganesh Dev is torn between Shakti whom he loves and Nirupama whom he marries under the misapprehension, induced by his mother, that Shakti is married already.

Santa and Sita Chatterjee wrote novels and short stories in Bengali and had them translated into English afterwards'. 'Tale of Bengal' (1922), 'The Cage of gold' (1923) and 'The Garden Creeper' (1931). Cornelia Sorabji was the author of a number of stories, some of which appeared in the Macmillan's Magazine. Her best work was collected in 'Love and Life behind the Purdah' (1901), 'Sun-Babies: Studies in the Child-Life of India'(1904) and 'Between the Twilights'(1908). Coming from the Parsi- Christian background, in her most successful work Miss Sorabji tried to penetrate the Silken curtain of the 'purdah' and reveal the nuances of femininity. Are love and exciting life possible behind the purdah? Indeed, yes. Ecstasy, tragedy, tragi-comedy, comedy are all possible behind the purdah. The situations are often touched with sadness, melancholy, sometimes even despair, and early widowhood made woman's life a precarious affair. Woman was easily caught in the meshes of intrigue, and social taboos of all kinds and her subservience to man gave her very little freedom of action, Miss Sorabji's disapproval of the evil customs doesn't affect the humanity of her portraits of the victims of those customs. "The pity of it - O the pity of it." Miss Sorabji Seems to murmur: that one should ascend the funeral pyre to save one's sister from that fate or that a barren wife should feel called upon to remove herself from the scene so that her husband may merry again. Much of the drama behind the purdah is "static". The silent suffering, however, is often more eloquent than violent action or speech that tears passion to tatters.

A later writer Iqbalunnisa Hussain, in her 'Purdah and Polygamy: Life in Indian Muslim Household' (1944) has also tried with commendable success to present the currents and cross-currents in atypical Muslim family.

The movement for social emancipation of Indian women that started in the nineteenth century still have a long way travel before it reaches its desired goal. The prime requirement for this achievement is the zeal and tenacity evinced by the 19th century reformers and writers of Pre-independence Era.

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