



## FEMINISM AND FEMININE TRANSGRESSION IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The present paper deals with the problem of new forms of femininity outlining the theme of transgression as an independent discourse with special outlook and gender meaningful concepts. It reveals the implications of transgression described as the complicated socio-cultural phenomenon and the reflection of crossing the gender bar revealed in the writings of female Indian writers. These feminist writers transgress almost identically in different native contexts and milieu to woman's problems. The new transgressive traits as well as discourses around feminisms frame the theoretical base of this research paper. The present paper attempts to dispel some long held myths about females by suggesting a few plausible ways about the evolution and development of a transgressive woman that is more in line with present scenario.*

**Key Words:** Discourse, Feminism, Gender, Transgression.

### INTRODUCTION

Theories are the tools to unlayer the hidden and covert signified when apparently the overt signifiers rule the world. During the past decades, the emphasis is laid not on what is said or seen rather on what is not said or unseen. To unravel the mysteries and complexities is the basic human pursuit. Literature, being a huge reservoir of human experiences and turmoil becomes a target study for all the theories. These theories are the lances to probe deeper and to excavate the fossils of human behaviorism and patterns in past centuries. To address and redress various issues, theories have been inculcated and developed in myriad forms. A literary critic is well armored with the paraphernalia of different critical and analytical methods. The most important among them are Psycho analytical approach, Marxist approach,



Linguistic approach, feminist approach, Structuralist and Post Structuralist approach, Post colonial approach and many more depending upon the nature and requirement of the text under scrutiny.

The present paper will focus on the transgression of feminine gender and its essential applicability to read any text studded with multiple issues and variant cultural ethos related to woman. To eradicate the hidden meaning of any text feminism is must read theory for every student of literature. Any class room without the discourse or discussion on feminism is nearly incomplete. This stream belongs to domain of gender which is the most vibrant issue now-a-days and demands keen attention of the researchers, philosophers and educationists. Kate Millet in her seminal book, Sexual Politics, defines gender as a, “Personality, structure in terms of sexual category”.

Gender is the sum total of liberal humanism, post structuralism, and Marxism with its wider implications and applicability. The popular literary texts, novels, or short stories reveal how the politics of gender relation operate: this becomes the focal point for a feminist reader. Simone de Beauvoir is known as an authority on women and her thesis was found in the *The Second Sex*.

*One of the important obstacles to a woman's freedom is not her biology or the political or legal constraints placed upon her, or even her economic situation; rather it is the whole process by which femininity is manufactured in the society. In her celebrated phrase "One is not born but rather becomes it woman" (Beauvoir 125).*

According to Elaine Showalter, a woman can be Gyno reader, a Gyno writer and a Gyno critic and among these the third is the most important one. She outlined that there are three phases of feminist writings: 1) Feminine 2) Feminist phase 3) female phase. In the feminine phase, women novelist expressed themselves but in a hiding manner as they were reluctant to even use their real names in books. But in the second phase, feminist writers got courage to print their names in the space for writer. They attacked and criticized the male writer for their misrepresentation of women in fiction without having firsthand knowledge of their suppressed fears and fantasies. They raised their voices against oppression and suppression of writing. The third phase i.e. female phase is entirely different from the previous two; they shifted their focus from male writers and focused on their own style of writing. They identified the shared sisterhood experience and made it vocal through their writings.

In India, feminism came in to existence after 1960's and became a socio-political movement, which aims at understanding the oppressive power-structure in the society i.e. male-supremacy, social practices and social structure, which are largely responsible to put the woman on the periphery. Feminist theory is a powerful devised methodology to encounter the



marginalization and to transform the social structure which can lead ultimately to women's emancipation. The strong wave of 1960's and 1970's of this movement was theoretical in mood. The noteworthy thing about Indian feminism is that it was initiated by men only. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterji became the custodians of the female upliftment project. Describing the origin of the feminist movement in India, Suma Chitnis writes,

*The most distinctive feature of this movement is that it was initiated by man. It was only towards the end of the century the women joined the fray. The list of who champion the cause of women is long - Raja Ram Manohar Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Matahari Phule, Agarkar, Ranade, Karve to mention a few. The record of the reform they undertook to achieve is impressive. It reveals that their efforts spanned action to abolish the practice of Sati, the custom of child marriage, custom of distinguishing widows, the ban on remarriage of the upper caste Hindu Widows and a lots of other evil practices that affected women ( Chitnis VIII).*

In India the decades of 1980's and 1990's are very significant in transforming the situation of Indian women as the focus was now on concrete efforts taken by the academic women folk, who challenged the idea of 'otherness', 'differences' and questions of marginality. It covered the wider range of socio dynamics, cultural analysis touching even the political arena also, thus feminism is not a single concept, a mono program but an interdisciplinary tool and is seen as the struggle against all forms of established and structured patriarchy and sexist aggression. It is a passport to liberty as it frees a woman from dependence syndrome. This dependence syndrome can be in the form of father, husband or son, but when a woman is independent with her own economic clutches, she becomes free from these social and cultural traps.

Unlike west, Indian feminism is complex and multifaceted. It wrestles not just with the sole concern of gender but also keeps in focus the class, the caste and religion also. In India, there are urban women, who earn money, run households, support old parent, and bring up children, where as there are rural specimen who do the manual labor at farm, domestic labor at home and sexual labor at night, then the third variety belongs to the metro women, who chop off their hair, or choose not to procreate, or drive out alone. Thus the different experiences of womanhood cannot be labeled less than one single tag of feminism, as one woman cannot be the all inclusive representative of myriad voices of Indian women. The Feminist thought and the feminist movements in the west had some influence on the woman's movement yet; feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counterparts. As Uma Narayan puts it, "Third world feminism is not a mindless mimicking of Western Agenda in one clear and simple sense. Indian Feminist is clearly a response to the issues related to Indian women"(Nayantara 243).



With the rising interest in feminism, a great deal has been written or read about Indian women, their psyche, their behavior, their trials and tribulations. The readers' interest grew in the compositions of Indian women writers during the last decades, but no serious critical endeavors have been done to unlace the intricacies narrated by Indian female writers. The serious themes and bold experimentations and new innovations have been ignored by the Indian reader segment being largely constituted of males only. As Simone de, Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, "The term masculine and feminine are used systematically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. Actually the relation of the sexes is not quite as if that of the two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and negative whereas, woman represents only the negative" ( Beauvoir 123).

Therefore, it is the urgent need as teacher and student of Indian English literature to re-examine the works of some trend setters through fresh magnifying glass of feminism to make the validity of these ignored works. No doubt, the task is arduous and demands a lot of hard work, intelligence and understanding on the part of readers and researchers, but it is our foremost duty to make our profession a noble pursuit of truth and dedicate ourselves to the cause of women's expression through writings. Woman did not write in the beginning as it now, as Virginia Woolf puts it, "A woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction" ( Woolf 126).

Considering the whole world of writings, women writers are comparatively less in number. But now they are strong enough to write what they feel and experience about race, gender and other socio cultural issues. Feminism can be explored largely in the novels of a new chain of writers who have broken into the literary circuit and have created a large fan fare starting from Toru Dutt to Aru Dutt to Kamla Das, and from Sarojini Naidu to Arundhati Roy, Imtiaz Dharker, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapoor, Shobha De and many more writers in the galaxy. These female writers have explored myriad themes, through the gallery of variant portraits of womanhood, astonishing variety of style, innovative diction that poetry or novels can portray. Within the ambit of writing, they have gone so far to touch the global Zenith and been awarded with the honorable titles and prestigious prizes.

These writers have evolved the shifting paradigms for women; from domesticity to public sphere; from bread maker to bread earner; from personal to public life. They have involved the metropolitan culture and its penetrating effects upon the upcoming generation with its different facets including posh and high life style, urbanized influences of Pub, disco and pop culture and the far reaching influence of western consumerism and materialism. Modern women with their sophistication and precision in speech, cross dress behaviorism, etiquettes and courtesy have become a formidable pattern of study and research. Their rebelliousness is mainly the transgression rolled in over a more or less resistant society and culture and leaves its mark in novels in the form of female characters resisting conventional norms of femininity



and overstepping the boundaries into masculine territories. This post feminism cult has produced a new variety of literature, popularly known as chic culture studded with the sparking and dazzling modes of woman's behavior. The site of tension is when a literary character violates the 'Gender Rules' of a 'Gender Contract', she is seen as monstrous and evil. The idea of transgression can ensure growth and development as it uses the force to break the limitations and circles and goes upwards in a spiral movement forming the concentric wings, thus expanding the narrow regions in to infinity. The idea can be proved how females have imbibed their internal energy and opened the Pandora Box of possibilities and avenues of growth for herself, by transgressing the restricted female zone of domesticity, motherhood and marriage; they have intruded the privileged area of men's profession, occupation and adventure.

This theory of transgression has also formulated the basis of innovations and techniques as Wright Brothers would not have been credited with fame had their minds not crossed the territory of earth and encroached towards sky. The name of Neil Armstrong would not have been registered as the creator of new history, had he hesitated to transgress on moon. Thus creativity and birth are hand and glove with transgression. The joy of transgression is elation, an exuberance that results from the freedom from all the vestiges of reason and rationality.

The term transgression is not a constant signifier rather it pandulates from time to time and place to place. In terms of time one can validate the following example. As the custom of widow marriage in India nowadays is not considered as an act of transgression as what it was assumed half a century earlier. This clearly shows that an act of Transgression leads towards development as we can create this fine hypothesis that some transgressive widow would have taken liberty to get married again at the cost of conservative society's wrath and would have become a target study for sociologists, a new protagonist for fiction writers and a new heroine on screen. The idea would have been treated as a threat at first but later on due to its commercial and popular appeal it would have been bypassed by the superstructure of the society.

In terms of place, the idea of transgression fluctuates from one region to another region. For example open public kiss is a part of courtesy (a way of greeting) in western countries while it is assumed limit crossing in India. To marry with the object of one's choice is common practice in developed countries while it is assumed still as an offence in developing countries like India. To live with a partner without marriage and having sexual relationships without nuptial bond is in the air in the other part of globe while it is assumed as sin in India. Thus as the place or site changes the connotations of the unstable signifier gets drastically changed.

Transgressive Fiction as a genre is a part of Radical Fiction, Erotic Fiction, and Ultra Modern Fiction which seeks to portray forbidden behaviors and shock readers. It is assumed as censored work, obscene, pornographic, and rebellious in nature. In women's fiction it has the





potential to set an Avant-garde trend. The main focus of this fiction is on those characters who feel suffocated by the cultural marks and regulations of society. The restrictions and limitations choke them and as a result they try to shatter these norms and confines in unusual or illicit ways. The protagonists (Male) of such fiction are usually mentally ill, anti social, nihilistic, criminal, sinner while protagonist(Female) belong to such category like prostitute, adulteress, spinster, widow, divorcee, childless woman. As a subject matter this as a genre deals with taboo such as patricide, incest, drugs, sexual activity, violence, drinking and gambling, pornography, rape and crime. The language and diction used in such novels is mostly abusive, bizarre, crude, and slang. Thematic location of these works includes revenge, autonomy, self identity, self indulgence, self love, inner peace and personal freedom. The tone and impact factor of such works created upon readers is partially horrible, full of crude humour and also imbibes shock value for audience. The final conclusion of such fiction is no final or readymade solution rather it generates a feeling of alienation and isolation or sometimes it ends with retrieval for the protagonist under the societal pressure.

Thus, breaking the rule actually forms a vital and necessary part of the game of society because the boundary is then acknowledged. The 'boundaries' and 'limits' also connote ideas of rigidity and fixed positions, thus Contemporary literature is replete with a tradition of transgression as a rebellious idea but its nomenclature as a pure genre still demands the support of such critical writings as the present study promises to be. Twenty-first-century readings of the term transgression in literature also need to respond to the paradigm of postmodernist innovations and experimentalism.

Manju Kapur through her novel *A Married Woman* tells the story of an artist whose canvas challenges the constraints of middle-class existence. She describes through her protagonist (Asha), "A woman should be aware, self-control, strong will, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense"( Kapur 23). Shoba De is a big name and bold voice for women's concerns blowing the feminine norms into the air. For her N. K. Nib writes,

*Shoba De not confronting to any feminist school of thought. De's characters fight to get their due but they forget the fact that the real victory of woman lies in mending their focus not by making a mockery of their bodies but by respecting the physical, emotional and spiritual exigencies within a decorum and also making their counterparts realize the sanctity of body free from petty considerations of domesticity and commodity (Nib 21)*

Thus a great deal has been written or debated over the years about the status of women in Indian Society, and we can affirm unanimously that the position of women has improved enormously over periods of time and in different civilizations. Women in India, as in the rest

of the world have taken a spiral upward movement. Though the early steps of progress, as a consequence of the exposure of India to western set of values, were slow and hesitant; lately the pace at which women are advancing has got the momentum. This emancipation is, however, limited to a small section of society, yet plethora of ground has to be explored.

No doubt, feminism in India, has successfully taken great strides during the last five decades. But most of these have not group found place in the cold print of any book. The discriminatory attitude towards women has given birth to many social evils; It has adversely affected man-woman relations as well as woman's psyche. The sauce for the goose was rarely allowed to the gander. Even the prospects of women's equal position with men before law look feeble. Notwithstanding the hoopla about it, the claim that our constitution outlaws sex-discrimination has, so far, remained only a mirage for our past generation. But with the advancement of Neo-liberalism, the scenario has got shifted in India in the present decade. Indian woman is not following the global image of woman, confident in behavior, comfortable in unisex mode of dressing, and armored with economic weaponry. Now she is taking the giant leap to establish herself not only in family, but in society, economic sector, sports, literature, media, and army and in many more promising and untrodden paths. The day is not far away, when due to the hard work and incessant efforts of multitude of women's race, the dark forest of male "Idée Fixe" and deep rooted traditional prejudice will be cleared where men and women will enjoy equal social status and gear up the social machinery equally and strongly.

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