
Feminist discourse in Hindi Fiction

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Abstract:

The Feminist discourse analyses the early trends in Hindi fiction to suggest the subdued undercurrents of feminist drive to break the shackles of patriarchy. Patriarchy which had dominated the literature of the East till early 20th century generally in line with the feudal order had not left much of a space to accommodate feminist point of view. The paper examines the efforts of a few women novelist and a male writer like Bhisam Sahni expressing solidarity with the feminist reactions and to suggest further the Hindi fiction had risen in consciousness to challenge the phallic structure.

Key words: Feminism, Rebellion, discontent, assertions.

BACKGROUND

Feminist discourse what is known as Nari Vimarsh in Hindi literature has been as intense a movement as in any other literature though the first phase of Hindi fiction perhaps did not notice any voice which could have suggested its early rise. Hindi fiction took its own time right from the days of Premchand, Jainendra, Yashpal to evolve down to the parallel Nai Kahani led by the likes of Mohan Rakesh and Kamleshwar though what was new in Nai Kahani remains debatable.

The rise of women writers in Hindi fiction was comparatively slow as even Urdu fiction had in its sphere some women writers since the days of Taraqqi pasandi or Progressive movement wherein writers like Rashid Jehan rebelled against the patriarchal hegemony by writing fiction that hoisted upon women a new consciousness to usher in and challenged the phallic authority head on. In retrospect Hindi fiction witnessed the rise of women writers a bit late though Krishna Sobti had already emerged as its leading light but she did not write the kind of fiction Rashid Jehan or Ismat Chgtai wrote. But with the passage of time Hindi fiction witnessed an upsurge in the feminine territory and there came about a host of writers like Manu Bhandari whose Mahabhoj perhaps cast the first stone towards the birth of a feminist tendency. There she unearths political conspiracies in the context of villages and sub villages. Krishna Agnihotri's Bani Parchaiyaan and Mai Apradhi Hoon attacks the acts of omission and commission against women. Krishna Sobti's Zindaginaama, Yaron ke Yaar and Teen Tahar do raise some questions about women existence and the cataclysmic events in Punjab during the partition days. Prabha Khiatan in Peeli Andhi and Chitramasta lashed out against the tradition bound Marwari society. Mamta Kalia in Beghar and Narak Dar Narak writes the helplessness of women. Mehrun Nisa Parwez moves about the villages of Bastar and pieces together the bits and bobs of women existence in the narrow, congested lanes of Bhopal and her two works Ankhon Ki Dahleez and Korja are worth mentioning.

Mirdula Garg perhaps broke the jinx of the phallic authority much more effectively through her works like Chitkobra and Kathgulab. She observed and commented upon the changes in the conduct of men towards women suggesting in the process the new dawn where the question of women empowerment through education became much more pertinent. These were the early sparks igniting the flame of feminism and the way questions were raised in 1798 by Marry Wallstonecraft in her book Vindications of the Rights of Women and later on

Virginia Woolf in *In a Room of One's own* and Simon de Bouveire in *The Second Sex* tore apart the male chauvinism and expressed their displeasure and lodged protest against the determination of a woman's role in society. They challenged the traditional subjugation of women holding them hostage for their use and abuse. These trends came about in the 20th century but the concept of East is radically different from that of West because even today after all these writings girl's education remains a bone of contention in the less developed society be it Hindu or Muslim or for that matter the ultra-modernists who too are under attack for their aggressive assertion of the self. Neena Gupta's decision to be a single mother was hued with scorn in a society that boasted of liberation and yet remained an exceedingly conservative one which did not shy away from orthodoxies and the values of the kind still revered as pure. Live in relations, extra marital though Krishna Sobti had given the image of a new women rising from the ashes if not satisfied with the given conditions in *Mitro Marjani* that broke some early grounds in terms of women liberation.

Nasira Sharma has gone a long way in addressing the issues of woman more directly than her contemporaries and the feminist discourse possibly takes a more meaningful turn with her convergence on the Hindi literary scene. Nasira Sharma indeed through her extensive writings raised the very feminine concerns to the level of a discourse so much so that she can be equated with the feminist writers of the world. The patriarchal structure that her characters challenge, the refusal to remain wedded to the orthodoxies and the nauseating traditions imposed by the male dominated society, which her characters of fiction reject with complete authority. According to her, feminist discourse is a modern development and she has induced in her characters a sense of confidence to rise in revolt against what has been traditionally done to women in the society based on the gospel of irrationalism. She has not seen women as a mere wife or mother or sister but an independent

entity that can act on her own and decide her destiny rather than to be guided by it. *Khuda Ki Wapsi*, *Sarhad ke Paar* and *Zero Road* are works of real substance to create the much wanted transition in terms of a new woman not afraid to launch herself into the changing social milieu.

Namwar Singh, the critic, opines

Discourse or Vimarsh in Hindi is the translation of Michel Foucault.

In Criticism things are to be seen while in a discourse the thoughts are important. In criticism there are points- counter points, controversies but in a discourse the issue itself becomes important.

Feminist discourse generally means the issues of women or the issues surrounding their existence and one of the things that has been said time and again that whether things written by women can only be considered as feminist discourse or their male counterparts writings on the issues of women may also be considered as a part of the feminist discourse is again almost a reminder of the writers of Marathi literature who refuse to treat the writings of non Dalits as a part of Dalit discourse. They believe that fire cannot be felt unless one burns in it and therefore the Elite's concern for the Dalits dwindles to fashionable trend of writing rather than developing a genuine concern for their sufferings.

Jagdeeshar Chaturvedi remarks

The patriarchal structure is responsible for the powerlessness of women. Woman in literature was seen as an object of pleasure and such thoughts were entertained that only impeded the growth of women folk as something free. On the other hand Consumerism was seen as a surrogate term for abstinence from life. In reality luxury remained a constituent of patriarchy.

Male domination is known as patriarchy. By definition patriarchy is a tool to subdue a woman.

Arun Prakash writes

Patriarchy is a point of view, it's a thought. The French Postmodernist Jacques Lacan maintains that "There is the domination of gender on culture of the society. In a patriarchal structure, the economic condition, sexual relation and in cultural issues the man controls the women. A woman does not find any wage for domesticity and this substitute as her means of livelihood."

Whereas Chitra Mudgal believes

It has been established by the patriarchal society that to continue the male domination the men have handed down a definition to the woman of womanhood that is a catalogue of orthodoxies, gross anomalies and superstitious beliefs that for a moment the heart comes to the mouth that prestige oriented women tend to question what is that meaningless social existence.

All these statements suggest the dexterity of the phallic thought that coerces women into the secondary position or to a position of no importance and to the extent that no man ever thinks beyond it. Prabha Khatan's dissent in this regard can be considered.

"A woman is born amidst cold reactions. The very first sob raises a collective sound, the daughter has come. In today's time there is no need even for the birth of a girl because the sex of the child is predetermined by Sonography. If she is a girl then she belongs to the society, to the family, to the father and the first reaction of the very woman who conceived her is, take her away, kill her, even the second one is not acceptable under any condition. And what else a woman is except the child producing machine. What difference does it make; again she will conceive, for the third or the fourth time, someday she will have a son in her womb and if he does not come then the same son can be produced through the test tube. In today's time where such views are held by the educated people then it is a pointless shedding tear on ancient times.

Then there was the domination of man using religion to generate fear. Earlier patriarchy used to take support of religion, now Science does it.”

To the extent Prabha Khaitan is furious can be gauged from her outbursts against the phallogocentric society and regardless of the time, the woman has been maltreated and considered decisively inferior to men. Here I am reminded of Simon de Bouvoire’s statement that: *One is not born, rather becomes a woman*, which echoes the anger of Prabha Khaitan.

Women liberation has been the slogan of almost all the women around the world. Whenever there is question of women liberation, it only reminds of her subordinate position and this trend has been in vogue even while the movements are and the feminist organizations fighting out on the street to dismiss the patriarchal bias given their newly found educated status. But the other side or the flip side of the coin also projects a new scene that with the rise of education of women, there is a rise of disintegration in the society too which is based on a paradox and the paradox has its genesis in the complex nature of women.

MODERNITY AND FEMINIST SPARK

In Hindi fiction modernity synchronized with a sense that coincided with the need to look beyond the tradition of what has been repeatedly said in literature which is to say that it was an import from the West. The idea of modernity in Hindi literature began during the freedom struggle for liberation and the emergence of the Brahma Samaj. There are writers who have expressed the term modernity in a variety of ways and it would not be out of context here to review some of the concepts fostered by the Hindi critics.

Ramesh Kuntal opines:

The sense of time has much to do with wisdom and therefore these are the fountains of information. This is influenced by

the time consciousness which determines what is old and modern. Modern sense therefore is a dual perception of time and period and they are diverse in nature.

Ageya writes:

Only the present is not modernity, today's man, God, Religion, humanity etc are discussed from a different standpoint; he views tradition from a different perspective. He says, the one whose sensitivity has changed, the man who is aware of ecological balance is modern and this kind of alertness brings about a change in the entire structure. In the mechanical and scientific age, transition is another term for modernity and the resultant sense is the modern sense.

The above critics have given different versions of modernity professed and the idea of modernity as a matter of consensus points to one fundamental instinct and that is the sense of conditions one is placed in. The modern tradition of feminist writing begins with Rajendra Bala who had already heralded her advent towards the beginning of the 19th century with her *Bung Mahila*. The ones who followed her were Shail Kumara Devi, Yasodha Devi, Rukmani Devi, Gopal Devi, Priyamwada Devi, Kaviyatri Thakur, Tej Rani Dikshit Shrimati Purna Shahi Devi are important. These women writers had commented upon the softness of the woman's heart, their mental struggle, love sacrifice and so on and they discussed at length which again suggested the feminine concerns being addressed by them through the prism of Eve's imagination. But the limitation of their writing was the focus on creating a more idealistic view of a woman discarded by the Western female imagination which pressed hard for the rights of the women and Hindi women writers kept reeling under the pressure of tradition and the truth remained unsaid.

George Sand is another woman French novelist of the 19th century who rebelled against the male dicta through her novels like *Indiana*, *Valentine*, *Jacques* and *Lelia* and so did Maria Deraismes who wrote a book called *Theatre at Home* and

contributed to the hugely popular newspaper of her time *Women's Right*. She was a fearless writer who attacked the male chauvinism to the best of her convictions and was well supported by Alexandre Dumas and Barbey. All her writings have been compiled in *Eve in Humanity*. She has been widely and elaborately discussed in *French Feminism in the 19th century* by .C. Moses. Tristan Flora perhaps was not far behind George Sand as she too unleashed her creative energy through fiction to combat the rising male bastion committed to confining women to defined roles. She was associated with *Women's Gazette* and her book *Travels of an outcast* dismantled many myths regarding the monolithic phallic structure.

So we can judge the commitments of the Western women writers who almost dismantled the phallic hegemony by pursuing a relentless course of aggressive writing which both Urdu and Hindi feminist writers missed badly. May be the cultural barriers, the lack of economic independence and the man-woman relationship has a different milieu but the concerns are common in the sense that they were writing the bias of the phallic structure guilty of marginalizing and defining roles for women. Let's see some of the contemporary Hindi feminist writers who possibly can be billed as trailblazers trudging difficult paths to assert and reassert the authority of the female voice no longer waiting to receive instructions to act and entertain the male whims.

Feminism in Hindi fiction as a movement has been not very prominent except some stray voices or it might be more proper to say that writers like Meera Sikri Maitri Pushpa whose *Alma Kabutri* was a landmark writing and so was Alka Sarogi's *Kali Katha* via by pass which does not espouse the feminist concern but her work *Apni Talash Mein* is the quest for an identity trampled by the phallic whim. Jyotsna Anil's *Argala* comes down hard on male hypocrisy and the feminine susceptibility to fall and rise from the fall to regain what she lost by being submissive. Nasira Sharma also takes the lead in asserting the dilemma of women and the inability to look

outside the realm of raising kids but not without being sympathetic to the social milieu. In India feminism or women empowerment has been more of a political slogan much the same way as it was in the early days of Western feminist movement. But things are changing and women are taking to writing to express their ire and claim gender equality. One of the limitations of feminism in all forms of literature has been the lurking fear of the societal collapse in terms of a radical shift in values which might create a flutter or two more particularly in the oriental set up.

BHISAM SAHNI'S FEMINIST LEANINGS

Bhisam Sahni the author of *Tamas*, one of the most prominent voices of Hindi fiction rode the crest of publicity through addressing the concerns of humanity, the oppressed and the dislodged human conscience.

I have selected two stories of Sahni to suggest the degree of sensitivity the author exhibits and the stories are *Chief ki Dawat* and *Cheleen*. These two stories may not suffice to suggest his entire artistic milieu but can still suffice to illustrate the diversity of concerns, the disintegrating values and the generation of a culture that only dismantles what his generation built and created assiduously. *Tamas* was a political discourse with a human touch to record the bestial human act and the subsequent anarchy that led to the veritable breakdown of the very human ability to think. But *Tamas* was not the end of the road; his stories too represent his human face, his ability to read the divergent streams of thoughts with regard to the values of a crumbling generation.

In *Chief ki Dawat*, Sahni unravels the humiliation of a mother for being poor and depending on her son for her subsistence. Shaamnath is the central character, wedded to his ambition, insensitive towards a hapless mother who is a discarded commodity in his house. The way the story progresses strikes a serious emotional chord based on the almost

unrealistic pattern of behaviour of a son and progressively Shaamnath and his wife represent the rise of a material culture where the persuasion of ambition scales all limitations and how the gains can be had even it means dwindling to the lowest level of human behaviour.

Mother in the oriental set up is a revered concept and Sahni here against this backdrop illustrates the mad scrambling of a son whose splendid cultural bankruptcy echoes the undercurrents of a bleeding mother. The mother as it is reflected in the story is a portrait in silence, humbled by the material ambition of her own son. Battered and pulverised, she watches the idiosyncrasies of her son who remains wedded to his ambition and in the process thoroughly undermines the sanctum Santorum. Sahni explores the changing value system and the rise of a tendency where mother ends up as a commodity or even worse than that. Hindi fiction has made some serious forays into the humanistic pursuits and reminds one how the likes of Mohan Rakesh, Mirdula Garg, Krishna sobti, kamelshwar, Shrilal Shukla, Vinod Kumar Shukla, jainendra have plumbed the depths of human emotions. The story expresses the angst of an artist over an indolent, wickedly ambitious son who mistreats his mother right throughout the enactment of the dram of invitation to the Chief on dinner. Through the early hours of the day the couple, Shaamnath and his wife are engaged in finding a suitable place where the old woman could be dumped and how she can escape the attention of the Chief as if she was the squalor that needed to be thrown. The story plumbs the depths of the smitten mother's consciousness and the touching movement leaves the heart wrenching.

Shaamnath tugged the cigarette between his lips with eyes contracted glancing at the face of his wife, and thought for a while and said moving his head, I had confined her before with a lot of difficulty. Tell mother to have her dinner early and get back to her room during the evening only. The guests are expected at eight and must finish everything before that.

The proposal was liked by both of them. But all of a sudden Shaamnath blurted out, if she fell asleep and started snoring then? Verandah is close to the dining table.

The two passages show mother was a hurdle in Shaamnath scheme of things. Both wife and husband were busy finding a suitable space where the old lady can be rendered invisible to the guests. She was a problem to be negotiated. Shaamnath did not want anything to be left to chance which could even blur his chances of position and powers but her own mother was construed to be a deterrent. The way Shaamnath behaves with her mother with a catalogue of instructions itself, suggest as how an old dignified woman who happens to be his mother is symbiotic of a generational shift in terms of dealing with old parents. Chief ki Dawat bares the gross indifference of a son and the silent humiliation of an old woman.

There are some deeply emotional moments in the story and the trauma the mother goes through without a trace of protest characterises Sahni's grip on the narrative. She squatted on the chair with legs up on it and dosed off only to be brought back to the senses by the wild shriek of her son, Maa, the Chief volunteers to shake hands with her and she does it under nervous conditions. The Chief's exclamation, "poor dear", is insulting for Shaamnath, as he exhorts her to shake hand with the Chief, while doing so one of her hands got stuck up behind the scarf and she offers her left hand which the Chief shakes vigorously. Her son Shaamnath reminds her that it was her left hand and not only this he further goads her into singing a folk song and respond to Chief's, How do you do, which she manages nervously. Then Shaamnath reminds the Chief that she makes good phoolkari, a sort of handicraft where flowers are carved through the delicate movement of needle on a piece of cloth. The mother pleads for not being able to make phoolkari much to the discomfiture of her son though he remains unrelenting. Towards the end the mother is completely shattered over the almost lunatic tendency of her son and rues

the loss of her husband most that particular moment. She goes back to her room and breaks down as tears stream roll.

Writes Dr. Charu Sharma

Bhisham Sahni has always portrayed women with great sensitivity and empathy.

An analysis of the subservient, marginal roles of women in society; their attitudes towards political events; their interaction with men and their suffering reveals them to be protagonists of and believers in humanitarian values. *Compassion versus Communalism.*

After the party comes to an end, Shaamnath goes to her room, hugs her mother in anticipation of getting the phoolkari prepared by her and thereby the expected position. He tells her that it was her promise of phoolkari that impressed the Chief. The mother says no it initially but once she gets to know that it is required for the promotion of her son, she readily agrees to do that. The disgraced mother's heart remains soft even after the humiliations that were heaped upon her by her own son. The story is sensitive to the sensitive mind and a bare narrative for the likes of Shamaath who unabashedly disgraces his mother for the heck of economic gains. It's not that Bhisam Sahni weaves a story based on the figment of imagination but realistically there are sons today who are doing it to their parents. The story indeed lashes out at the value ridden society where a widow mother has to hop and dance to please the Boss of her wickedly ambitious son. Cheelen (Eagles)

The story is based on the paradox of conjugal life. Man, Women, marriage are the issues addressed through a monologue and the first person narration attempts an evaluation of the self by the unnamed husband who sees through the prism of his own unsatisfactory past to look into the dynamics of women existence., her desires, longings, quests and the explorations in terms of finding a safe haven. The apparent dislike towards the husband, the mollycoddling by the

husband, the eventual but voluntary exit of a wife from a husband's life is the constitutive elements of the story. The first person narration, the backdrop of the story, the description of Eagle and the abrupt emergence of Sobha, the husband's many decisions in a matter of minutes, recalling the bitter past, the tantrums, fissures, disdain and despite the absence of conviction, he chases Sobha who appeared to be persisting with her habits. Neatly dressed, a rose tucked at the back of the head, his own longings, everything, though he was not a happy husband.

Twice the husband tried to go close to her, even though the bitterness in relationship had once dissuaded him from approaching her but he was helpless. He stood, walked down in the direction Shoba was going but she disappeared. He thought she might reappear and she did. He slouched down the park, chasing the shadow driven by the desire to be close to her was intense though the Eagle almost swooped down to block his ways and he could see the shadows of its expanding wings.

The story chronicles the frustrations of a husband for having a grudging wife who is a woman unsure of her being. The statement of the ambiguous desires leave the husband petrified. He brooked her tantrums, surrendered the initiative to please the complex persona of his wife. Sahni in this story discusses the paradoxical nature of man-woman relationship and what he finds puzzling is the nature of a woman, a grudging woman whose desires are not known to her. Sita or Maya of Anita Desai share the impulse, the Manto women are better off because they do what they are doing. Bedi's women are extraordinarily submissive, oppressed, liabilities and the tamed creatures of earth.

Here Sahni explores the mysterious, mandarin nature of a woman while a man spends more time in ensuring the happiness of his wife as it is the case in the story Cheelen. The backdrop of the story casts a gloomy spell on the readers but in the construction of such a gloom, Sahni finds a method to deal with the myriad contradictions that permeate the conjugal

existence. No man is ever happy and no woman is ever satisfied.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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