

Shifting Paradigms in Subaltern Literature: Women as Subaltern

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OPEN ACCESS

Volume : 6

Special Issue : 1

Month : September

Year: 2018

ISSN: 2320-2645

Impact Factor: 4.110

Citation:

Adkoli, Bharati Narayan. "Shifting Paradigms in Subaltern Literature : Women as Subaltern." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 6, no. S1, 2018, pp. 101–02.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1421161>

Objectives

- To provide a glimpse into the representation of the unheard women subaltern within the patriarchal culture.
- To revisit, relocate and reflect upon the image of the female subaltern as presented hitherto in the select literary texts.
- To explore and analyse the changing configurations and shifting paradigms in the literary presentation of the image of women subaltern .
- To highlight the need to identify and appreciate the emerging trends on the portrayal of female subaltern in Indian English Literature.

Methodology

This paper has been designed within the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies, examining, discussing the secondary data collected through Books, Internet, Websites. Apart from explaining briefly the emergence of the Subaltern Literature, as elaborated by Gramsci, Spivak and the Subaltern Group of Historians, the paper makes an attempt to trace the literary tradition in the representation of women subaltern with the select illustrations from the Indian English Literature.

Introduction

Meaning – The word 'Subaltern' denotes a person holding a subordinate or an inferior position. 'Subaltern Studies' gained momentum in the last part of the 20th century. Antonio Gramsci, (1891-1937) an Italian Marxist , thinker adopted the term 'Subaltern' in a sense of 'inferior rank', to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union, who were subjected to the hegemony of the ruling class. The working class includes peasants and workers who were denied of hegemonic power. The term 'Subaltern' has been adopted by a team of historians who are known as the 'Subaltern Studies Group' who aimed at promoting a discussion on Subaltern themes. They used the term 'Subaltern' to refer to the prevailing subordination in terms of class, gender, race in the South Asian Society. The group consisted of such members as Ranjith Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey.etc. The concept of 'Subaltern' gained more

prominence and currency with Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" (1985). In this essay, Gayatri Spivak an Indian literary critic, a practical Marxist feminist, focuses on some of the problems of the Third World Women. Her opinion is that if in the context of colonial production the Subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the Subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow. To Spivak, Subaltern women, are subjected to oppression more than Subaltern men; they do not have proper representation and are not able to voice their opinion. Spivak's writings reflect the background of women's struggle and oppression in the third world countries. These problems have never been mentioned nor discussed in the third world countries. Spivak expresses with anguish that female subalterns have become ghosts in society. Robert J. C. Young in his commentary on Spivak observes that Subaltern woman has her identity within the patriarchal and imperial discourse.

Representation of the Women Subaltern in the Select Texts from Indian English Literature

From the time immemorial the orthodox, conservative, tradition bound, biased Indian society has always considered women inferior, and incapable of any serious thinking and action, irrespective of the period of time they belong to. More or less the same sort of perception and sex-stereotyping is expressed through language and literature. Many literary texts have portrayed women as the 'Subaltern', as the 'Other', so, as the marginalized, the silenced, and the oppressed. Portrayal of the female characters as Draupadi, Kunthi and Sita in the Indian epics throws light upon the mechanism of patriarchy and reveals the attitude of the society towards women. The early novels of Kamala Markandeya, Babani Bhattacharya and even Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao etc. depict the suffering of women caused by infidelity, childlessness, harsh mother-in-law. They also illustrate the limited roles women are assigned as they were not allowed to think, decide and act independently. Women have been portrayed by these novelists as being submissive, meek, gentle, docile, silent patient and treated as the 'Other'. As De Beauvoir observes "...She is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is defined and differentiated with reference to men.... She is called the sex...He is the subject. He is the absolute, She is the other." Portrayal of the image of women in literature explain how women under patriarchal dominance are controlled and conditioned to play the stereotypical roles perpetuated through centuries.

Post-Colonial Period

Women writers in the Post-Colonial India have portrayed the image of the women who have consciously accepted the supremacy of the patriarchal value system and surrendered meekly to their traditionally assigned roles and allowed themselves to be dominated. Writers like Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, have depicted women's problems and express their concern in their novels. Kamala Markandeya, who introduced the sub-genre of feminist writing in India, advocated the concept of feminine autonomy. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's novels have the themes of clash between traditional codes and modern aspirations. Describing the plight of women in the Patriarchal society Nayan Tara Sahgal explains how man plays the role of the master of woman's life and the creator of destiny, and regrets that a divorced woman becomes stigmatized in this society. Mahasweta Devi is regarded as the voice of the Subaltern and her female protagonists struggle to cope with the discriminatory practices in order to survive with dignity. In her novels Arundhati Roy portrays the doubly marginalized women subaltern as they are oppressed by the native cultural and the dominant forces of patriarchy.

Shifting Paradigms

The next generation of Indian women novelists like Gita Hariharan, Anita Nair, Namitha Gokhale, Manju Kapur focus their attention on the predicament of the contemporary women who

strive for emancipation and liberation from the dominant patriarchal system. Indian women today, are exposed to the new set of values with education, employment and awareness. This has put them in a conflicting state and are caught between their desire for more freedom and their traditional role. Many women novelists have portrayed women caught in this dilemma and have anticipated changing configurations. The novels of two contemporary novelists – Sudha Murthy and Jahnvi Barua can be cited as examples in this regard. The female protagonists of the two novels – ‘Rebirth’ (written by Jahnvi Barua) and ‘Gently Falls the Bakula’ (written by Sudha Murthy) are educated, cultured, modest and strong enough to tolerate silently the unkind treatment meted out to them, but walkout of their marriage when they realize the worthlessness and meaninglessness of their marital relationships. The patient await for the desired change ends with the awakening and realization that the life they are gifted with is more precious than subservience.

Implications and Recommendations

The study of the representation of women in the select texts of Indian English Literature conveys the message that there has been a substantial change in the status of women, but at the same time they are still under represented and under estimated in many domains of the society. Education and economic independence may have empowered women to meet the challenges of life, to earn a respectable status, to live a life of self respect and dignity, but still at some point an invisible discrimination persists in a subtle way. At present, women may have freedom but with restraints. Many have been relieved of the drudgeries and hardships they have been subjected to at different levels, may have also been enjoying a respectable status, position; but the kind of inexplicable torture and harassment continues to oppress her even in today’s context. Many feminists consider sex based discrimination as one of the oldest worst forms of apartheid in the history of humanity. Hence, there is a need for changes within language and culture to bring about a paradigmatical shift in our thinking habits, our collective consciousness and value system related to Women Subaltern. Society’s mindset needs to be changed to encourage, to motivate, to treat women with respect and assign the status they really deserve.

Conclusion

Literature is the best tool for representing any issue related to mankind of every period of time. In the post independent India, especially in the past two or three decades women writers have shunned all inhibitions and bravely projected, delineated and discussed the real status of contemporary Indian women. In the wake of the shifting paradigms which is a continuous process the women’s Subaltern are getting empowered through the influence of education, economic freedom and western culture. They are progressive and conscious of their rights and at the same time they have not forgotten their care, concern and responsibility towards the welfare of their family. Time and again, the contemporary Indian women writers in English have been successfully trying to represent the changing configurations in the image of Women Subaltern.

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