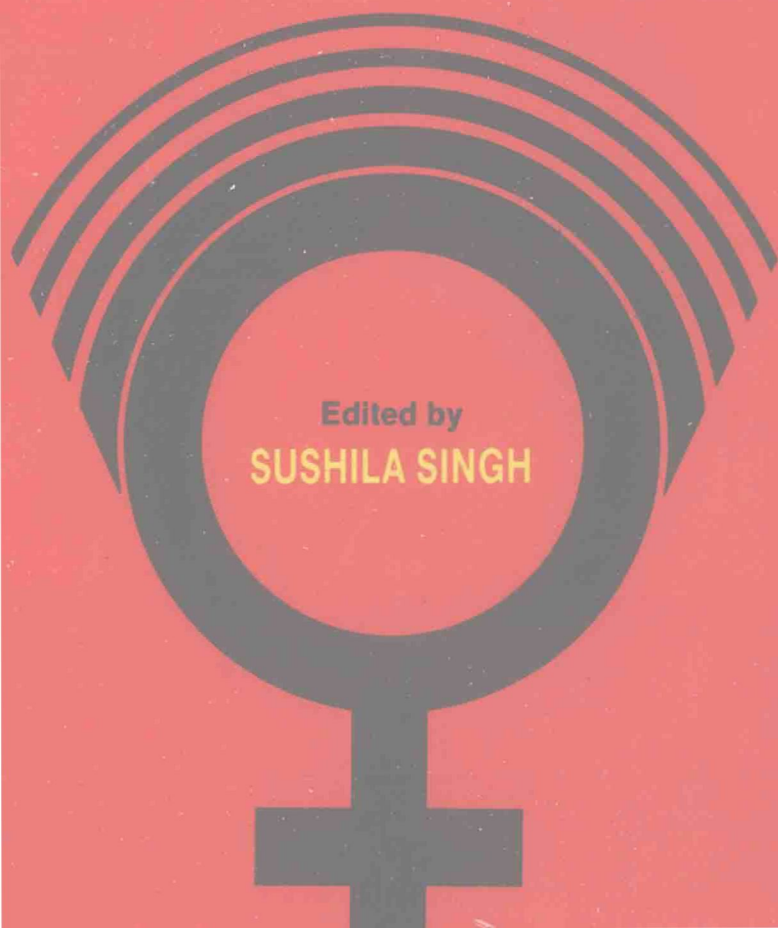


FEMINISM AND RECENT FICTION IN ENGLISH

**Edited by
SUSHILA SINGH**



**Feminism
and
Recent Fiction in English**

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Preface

Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Feminist literary criticism offers new readings of literature, re-evaluating literary expressions by both women and men, documenting the impact of sexist assumptions on writers, challenging literary judgements that deny the female voice an equal role with the male. Human experience, for centuries, has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life. There has existed, all the same, a distinctively female literary tradition grown out of the anxieties of a woman's life. Women writers have been drawn more to fiction writing than to the other genres of poetry and drama. The very reality of woman's life situation, its "interrupted" nature, perhaps, is the reason for a close affinity between women and fiction writing.

Systematic subject-deprivation of woman has been a fact as much in life as in literature. Feminist consciousness seeks to analyze and understand the material conditions through which gender has been constructed within specific languages and bodies of literature. The strong wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s helped theorize a woman's discourse. Since

fiction as a literary genre has religiously kept close to the path of realism, recent fiction responds emphatically to this new awakening.

A feministically read text can lead to a better understanding of the woman condition, thereby subverting the male strategies of oppression. Thus, the very basis of feminism is reformist. As the historian Linda Gordon says, feminism is "an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it." At the same time, while dealing with feminism as an ideology and also as a critical tool, it is essential to take note of the fact that it assumes different configurations in accordance with racial, class and cultural variations. As a literary discourse, it is part of the modernist search for new modes of conceptuality to change the existing pattern of gender relationships. Feminism, thus, offers a fresh perspective for critical analysis linking the study of literature with real life contexts.

The feminist goal of equality with men has undergone a significant change in recent years. The woman-centred perspective now locates specific virtues in the female experience. This concept of the valorization of difference isolates and defines those aspects of woman's experience which prove to be the potential source of their strength with a promise of better future for humanity. This is a kind of "subaltern consciousness" that articulates the hidden and suppressed voice, thereby generating power in the victims out of their own victimization. As Gayatri Spivak rightly says, "the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the subaltern."

This book owes its genesis to a seminar on the subject held in November 1989 at the Women's College of the Banaras Hindu University during its Diamond Jubilee Year. Out of twenty-one papers presented, eighteen find place in this volume. The other five are invited articles. These essays discuss recent Indian-English, British, American (including

Black American), and Canadian fiction under the feminist perspective. Broadly, the essays fall into two categories—conceptual and analytical. Significantly, a good number of these focus attention on Indian-English texts. There is indeed a genuine need for an intensive study in this area from the feminist point of view. How with a change in the cultural, racial and class context the woman situation also changes is evident from the study of the British, American and Canadian texts represented here.

This publication aims to review the key issues related to the discipline of feminism and its application in the reading of recent fiction in English. The book is addressed not only to the students of literature but to all humanists with a commitment to a just social order.

Many people have helped in the making of this book. First of all I wish to express heartfelt thanks to all fellow contributors whose instantaneous and warm co-operation made this anthology of critical essays possible.

My revered teacher, Professor T.N. Singh, has been a constant source of inspiration and guidance for which I am profoundly indebted to him. I owe deep gratitude to Professor R.P. Rastogi, Vice-Chancellor, Banaras Hindu University, for encouragement and generous support. To Professor Annapurna Shukla and to Professor Usha Kiran Mehra, I remain grateful; without their support the volume could never have come into existence.

My chief debts are to: Professors Chaman Nahal, Meenakshi Mukherjee, O.P. Mathur, T.R. Sharma, Ramesh K.Srivastava, R.S. Pathak and R.R. Mehrotra for helping in more ways than one. Also my special thanks are due to Dr. R.K. Dhawan for his interest in the book, and to my husband, Professor K. P. Singh for his unfailing help as ever.

I am thankful to the University Grants Commission for sponsoring the seminar and the Banaras Hindu University for subsidizing the publication. The Prestige Books have taken pains in producing the book elegantly; my sincere appreciation for a fine job done.

Banaras Hindu University

SUSHILA SINGH

Feminism and Fiction: Some Reflections

T.N. SINGH

Feminism as a precisely defined concept relating to sociological and literary studies is a phenomenon of recent development. The discussion of feminism in literary context, particularly in the context of recent fiction in English should prove an endeavour of a highly innovative nature representing a significant departure from the traditional mode of critical evaluation. I believe, we should consider feminism as a fictional strategy forged by writers in accordance with the pressures and challenges to which they have been subject, for projecting a feminist view of life and its problems. Criticism so far has been unable to take note of this strategy because of the age-old dominance of the male view in the world of letters. Naturally, therefore, we have not been able to see things as these feminist writers would want us to see them. As a critical tool, feminism should aim at providing us an altogether new awareness of the woman's role in the modern complex world.

About two hundred years back, Jane Austen as a writer had a sensitive awareness of the constraints and handicaps of her sex. This may be said of other women writers of the nineteenth century as well. Social decorum and prudish notions of morality proved in their case tyrannically inhibiting factors. Men could very well ignore them. But for a woman, a defiant attitude towards these rigid norms could not but have disastrous consequences for her literary career. A woman writer had to restrict herself only to certain permissible areas of life. Many other domains of human experience that were no less vital remained forbidden to her. Her creative talent, thus,

never found a full-throated expression.

Social environment has changed since then. Women writers in the contemporary world enjoy a greater measure of freedom. No area of life remains the exclusive male preserve now. We find women exploring the hitherto prohibited regions of experience with an unusual sense of candour and boldness.

The moot question, however, is whether the new endeavour by modern women writers has succeeded in demolishing the traditional image of woman as a mere sex-object. Feminist writing will have justified itself only by bringing about a radical transformation in public attitude towards man-woman relationship. It must make people realize that love-making and domesticity are by no means the sole concern of women. They have as much to do with the rough and tumble of life as men. Feminism as such has to attempt a new definition of woman's role in the wider social frame.

It is worth noting that almost the whole gamut of feminine writing is marked by a tinge of sadness. Even where the atmosphere is gayfully comic, one has the feel of a grave note. This may be due, perhaps, to a disturbing awareness of the precarious nature of woman's position in society. Even today an average woman feels uncertain about her identity as a social being. Conditions of life have no doubt improved a tremendous deal since the days of Jane Austen. Women today have a greater share in social responsibilities. They have also an infinite number of avenues open before them. We have examples of women outshining men in many spheres. Notwithstanding all this, the general notion about woman as a shadow-figure to a male caretaker, be he a father, a husband or a son, continues to persist. The situation calls for a concerted effort to demolish such notions and to affirm the dignity of woman in the family as well as in the wider social life.

The problem, therefore, with which we are concerned, is not purely literary. It has many other implications—social, political, psychological and economic. Recent fiction, of course, will be the theme of our deliberations. But, I hope, we

will discuss it in the context of the contemporary social reality. We have to guard against the theme of feminism becoming a matter of pompous academic exercise. We shall be happy if this seminar assumes the form of a vigorous movement—a movement which does not stop till our collective thinking has undergone a complete change vis-a-vis the role of women in the more serious affairs of life. To achieve this task, we should discuss problems with an open mind, subjecting to a close scrutiny all such theories that are anti-feminist. Our aim should be to give a radically new orientation to the traditional mode of thought and life.

Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations

CHAMAN NAHAL

While discussing feminism, one is confronted with parallel or comparative models from different cultures. There are so many of them: the English feminism, the Canadian feminism, the African feminism, the Australian feminism, the New Zealand feminism. One has to listen to Patricia Grace to realize how effective New Zealand feminism is. Outside the orbit of literature written in English, there is French feminism which is very-very pronounced. Of Marxist feminism, I have personal experience at least of two countries—Soviet Russia and North Korea. So, which model one should follow for the sake of comparisons. The problem is the problem of definition. What is the definition of feminism that we have in mind while dealing with feminism and recent fiction in English.

So far the legal terminology is concerned, the term "man" includes the term "woman." What exactly do we mean by feminism? Does it merely mean female-ism or femaleness, the qualities which all women possess, not only human females but may be the other females in the non-human world. Though we cannot listen to them, perhaps they also feel the same constraints, same pressure of motherhood and child-bearing. Or, feminism means a sense of personal courage. If that is so, is this so very new that we are talking about it today? There are numerous fine examples of women having personal courage. We have Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, who puts on man's clothes and goes about looking for her lover. What about Sita herself? Though Sita is normally cited as an

example of anti-feminism, of submission, Sita must have been very courageous to have resisted a man like Ravana for one full year. After all she was totally at his disposal and he could have outraged her whenever he wanted. Sita was able to resist him; she must have been very courageous.

Or, feminism is a kind of social revolt against convention, like living outside marriage. Even then we have had examples earlier. Within literature, we have the example of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and of George Eliot who in the nineteenth century lived outside of marriage. So what do we mean by feminism? I have a definition to offer, but first I propose to problematize the issue.

Even unmarried girls feel the constraints of parents, of ethnic communities to which they belong, the social groups in which they live, of the schools they go to. I have known of girls going to English convents. Because they write with the left hand, and the left hand was the hand of devil, the nuns used to punish them. In one case I know of a girl who developed a stammer because of the punishment she received at the hands of the nuns.

Therefore, while talking of feminist tensions, probably we are talking of the tensions of life. The feminist tensions are the tensions of living whether one is a man or a woman. I would say, even a man would feel the same tensions living together in marriage. Marriage is an impossible situation institutionally for two people to live together. Several minor/major decisions—which paper to read, whether to have tea or coffee, to go out or stay home, to have a child or not—cut into the fabric of every marriage. So what do we mean by feminism? So far, feminism has not been defined in precise terms. What has been offered is a prescription of feminism. ✓

For instance, if we take into account Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* or some of the other French writers, they are very much concerned about the physical suppression of women. Therefore, according to the French models of feminism, it would imply the greater sexual expression. If we take into account the British models, all feminists

slowly become respectable, or reclaimed into the male world order. If we consider American models, they are more outspoken.

By way of coming to a definition of feminism,, I mention Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. This is the American assertion of self expression. Typically American, the story is of a young woman in a small village. There is the main street and along comes the peddler. The young woman is very tall, she married a man at one time; she fell out with him. He has gone away, has been in a prison, and she has not seen him for a long time. She is alone; the father is dead. One day a strange hunchback comes into the town and slowly works into her consciousness by telling her that he is an old relation of hers. The two of them start a cafe which thrives and flourishes. In the course of time, the one-time husband, who has been released from the jail, comes back. The point of interest lies here. They have to decide now who is going to stay in the village. It is clear that the young woman will have to fight physically. A match means a physical match. The day of the fight comes, and this woman is actually about to beat the man and then the hunchback jumps on her back and she is floored, downed in defeat. The man wins. The woman loses by default. But there is this strong expression of self-assertion.

In the North Korean Marxist variety, there is a strong sense of feminine loyalty to the party as exhibited by the guide—a woman of twenty-one who looked after me during my stay in that country.

Therefore, there is the problem of definition. Some one might say why have a definition; having a definition is too schematic. But that is the whole business of literature. I think literature is not a teachable subject. Either one likes a writer or does not like a writer. If you do not like Lawrence, what can I do? You do not like him, I like him very much. But to teach a writer we have to have definitions, labels—just to understand, just to problematize the subject.

Before coming to my definition of feminism, I want to mention how women writers have explored the