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Postcolonial Indian Feminism: A Study of *Sensible Sensuality: A Collection of Essays on Sexuality, Femininity and Literature*

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Abstract

Present paper attempts to study the key features of postcolonial Indian Feminism as represented by Sarojini Sahoo a feminist of international fame in her monumental work *Sensible Sensuality: A Collection of Essays on Sexuality, Femininity and Literature*. Linked with sexual politics of women, this work covers various issues pertaining to women like motherhood, marital practices, socialization of gender, beauty myth, feminine identity and female sexuality. Drawing upon theories of Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiquing monolithic concept of universal womanhood, this research paper underlines the Indian version of feminism as depicted in the text to be studied. The selected work is grounded in Indian socio-cultural context. Sahoo demands equal status for women in every sphere of life. Her bold and candid expression for sexual liberty for women makes her stand apart from the conventional women thinkers and writers. She redefines feminism with Indian perspective dealing with sensitive issues like rape, menopause, abortion, lesbianism from a female perspective.

Keywords- *Postcolonial Indian Feminism, Patriarchy, Oppression, Feminism, Sexuality, Femininity*

In colonial India, movement for the cause of women was initiated by male social activists. Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Phule and Keshav Chandra Sen made

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sincere efforts for the abolishment of outdated and inhumane practices like 'sati', child marriage and the ban on remarriage of upper caste Hindu widows. A few women feminist thinkers and writers like Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai gave voice to the gendered subalterns through their writings and social work for justice. Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulna* exposed the power politics of patriarchy causing subjugation of women. This work underlined the socio-cultural norms of patriarchal system of Indian society making life of Hindu widows a dreadful experience. Pandita Ramabai's *High-Caste Hindu Woman* was an appeal for the provision of education for high-caste Hindu widows going through horrible phases of their lives. Hardships faced by women in day to day life due to their secondary status led to the emergence of feminist movement in India. In this context Anupama Choudhary observes: "In our country, feminism has emerged not as theory but from the real problems faced by women" (34).

The Indian feminist movement focused on the freedom and power for the gendered subalterns underwent various developmental phases and got strength from empowerment strategies constituted in post-independence phase. Feminism in postcolonial India got a new face with the shift from social activism to theoretical and political interventions. Despite the indifference of society, adverse material circumstances and the dominance of male literary tradition, a very few, but fairly distinctive women's voices began to make themselves heard. Creative writing was supplemented by a body of criticism by critics like Susie Tharu, Kumkum Sangari, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Arun Prabha Mukherjee, C.T. Mohanty, K. Lalitha, Rajeswar Sunder Rajan, Spivak and Sarojini Sahoo.

Sarojini Sahoo, a prime figure in Oriya literature, an award winning writer is linked with sexual politics of women. Though a feminist of international fame, her views regarding feminism are grounded in Indian perspective. Not being a follower of stereotyped man-hating feminism, her ideas of feminism do not go with radical feminism. She has nine anthologies of short stories and eight novels to her credit. She has been conferred with Orissa Sahitya Academy Award, 1993, the Jhankar Award, 1992, the Bhuvneshwar Book Fair Award and Prajatantra Award (Nawale 267). She is a feminist in a unique way and presents the world of woman in totality. She believes that 'femininity' is the proper word to replace 'feminism', because later has lost its significance and identity due to its extensive involvement with radical politics (Nawale 272).

Present paper attempts to study Sarojini Sahoo's *Sensible Sensuality: A Collection of Essays on Sexuality, Femininity and Literature* with a special emphasis on various factors constituting Indian feminism. The selected text of Sahoo published in 2010, presents her views regarding the concept of feminism and its place in socio-cultural context of India. This compilation of essays covers the socially constructed and approved patterns of gendered behaviour and their impact on men and women. The selected work underlines the impact of

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socio-cultural constraints on the growth and assessment of women writers of India. Through this work, Sahoo covers various issues pertaining to women like motherhood, marital practices, socialization of gender, beauty myth, feminine identity and female sexuality.

Feminism is a concept that differs from culture to culture and from people to people. Second-wave feminism was criticized for its ethnocentricity in the 1980s and its failure initially to accommodate the diversity and specificities of women's experiences. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Under Western Eyes* argued that feminism had taken the white, Western norm as its standard. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her powerful work in 'Can the subaltern speak?' too asserts that Western concept of feminism cannot accommodate diversity. (Woodward 17,18). Both these feminists are against the concept of universal womanhood and believe that it should be culture specific. In India the question of primary importance is of survival of women. Thus feminism in India is different from feminism in West. Many factors like religion, caste, class and social norms make Indian version of feminism. According to Suma chitins, the historical circumstances and values render the women's issues different in India.....So what makes Indian women 'feminists' different is the fact that they raise their voice against the social injustice and the oppression of woman rather than ask for her freedom from the institution of marriage and family (Atrey and Kirpal 5-6).

In *Sensible Sensuality: A Collection of Essays on Sexuality, Femininity and Literature* Sahoo opines that Western concept of feminism is not completely relevant in India and opposes the western feminists like Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir who considered marriage and motherhood as a source of oppression of women. She goes against Simone's concept of 'other' in feminism. She strongly feels that we should accept the reality that women are different from men biologically and psychologically: "But my point is that women need the same status as men but they have their own identity and they are different from men. They are 'others' in real definition but it is not in the context with the Hegelian definition of 'others'. It is not always due to man's "active" and "subjective" demands" (131-132).

French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* "One is not born but rather, becomes a woman" (297). She presented the ways religion, socio-cultural norms, literature, philosophy and every day practices play decisive role in the construction of the gender of femininity. But Sahoo seems to disagree with Simone as she believes that trying to explain everything by its social construction creates problem. She admits that her upbringing like a boy couldn't make her a male in her attitude. She was very much a girl even being dressed up like a boy. Her outer appearance couldn't hide the very feminine instincts in her. Clothes can't change the psyche of a person. Sahoo believes that her feminist thought took birth because of the pathetic condition of her mother. She has just tried to give voice to her

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mother's silence: "Tomboy activities' do not make anyone feminist. Rather it is my mother, whose situation, condition and life under the patriarchal milieu make me a 'feminist'" (103).

It can be stated that the way she was brought up also sowed the very seeds of feminist thought. The worried reaction of her mother at her birth as not getting a son also indirectly affected her: "She told me later, she could not sleep the night with fear of facing my father with a girl child. She was praying all night to God for changing my gender, but God did not pay attention to her pathetic cry and hence my gender was not changed. But my father was a strong-headed man and he could not forget his sorrow of not becoming a son's father. He wanted me to bring me up as a boy" (1). There is no doubt that Sarojini Sahoo realized her inferior status as a girl in a society where gender discrimination is quite common. She got the very first glimpses of man-woman relationship in a polar dichotomy society through the relationship between her parents. Patriarchal society is based on power relations between sexes in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. The picture of sexual politics prevalent in such societies is portrayed by Australian poetess Judith Wright:

Sunk in his brittle prison-cell of mud

The god who once chose to become a man

Is now a man who must become a god (Gupta 63).

Sarojini Sahoo seems to agree with Kate Millet who explains all cultural phenomena purely in terms of power politics. According to Millet sexual politics is a process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex (Moi 24-28). Sahoo feels that patriarchal social setup creates the myths of 'purity' and 'virginity' for women to subjugate them. Women blindly follow them without knowing the harm being done to them: The concept of 'Sati' or "devi" is good to hear, but in my opinion, they are the tools of sexual politics that patriarchy has been trying to play with women for ages" (103). Like Simone, Sahoo too observes that stereotyping of women is done by every society for its own purpose. Woman is always provided with two images one is of Goddess and second is of an adulteress. There is no doubt that every woman strives for that positive image and becomes a plaything in the hands of men.

Sarojini Sahoo demands equal status for women but is not willing to interchange the roles of men with those of women. Interchanging the roles will result in the wretched condition of men and that is no way justified. Like Judith Butler Sahoo too is not in favour of feminization of the present world: "I am not against any social system like marriage, motherhood, or heterosexual love. I am against patriarchal society but that does not mean that I want to replace a matriarchal society with a patriarchal one." Sahoo fights for equality for women and is against the idea that women are inferior as she admits: "I think man and woman are complementary to each other in order to make nature's law fulfilled." To strengthen her opinion, she quotes the words of Plato in her work *The Sensible Sensuality*:

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Plato once said in his 'Republic' that "the only difference between men and women is one of the physical function - one begets, the other bears children. Apart from that, they both can and should perform the same functions (though men on the whole perform them better) and should receive the same education to enable them to do so; for in this way society will get the best value from both". (103-104).

As a versatile scholar, Sahoo uses her knowledge of philosophy, religion, biology and physics to make her demand of equality for women genuine. According to Sahoo, Adi Shankracharya, the founder of non-dualistic philosophy (Advaita – 'not two') in Hindu thought says in his Saundaryalaari – "Shivah Shaktayaa Yuktu yadi bhavati shaktah prabhavitum nache devam devona khalu kushalah spanditam api", i.e., It is only when Shiva is united with Shakti that He acquires the capability of becoming a lord of the universe. In the absence of Shakti, He is not even able to stir. (12). Sahoo opposes the gender based hierarchies and advocates the equal contribution of both men and women for creating balance in society. Social structures of patriarchy cause damage to both men and women and feminism should aim at social change.

Religion that provides double standards of morality often denies women the free expression of sexual desires. According to Wendy Doniger, the Valmiki Ramayana and other religious books are responsible for the oppression of women. She believes that religious morality makes women follow the Sati-dharma: Because of her father's offence against her husband, sati burned her body in the fire of her yoga, to demonstrate sati-dharma....Again, "Sati-dharma" means both what Sati did and what any good woman should do (Doniger 415). Indian society leaves two options for women- to be conventional or to be unconventional. They have to choose whether to be a Sita or Shurpanakha and in both these roles women have to suffer. Though Sahoo feels that biased religious opinions are used as a tool for the subjugation of women yet she disagrees with Doniger up to some extent. She wants to highlight the positive aspects of religious concept of 'Ardhanarishwar' form of Lord Shiva in Hinduism that is considered as the major factor of gender equality (11).

Through *Sensible Sensuality: A Collection of Essays on Sexuality, Femininity and Literature* Sahoo explores the prohibited field of women's sexuality in Indian context. Considering sexual liberation of women the main motive of feminism, she asserts, "As a human being, I always argue about equal status for women and I refuse to believe that by denying our sexual selves, women can be equal with men" (174). Feeling proud to be a woman, she writes about female bodies breaking all the imposed barriers of modesty. Her views on sexuality and on the tabooed issues of India are remarkable. Despite of the fact that social norms, family responsibilities and standards of morality always keep an eye on woman writer leaving no room for full-throated expression through literary creations, Sahoo has exhibited extraordinary strength and self confidence to get out of this web of decency. It is

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common that women writers are accused to tend to stick to safe decent ideas under the pressure of patriarchal restrictions. Sahoo cites the case of Kuntala Kumari Sabat the veteran feminist poetess and writer of Oriya literature whose life was dangling between love, sex, oppression and harassment by the male dominated mentality of feudal India. But sexual agony was never expressed in her poems. Rather she always tried to hide her sexual expression with a coated version of mysticism in the form of Sufi ideology (*Sensible Sensuality: A Collection of Essays on Sexuality, Femininity and Literature* 107). A few exceptional writers like Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam and Sarojini Sahoo showcased the tabooed issues of Indian society in an unconventional way.

Sarojini Sahoo is of opinion that Sexuality has a major role in understanding feminism in India 'where women's sexuality is used for raising of children only and there is no seat for their sexual desire (16). Sahoo finds it ironic that though 'sexuality is often described in our myths, Puranas and in our religious texts and above all in our literature from medieval age to this post-modern age' but in real life even a mere discussion on it faces censorship (12-13). A woman in Indian society has to suppress her sexual desires for the sake of family and social norms. Sahoo is a strong supporter of woman's right over her body and believes that a woman has every right to express her sexual desires: "In Asian and African countries, the patriarchal society has its control over sexuality. So, the women need two types of liberation. One is from financial slavery and another from sexuality. I believe in the theory: 'a woman's body, a woman's right' (16-17).

Sarojini Sahoo is a trendsetter of feminism in contemporary Oriya literature. She has carved a niche among the contemporary feminists by presenting the true situation of Indian woman. From the very childhood to puberty and menopause every phase of a woman's life gets place in the selected work. She has tried to analyze the truth regarding the nature and behavior of the female mass. Her unique way of handling universal female experiences is really remarkable. Her basic concern is to depict woman as a human being irrespective of her traditional roles assigned by the patriarchal society. She considers herself as a genderless writer only: "I consider myself more a writer, I think I am always a genderless entity. In my opinion, a writer should not have any gender" (Nawale 273). According to Sahoo women need not to look at man-made conventions to be perfect human beings as they have their own identity. She redefines feminism with Indian perspective dealing with sensitive issues like rape, menopause, abortion, lesbianism from a female perspective. She has been placed in the category of courageous women writers who believe in candid expression leaving all inhibitions aside. Sahoo realizes the significance of taking risk to break the conventional image of a woman writer to achieve justice for gendered subalterns: "... it is risky for a woman writer to deal with these themes in an Eastern country, and for that I face much criticism. But still I believe someone has to bear this risk to accurately portray women's

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feelings- the intricate mental agony and complexity which a man can never feel-and these must be discussed through our fiction” (183).

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