

Existential Medievalism in the Social Narrative of South Asian Literature

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Abstract

The 'othering' and 'exiling' of female consciousness in contemporary South Asian Literature draws its sustenance from an existential Medievalism in the literary discourse of the region, still retaining more or less the same amount of patriarchal and subaltern references. Forces that dare to defy these norms are met with criticism on all modern and postmodern platforms reigning in the aggression and discontent. Expressions of liberation are mocked and subverted, paving way to conformist and conventional powers. We can hardly claim a paradigm shift right now, unless time and relentless striving to reinstate social justice proves us wrong.

Keywords

Existential medievalism, South Asian Literature, subalterns, expressions of liberation.

Modern South Asian Literature has witnessed a parochial shift from the medieval assertions of female consciousness. It mirrors a society that highlights patriarchy and chauvinism as a major theme, essentially a trait that goes back in time to the Middle Ages, wrapped in the misgivings of feministic rhetoric and postmodern discourses. Raking up instances with the female body as the ground of storytelling is still popular practice. Sadly after all the discussions and empowering sessions there is still discomfort with those who speak up followed by victimizing and rampant misogyny towards those voices who refuse to be quietened. The Indian social fabric is deep down yet unprepared to accept levelers and social equilibriums, curling in the seams of social justice. Ploughing the ground, readying it for newer seeds is only possible through addressing the issues at the roots of the problem and discarding it for altogether better crops. Eager advocating and open discourses are important to change postcolonial and neocolonial strategies to hush the 'other'. The binaries of the conqueror and the conquered need to be thwarted through wholehearted debates.

The Early Modern Period, characterized by Humanistic ideals was a huge influence on Literature and scholarship. The literary heroes of Renaissance played an active role in changing cultural values and giving shape to modern political and socio-economic systems. Renaissance Literature that started in Europe as early as the 14th century through the works of Dante and Petrarch

reflected the change from Persia to Japan and to India. Yet in the socio-cultural paradigms that featured women any paramount change is far from noticed. The detriments of the socio-cultural changes of the Later Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period on women's status and identities evidently ratify an existential medievalism despite the development of the times.

The Medieval Period (500-1400-1500 CE) is divided into Early, High and Late Middle Ages, invariably sandwiched between two more important epochs-the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. Though the period is generally characterized as a time of extreme ignorance, superstition and social oppression, the Middle Ages are now largely considered as a significant period in time that brought forth the idea of Europe as a distinct cultural unit. Political, social and cultural structures were profoundly reorganized and the high or central middle ages grew in importance dramatically being the era of the crusades, gothic art and architecture. This was also the time of the papal monarchy, the birth of the university, the recovery of ancient Greek thought, and the soaring intellectual achievements of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Leading literary figures in Europe combined the ideals of the ancient and classical texts with the medieval values of Catholicism and contemporary values of Renaissance. Within the confines of a largely patriarchal, feudalistic and misogynist society freshly brewing concepts like that of social equity, and the rise of the middle class, Chaucer

slays the notion of social order based on noble birth and high status by introducing the Arthurian pre-fourteenth century knight who rapes a young girl. There are many references to Chaucer's anti-feminist representations in 'The Wife' as well. The feminist character in the tale herself is represented as loud, indiscreet and deceitful. Women who dared to defy male power were seen as wicked women following the footsteps of Eve and those who remained obedient to their husbands despite trying conditions were compared to Virgin Mary. Both in Chaucer's Tales that engage with gender relations and the hugely male-dominated narrative of Beowulf, females were largely placed in patriarchal and misogynist environments. In the hugely male dominated narrative of 'Beowulf', female characters are sidelined and left to fulfill roles male protagonists cannot, the role of peace weaver, hostess, mother...Women continued to be portrayed as either virtuous and chaste, or seductive and deceptive. "Frailty, thy name is woman." (Hamlet: Act 1, sc.2) feeds on the generic misogynist Renaissance attitude while comparing Hamlet's own inaptitude to the actions of a representative of women. Rahman (2006) in the IIUC Studies, vol-3, points out that "Shakespeare never intentionally portrays women in a negative light. But his works should be viewed as being a reflection of the world around him. Because a playwright, however individual he is, lives in a society and in spite of his entire individualistic outlook he is not totally free from the outlook of his society." (pg. 43) Wollstonecraft in the book *A Vindication*

of the Rights of Woman' (1792) stated that women's obsession with desires and outward beauty are symptoms of the way society warps their mind. "Ignorance and the mistaken cunning that nature sharpens in weak heads as a principle of self-preservation, render women very fond of dress." (13.42). The protofeminist, walked long-strides in her notion of the unshackling of female consciousness which reverberates even today in the realm and concept of Existential Medievalism.

In India feudalism was an underlining social reality throughout the Early Medieval Period continuing in different forms and intensities for ages to come. After the fall of the Harsha Empire in the 7th Century, the 8th to the 12th century political India was into a large number of states. In the North were the Deccan, Pratiharas. Palas and the Rashtrakutas. In the south were the Cholas. In the 8th Century, Arabs conquered Sind. Turks invaded India during the late 10th and 11th century. The concept of patriarchy matured during the Early Modern Age. Women were subjected to be regulated by men. They were not allowed to study the Vedas, and the system of 'Sati' or self-immolation too was a prominent feature. The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century brought in an era of repression and rule. For years, the social structure that reflected the characteristic Middle Ages were to continue. What was to be witnessed would be a mere shift in the geographical narrative. The conqueror and the conquered are the two feasible bipartite, in a country marked with numerous invasions.

There is an 'othering' and 'exiling' associated with the female consciousness in the social mosaic of South Asian Reality. Gandhi's misogynist observations are still believed to linger in the Indian cultural context. Rita Banerji in her book *'Sex and Power: Defining History, Shaping Societies'* (2009) points out that he believed that menstruation was essentially a symptom of a sexually distorted soul.

We see that Female characters in the 1980s asserted themselves and defied marriage and family censures. Chitra Fernando's collection of short stories *'Three Women'* (1977), like Anita Desai's *'In Custody'* (1984), portray women who need their individual worth realized and endeavor to break through the distress that customary society offers them. Followed by this we also see the urge of an educated woman's search for identity and meaning -- in autobiographical form, as in Kamala Das' *'My Story'* (1977) or in Sara Suleri's *'Meatless Days'* (1989), or combining autobiographical and ethnographic form, as in Anees Jung's *'Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey'* (1986). Though this definitely was a positive stride towards fearless and independent expression of womanhood on the part of such brave literary heroes the battle was not even begun so to say. Indian writing since then has meandered in parallel paths refusing to intercede in terms of the social discourse of the female body. So even when Arundhati Roy in *'The God of Small Things'* (1997) challenges patriarchal norms when she allows her female characters to defy the general classifications of social order and gender roles, there is always critical assertions that keep

the discord alive. This is just one reason why aggression and discontent has crept into the voices demanding change and acceptance into contemporary social discourses regarding the female body. How else can one describe the incessant outpourings of wounded souls on digital platforms seeking reinstatement of dignity and gender sensitivity. Oftentimes we are missing the point while screaming out to the world going overboard with expressions of liberation, giving impetus to the lurking forces of conformist ideologies. What we are truly left with right now is the same 'othering' and 'exiling' that was always there and a gaping medievalist outlook that just refuses to move on.

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