

Indian Renaissance and voices of Indian women in English literature Re-reading the Feminine Spirit of Indian Renaissance

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Abstract:

“Renaissance” is a French word which means rebirth or resurrection. It is as if the Phoenix coming out of the ashes. Europe experienced such a philosophical enlightenment around the mid fifteenth and sixteenth century while India realized her revelation during mid nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, the meaning of renaissance is not confined to “rebirth” only, rather it has a broader perspective in bringing about one’s self realization in particular and knowledge of symmetry in every cross-sectional social stratum. Though renaissance flourished both the horizons East and West in different aspects, the question still remains un-extinguished that how far did the women could lit up themselves by the light of renaissance. If the women of the West voiced through feminism in the mid nineteenth and twentieth century the Indian women murmured her voice unobtrusively behind the veil through every sooted corner of “andarmahal”.

Given a chance, I would like to present a paper on the quest for “Indian Renaissance & Indian Women in Literature”, focusing on English writing by Indian women during the period. Here I would like to discuss on the writings of Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922), Krupa Sattianadan(1862-1894), Cornelia Sorabji(1866-1954), Sarojini Naidu(1879-1949) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain(1880-1932). This is to take a survey chronologically in order to discover an Indian woman and to see whether her view actually changes with age or is affected by the spirit of renaissance. While emphasizing on English works by Indian women of the period, my paper would also refer to the works in different Indian languages by other Indian women of the time.

Keywords: Indian Renaissance, Indian women writers, English literary writings

My Dear Maa,

Now it is night I know. Perhaps you have finished your day’s work and have finally slipped into your private corner of the room where a diary, a pen, and a lamp wait for you throughout the day. None of your children, nor even your dear husband, our regarded father, ever knew of you writing your heart down every night. We never knew how beautifully you wrote. We could only imagine you before the oven, or feeding our younger siblings, or at the most telling the same tale of that ‘Laal Kamal and Neel Kamal’ beside the timid lantern that glimmered feebly before large grey

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shadows on the walls, as we fell asleep. One night I happened to wake up suddenly and beyond my astonishment I saw you writing The next morning I took your diary secretly and with great excitement placed the same before the other elders of the house..... After that day you never wrote. I will never ask you why ? –But I shall ask you for once atleast, “Do you now right Maa ? I know you do. You do certainly write through me and for me.

This is perhaps the very common dream of most of the Indian women that their daughters would voice their hearts, the time will surely enhance their living and scope of freedom and if not they themselves, at least their daughters would achieve recognition. But how far is this dream true to reality we actually do not know, and so perhaps we seek for an answer to this question desperately.

The mid nineteenth century India observed her Renaissance through the sprouting of enlightenment and spreading of knowledge. Specially the influence of English language advanced the Indian society immensely. Even the thought of institutionalizing the women education came into being due to Renaissance ,by the virtue of which today we get record of the writings of the women of the period. But the meaning of the word ` ‘Renaissance’ is not confined to the spreading of knowledge and different discoveries. It also aims at excavation of one’s self and conscience by which one can know and realize the world and recognize all with their due regards. However, this essence of true knowledge was not observed in case of treating the written works of women of the time. They were always mere scribbles on the soothed walls of the kitchens. Only recent researches show how beautifully, lucidly, these ladies murmured from the corners of the dark `andar mahals’.

Here I want to quest through the writing of such Indian ladies during Indian Renaissance, emphasizing on those women who wrote in English and thus voiced an Indian woman on the worldly stage. In this regard, I would also like to mentioned on other works of Indian women writers of the time who had chosen the pen to ventilate their feelings in various Indian languages familiar to them, thereby setting the first brick for the future of Indian women – emancipation which evolved later on.

“ Absurd may be the tale I tell,

Ill – suited to the marching times.

I loved the lips from which it fell,

So let it stand among my rhymes’.

The `tale’ of her life was brief, but her literary talent made her immortal. She is often called Keats of Indo-English literature for her meteoric rise and disappearance from the literary firmament. She is the first Indian woman writing in English, the one proficient in French and Sanskrit at the same time. She is none other than **Toru Dutt**.

The above quoted lines are from her unique poem 'Jogadhya Uma' which evoke her vibrant, fiery, unconquerable soul, deep and simple like Toru herself.

Born in 1856, 4th March in Calcutta, Toru developed a strong inclination towards Indian myths and folklores while she expressed her realizations in foreign languages like English and French. Thus very uniquely she delved out the very 'Indianness' of her origin and making of her souls. 'Our Casuarina Tree' reflects her inner-vision of sublime beauty as well as the element of yearning for the nostalgic past. References to the 'sleepy cows', 'kokilas', portray an Indian rural picture while Toru sigh; - "Dearer than life to me. alas were they!", expresses her longing for childhood days in India. Frequent references to mythical characters like Sita, Lakshman, Dhruva, show here deep knowledge and interest in Indian Puranas. However, a practical observation of reality is also seen in poems like 'Christmas' where the birth of baby Jesus is drawn through stark imagery of "spider webs" "slung upon the rafters", "white wreaths of snow roofs" and cold loneliness with only "stars" adorning His birth.

Not only in the field of poetry but also in novel-writing Toru Dutt was a name. Just after A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, a collection of poetry published in 1876 in Saptahik Sambad Press of Bhowanipore, Calcutta Le Journal de Mademoiselle in French, appeared in 1879. She also attended the Higher Lectures for women at the University. Her unfinished novel Bianca or The Young Spanish –Maiden d' Arvers was published at regular intervals in Bengali magazine between January and April in 1878. The Examiner is a rare collection of Toru Dutt's no less than one hundred sixty-six poems, of which we can take pride of Indian heritage of women writers.

At the death of her sister Aru, she wrote :-

" Of all sad words of tongue and pen

The saddest are these – it might have been,"

- The same we feel of Toru and her contribution to literature and perhaps utter her words only ; -

" like a ripple or smile

My youth passed away."

Another individualistic spark was Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. She was, "..... the greatest woman produced by modern India,.... the one to lay the foundations for a movement for women's liberation in India," says A. B. Shah. Though few would say that he has made an overstatement, Ramabai is a surprisingly hazy presence in contemporary consciousness. There is no documentary evidence about this unusual woman. The main source regarding her is her own autobiography, published in 1907, My Testimony. Right through 1880s and 1890s, newspapers all over India celebrated

her achievements. ShardaSadan – a widows' home was founded by her at Pune. She was one of the few nineteenth century women who could support themselves with their writing. Stree Dharma Neeti, 1882, was the passage to her for England. First ten thousand copies of Ramabai's most famous, High Caste Hindu Woman were sold in United States during 1899.

However, the becoming of Ramabai is like a story. She spent her childhood in drudgery in forest. After losing her parents and eldest sister in famine of 1874-1877, she came over to Calcutta where earning victory over Shastri in arguments, she was publicly honoured as 'Pandita'. Nor poverty, nor her gender in the contemporary society could curtail her advancement towards women-empowerment. It is because she had a proper lessoned mind and a sea of courage. This is evident in her own words; -

" My pilgrim life began when I was a little baby ' - my mother began to teach me ... she succeeded in training my mind" This "training" helped her to develop such an inner vision that made her judge the institution of Indian marriage through deep observation from Manu. In her letter to Miss Dorothea Beale, written on 1st September 1885, we get to know of her philosophical faith and universal realization of God, which helped her to lead such a life of wars and victories.

"No one was too poor or too humble to interest her," says Mrs. Grieg, a close friend of Krupa Sattianadan, (1862-1894), whose writings were regularly published in National Indian Journal. The most famous of her novels is Saguna : A story of Native Christian life. Kamala, her second novel was also a stir. Her writings evoked everyday interactions between the races in nineteenth century India. Through her works she voiced politically and even satirically enough which was a rare observation during the time, specially in women's writings.

Cornelia Sorabji, 1886-1954), was the first woman to graduate from Bombay University securing the first position. However, Scholarship was not awarded to her because she was woman. She even faced a great trouble to study law at Oxford. However, the entire life of Cornelia was a life of work for society and specially for women. Her works like

Behind the Twilight (1908), Sun Babies, The Purdahnashin (1917), Shubala : A child Mother (1917 approx), India Recalled (1936), The Imprisoned Rani, reflect her strong faith in feminism

Another outstanding literary artist as well as political activist was certainly, none other than 'the Nightingale of India', Sarojini Naidu (13th Feb. 1879-2nd March 1949). Born in Hyderabad Sarojini Chattopadhyay was a brilliant student. Her first poem of thirteen hundred lines, The lady of the Lake, was a source of great inspiration to her.

This led to the birth of other famous poems like. In the Bazaars of Hyderabad, Indian Weavers, Leili, In the Forest, In Praise of Henna, A Rajput Love Song, Cardle Song, Indian Dancer, The Broken Wing and others. Her portrayal of Indian life is vividly observed in her works. Lines from Indian Weavers, can be presented as an evidence ;

“ What to you weave. O ye flower-girls

With tassels of azure and red ?”

“We weave the marriage-veils of a queen,

We weave a dead man’s funeral shroud”.

This also evokes a greater philosophical revelation of the poetic soul which deserves special significance.

Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain (1880-1932), was unique in her own way. Her extraordinary creation, Sultana’s Dream , published in 1905 is not only a utopian fantasy, but a voice of protest against the unruly, illogical patriarchy. Here she shows a world where the Sultana rules and only matriarchy reigns. She dreamt of Indian women’s true freedom and dignity.

However Indian Renaissance also gifted other Indian ladies who wrote out of strong urge from indoors, in various Indian languages known to them, as most of the women could not receive education then and English remained alien to them foreven. Now we get to read their works in translation by virtue of which we can take pride of these otherwise neglected talents of India.

Amar Jiban (in Bengali) by a Bengali lady, Rassundari Devi (1810 -?) gives vibrant picture of women life between kitchen and cradle and the tug of war in her mind to snatch out a little sky to learn how to read and write; Kahake, of Swarna Kumari Devi (1856-1932), is a popular work today. Adorer Na Anadorer ? a novel with the question of whether a daughter is beloved or unloved by Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani (1861-1920), was a deep analysis of women’s position in her family in India. Nirupama Devi’s (1883-1951) Didi, is a work of deep touch. Bangalir Babu by Mokshodayani Mokhopadhyay (1848- ?) is a rare illustration of the helpless position of Bengali ‘babu’s’ which they did not realize. It is strange how being one of the unprivileged women, she pitied the men of her contemporary time. Amar Katha by Binodini Dasi , (1863-1941) is an asset in Bengali theatre as well as in Indian literature.

Palkicha Gonda or The Silk Tassel in the Palanquin is a work in Marathi by Kashibai Kanitkar (1861-1948) that expresses the insecure life of bondage and fear of an Indian woman. Amachya Ayushyatil Kahi Athawari or the Memoirs of Our Life Together by Ramabai Ranade (1862-1924) in Marathi, like the works of Binodini, or

Rassundari Devi, narrate the lives of the women of the time, it voices her own words which she otherwise could not utter. Another work in Marathi by Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910), Stri Purush Tulana, renders a comparative view between a man and a woman.

Beautiful works are also observed in the writings of Bandaru Acchamamba (1874-1904), the feminist historian in India, who in Khana argues for the recognition of honour of the ancient fortune teller khana. Suryasthamana, a work in Kannada by Kalyannamma (1894-1965) comments from a different angle on Indian history, Rana Pratap of Mewar and how Chittor was reawakened into for men spirit at the verge of loss by inspiration of an ordinary woman.

There were also women writing in Urdu. I Remember the Days of Lore's First Flowering, by Janaki Bai (1889-?), Purdah by Nazar Sajjad Hyder (1894-1967) and who will care to visit my grave when – I am gone by Sughra Humayun Mirza (1884-1954) reflect the hearts of the Indian women beating in the same rhythm regardless to caste, creed or religion.

Bandaru Acchamamba, begins her book on great women in India by quoting a verse in Sanskrit :-

“It is not the women imprisoned at home by men who hold them dear who are only those women are truly safe who protect their own souls”.

Her book. Abala Saccharitra Ratnamala (A Garland of Great Women's Life Histories) came out in 1901. However, the essence of these lines are echoes in Soraji's writings :-

“...., that women should lie flat in the mud in public streets, should scratch the faces of Indian tradesmen, set the fire to their shops, should picket liquor shops and bandy words with the intoxicated.”

Definitely these words are fiery, volcanic while the Sanskrit lines are comparatively softer. But both teach an woman how to live, how to adapt the art living with due dignity and significance. It is true that the Indian ladies were no more than 'abala', and that even 'das' or a slave had an unpaid hand-maid; his wife to obey him, but the works of these Indian ladies waged war of revaluation by pen and stirred the Indian society during the period.

'Renaissance' had brought new light to Indian society and the Indian women took this opportunity to peep from beyond the Purdah by voicing their state and

condition, emotional yearnings and intrinsic desire to break free like the caged bird who happens to fly off if it finds the door of the cage open by any chance. It is certain that this 'chance' was rarely obtained by a very few who could receive a proper education or were acquainted with the English language to make the world listen to their words, but the every single attempt to strike back by other Indian women, writing in Indian languages had set the fire of women reawakening future India.

This is an attempt to bring this power of Indian women during Indian Renaissance, who voice through their writings in the Indian household, in the Indian air.

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