



Spiritual Exploration in Early Indian English Novels

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Abstract

It is generally believed that spirituality is firmly opposed to worldliness and it is reaching out to God, heaven and eternal life. Man, when he feels lonely, inadequate and incomplete, in the shock of his loneliness or isolation craves union with God. The search for spirituality was long and unending. It was a search into the spirit, Holy Scriptures, sayings of seers and sages. It is widely accepted that each man seeks meaning of life and accept the presence of divine. Man may or may not be aware of his spirit but whenever he has to face the dilemma of right or wrong, he gets an answer. The paper analyses early Indian English novels by women to explore their spirituality and struggle for survival.

Keywords

Spiritual Exploration, Early Indian English Novels, Toru Dutt, *Bianca*, Krupabai Sattianandan, *Kamala* and *Saguna*, Shevantibai M. Nikambe, *Ratnabai*.



Although the first Indian English Novel is generally accepted to be *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1864), three women novelists appeared before the turn of nineteenth century- Toru Dutt (*Bianca*-1878),

Krupabai Sattianandan (*Kamala, Saguna* - 1895) and Shevantibai M. Nikambe (*Ratnabai*-1895). These novels were inaccessible for over a century and no research has been undertaken on these texts. It is therefore challenging and enriching to research the First Indian English women novelist and the protagonist and comprehend their spirit and struggle for survival.

The author covers the time when many reformist movements were directed against the age old superstitions and Hindu practices. Many legal provisions had been made to alleviate the status of women but the new laws were unable to overcome social inertia. Child marriages, condition of widows, lack of education, *sati*, polygamy, denial of property rights were problems which had made their lives miserable. Christian missionaries, social reformers, Hindu organizations like Brahma Samaj (founded in 1875) encouraged education of women. With access to English education, women wanted to write the story of their own domesticity, the story of their own seclusion within their home. They are autobiography in fiction and all of them identify with female characters. They were stories of their survival, conservative, strict observances of caste and religious norms but it is their spirit which gives them the strength to survive in difficult circumstances.

The women's question was a central issue in some of the most controversial debates over social reform in the nineteenth century. Two issues dominated many of these movements. The first relates to the status of upper-caste Hindu widows and related questions regarding *sati* – the practice of burning a widow in the funeral pyre of her dead husband and widow remarriage. The second pertains to education of women and the making of a new middle class culture entailing new codes of morality, new formation of the home as the private sphere and a new codification of customary law. This complex interaction of class polarization, gender redefinition and casting of a certain intractable legitimacy to the state to remould social relations emerge in the story of the reformers and their campaigns.

Though the first cultural contact of Indian society with the western world began in 1498 A.D. when Vasco Da Gama anchored his ship on Indian shores, a more lasting impact came with the British rule, particularly after 1820. The advent of British rule did not merely mean a new political rule, but it also had deep-rooted implications on the economy and the ideology of Indian people. Particularly after industrial revolution in England, the rulers turned India into a colony which produced raw material for Britain. The country passed through complex economic and political developments due to the working of merchant, industrial and financial capital. The imperial system initiated the capitalism mode of production but retained many pre-capitalist institution like caste system and inhuman socio-religious practices.

During the period there were two major movements which affected the position of women. These were the social reform movement of 19th century and the National movement of the twentieth century. Both these movement raised the question of equal status of women. The social reform movement has been regarded as a key to the intellectual processes that went into the making of modern India. The issues which attracted the attention of the nineteenth century social reformers were *sati*, the ill-treatments of widow, the ban on widow remarriage, polygamy, child marriage, denial of property rights and education to women. Social reformers felt that these social evils should be eradicated by awakening the consciousness and making people sensitive to the injustice perpetrated on women. They thought, by giving women the access to education and by enacting progressive legislation, social changes could be initiated.

In the latter half of the century, many reformist movement directed against orthodox and superstitious Hindu practices, enjoyed considerable support in Bengal before spreading to other parts of the country. Although a series of legal provisions had been made to alleviate the plight of women, the new laws were unable to overcome social inertia, consequently, the condition of women, and in particular of widows, continued to be pitiable. Child marriage was still in vogue,

education was not considered to be a desirable asset to women, and the idea of remarriage for widows was unthinkable.

Early in the 19th century, Christian missionaries began a campaign against the social evils in Indian society. This took the form of an open and scathing attack on practices like child marriage, female infanticide, temple dancing, polygamy etc. This had two consequences. The British government saw itself compelled to give up its neutral stance and perceived the need to legislate against the barbarous customs of Hindu society. On the other hand, it roused the conscience of the enlightened segment of the Indian community and led to reformatory movements within Hindu society itself.

The 19th century reformist movements, despite their laudable objectives, may be faulted on another score. Although it was realized that social and religious reforms were inseparable, all the religions could not be brought within the scope of a single reform movement on account of the resistance offered by the orthodox elements of the different religious groups.

Krupaibai Satthaiyanadhan, in her first novel, *Kamala - A Story of Hindu Life* (1984) describes how her heroine, only child of a Brahman and recluse and a runaway Brahman heiress, gradually realizes that *sudhra* (girls minding the cattle on the mountainside where she grows up are different from her, and yet as she treats them kindly, they can all play together and help each other. She is a very kind soul which connects to others. A very different world confronts her when she goes as a child bride to the Brahman settlement of the local town. In fact, the novel turns around the conversations she and the other unhappy girls have around the Brahmans' well. Temple festivals and pilgrimages provide the only escape, until her cousin Ramchander acquaints her with her true circumstances following her father's death. Her husband dies shortly after her infant daughter's death, and she can devote herself to 'unselfish works of charity'. Kamala cannot bring herself to defy convention when she is widowed. Like any respectable women from the 'twice-born' castes, her life is forever bound up in her husband's *dharma* - duty,

according to the Laws of Manu, and she cannot accept Ramchander's offer of marriage and live 'happily ever after'.

In her second novel, *Saguna*, Krupabai incorporates her own experience of coming to Madras to study medicine, being met at Madras Central Station by W.T, and living with his family for a year. One day the family's youngest son, of whose existence she had been but dimly aware, returned from Cambridge after graduation there, and a rapid romance brings the novel to a close. In real life the Satthiananadhan blessed this inter-caste marriage not in accordance with their principles, for Krupabai was the daughter of Revd. Haripant Kristy, a notable Marathi Brahman convert, but in human terms it was not a happy ending. Krupabai's medical condition, which had prevented her studying in Britain, worsened and she had to give up her ambition of being a zenana. She finally succumbed shortly after the death of her infant son in 1892. Most of her works were published posthumously.

Saguna is an autobiographical novel in which a rebellious young girl, in a family recently converted to Christianity, tries to come to terms with change. More poignant is the situation of her mother Radha, an orthodox Hindu child-bride, who must reconcile herself to her Christian identity. Further, the pioneering nineteenth-century classic is an insightful psychological study of two generations of women, as well as an invaluable social document. Despite its serious concerns, it remains a charming, vibrantly descriptive novel.

Every experience in *Saguna* is generally steeped in Christianity, every crisis resolved by it. This is not to say that *Saguna* is a Christian tract. Rather, the power of Christianity as an agent of regeneration is inextricably integrated into the incident described, or the confessional moment revealed.

Saguna rebels with true feminist resentment against such emotional dependency on man, believing it to be, 'a curse' that burdened most women. It is a spiritual change, an inward transformation. It is a transition from darkness to light. It is an awakening, rebornness. The frame of the spirit is kindled, religion

helps as an experience which affects her entire being, ends her disquiet and anguish, the sense of aimlessness of her fragile and fugitive existence.

Toru Dutt, another Early English novelist born on 4th March 1856 in Calcutta compels attention as a poet and a novelist. However her life is a combination of beauty and tragedy which equally fascinates and depresses. Both her work and her life induce interest. Her father Govind Chander Dutt, was well to do, a good linguist, and a cultured man with literary leanings and generous impulse. In 1862, when she was six, the Dutt family embraced Christianity. Initially, this strained the relations between her parents but it turned out to be a temporary phase. Her mother soon reconciled, became a devout Christian, and translated “The blood of Jesus” into Bengali, giving ample proof of her linguistic abilities.

Toru left behind two unpublished novels- *Le journal de Mademoiselle d’Arvers*- thought to be the first novel in French by an Indian writer and *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden* –thought to be the first novel in English by an Indian woman writer, in addition to an unfinished volume of original poems in English, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. In her letter she writes, “you are quite mistaken to think that we should be greatly missed by friends and relatives if we leave Calcutta”. She believes that Hindus are getting more liberal in their views. Her Christianity leads her to separate herself intellectually from Hindu society. The question of how exactly to position her as a writer is an extremely complicated one. She was Indian- but she was Christian rather than Hindu, she was educated in Europe rather than in Calcutta and she wrote in English rather than Bengali. Her Christian faith complimented her interest in beneficial social change for women.

Toru Dutt lived at a time when there were calls for social change in numerous women issues but conservative attitudes remained. These women were allocated a new social status, superior to that of lower class Indian women, who were uneducated and consistently depicted as lacking both social and moral

virtues and also that of westernized Indian women, who had purportedly forfeited their spiritual purity by abandoning traditional Indian values.

Bianca is a story of her own agony and anguish of life. It is a self-portrayal of Toru's own personality attended with tragedy. Her typical attitude, feelings and sentiments which are characteristically Indian in all respect manifests in the character of her heroine. Bianca's commitment to sacrifice for the sake of her deserted sister. Bianca feels it is her moral duty to treat her sister's fiancée with affection and not with love. She realizes it is her moral duty to confide her father that her lover has kissed her. This gives in reader's mind the image of an Indian woman rather than that of English or a Spanish woman.

The growth of women's education and the emancipation of the Indian woman through reformist movement were in themselves significant social phenomena which favored the rise of the Indian novel in English and they were also the symptoms of the emergence of the individualistic social order which was indispensable to the growth and the development of the novel as a form of literary expression.

The tragedy of writers like Toru and Krupabai was that they died before they had really begun their careers, or had a chance to give full proof of their abilities. Both these writer wrote from their sick beds and yet gave promise of what they might have achieved if they had lived full lives. Their poetic prose, their description of nature, their attempt to create character, and above all, the desperate struggle of their earnest spirit to express themselves shall remain like bright beacons among the dull, timid, uncreative Indo-English fiction that was written during the century.

Shevantibai Nikambe, a contemporary of Toru Dutt, born in 1865 in Poona, wrote a novel about the necessity of education for high-caste married girls. Titled *Ratnabai*, it was originally published by Marshall Brothers, London in 1895. Subtitled, *A Sketch of Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife*, it tells the story of a girl who was married when she was nine. Her father arranges with the father-in-law that she should be allowed to continue her studies, but both

Ratna's mother and old widowed grand-aunt do not believe in this and keep finding excuses to keep her at home. The father is not strong enough to withstand the constant pressure from the women, and, oddly enough, his progressiveness does not extend to mealtimes when he is served before the other. None of this is helped by the fact that Ratna does well at school while her husband fails his B.A. exams. Nevertheless, when he finds out how the education of his young wife is being interfered with, he insists on letting her continue her studies uninterrupted. Nikambe is at pains to show in her novel that education does not alienate a girl from her culture. She is a dutiful daughter and while at her needle-work, "She merrily hummed one of the infant school tunes, and was then singing softly a Sanskrit shloka."

The context of the novel debates about the education of women. Nikambe assisted Pandita Ramabai in the Sharada Sadan High School in 1890 before it was transferred to Poona. Nikambe was a Christian, according to *Women in India Who's Who* published by the National Council of women in 1935. She visited Europe and America to study Christian work and methods, and visited Europe again in 1913 to study educational and social work on the continent. She served as a headmistress at various institutions, and between 1912 and 1934, conducted a special school for married ladies. The text of *Ratanbai*, as with so many others, was not available in India and was ultimately obtained from the India Office Library.

Ratnabai by Shevantibai Nikambe narrates the poignant story of a high-caste eleven-year old Hindu child-wife in later nineteenth-century Bombay. In her novel, Nikambe describes the domestic routine and distinctive domestic and socio-religious custom of the contemporary Maratha community in vivid detail. A traditional flower ceremony, a pilgrimage to Goa and a puja for young wives are full of inside information, and often radiate incandescence as the heroine and her extended family participate in them.

Through the homely stories of Ratna and the girl-widow Tara, Nikambe confronts three of the most controversial colonialist reforms of nineteenth-century India: child marriage, enforced widowhood, and women's education.

Ratnabai is primarily a social novel and comprises the reformist agenda. By sketching her fictional characters with suggestive depths, and recording their complex responses to domestic crises, Nikambe develops an intimate and moving story. Simultaneously, through it, she projects a microcosmic view of the elitist Brahmin community in nineteenth-century Bombay, seeking equilibrium in the Indian-British encounter.

Ratnabai is more a propaganda story than pure fiction, but its appearance was significant since it voiced and espoused the cause of women's education and of the emancipation of the Indian woman. Shevanthi Bai Nikambe's *Ratnabai* (1895) is with an objective of strengthening her cause and spreading awareness regarding the rights of the weaker sex.

The critical evaluation of the four Early Indian English Novels reassures that it is the idea of the flowering of the human spirit in all its known and unknown dimensions. It is a pursuit, a vision, an exploration. Women writers through their protagonists trace their own journey, their lives and identify with the pillars which gave them strength to strive forward - be it inspiration in nature, scriptures or religion which connects them to the divine or the Supreme Being. Spirituality is their strength to survive in all adversities.

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