The Role of Feminism in India by Krupabai Satthianadhan, Cornelia Sorabji, and Sarojini Naidu

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Abstract: The socioeconomic status of women in India began to transform as industrialization and urbanization took place allowing for areas of education, politics, and employment to become accessible to women. In this new revolution of educated women were three leading figures that advocated the female voice, Krupabai Satthianadhan, Cornelia Sorabji, and Sarojini Naidu. One may say that it was in this colonial period that feminism in India was formed. Although the term feminism did not arise at the time of the colonial period, it is being associated with three women here because of their actions for women’s equality in India. It was in the period of the nineteenth and twentieth century India that social movements took place in regards to the inequalities between men and women. The feminist voice has been heard and was the subject of change. Although there was great protest against the British Empire and its oppression on the native people of India, there was also much oppression made by the native people on the women of India through its centuries old social practices.

I. Introduction

These women projected their beliefs through their writings and actions. All three women were born into the British Raj, and educated through English schooling. Being the first generation of Indian writers who have written texts in the English language, they promoted their beliefs about the social injustice women of India faced in their daily lives, and integrated them into their writings. Looking into India’s history, many women have been subjected to religious customs that have degraded their status within society. Satthianadhan, Sorabji, and Naidu, who were all elite women, all benefited from the key component of the shift in the status of women in society, and that was education. The establishment of education during the colonial period was what triggered a societal change in structure [1].

This was the underlining factor to many of Satthianadhan, Sorabji, and Naidu's beliefs. Without freedom for women of India, the country would never be free. Women for centuries in India had faced an appalling list of restrictions because of their sex, and it was the social reform during the eighteenth and nineteenth century that created a shift in such social norms. It was such social movements by social reformists that made way for the women to speak out about the issues they faced. The restrictions against women created inequality between men and women. Satthianadhan, Sorabji, and Naidu observed such practices against women and emphasized the swift action to change them. Each of these women have written texts on this subject or have used their role in society as a women to protest against such diminishing inequality. These texts written to convey their social reformist beliefs range in many forms: Satthianadhan wrote novels, Sorabji wrote narratives, and Naidu wrote poetry. These women who have overcome the battles that were predestined for them, helped support a society with new and transformed social norms while outlawing those that persecuted many women before them. Being brought up in a culture with such traditions impacted the lives of Satthianadhan, Sorabji, and Naidu, and this manifested itself in acts of protest.

Krupabai Satthianadhan

Krupabai Satthianadhan was a pioneer in women rights and studies, and considered as one of the earliest feminist theorist. The following section on the biography of Krupabai Satthianadhan relies heavily on the
account of Chandani Lokuge in the introduction of Kamala, The Story of a Hindu-Child Wife, as she is the editor of the newly published text, as well as Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in, A History of Indian Literature in English. She was born in 1862 in Ahmedanagar, later settling in Madras, and was born into a Brahmin family who had converted into Christianity. She’s father died while she was a child, and she turned to her older brother Bhasker as a father figure. Bhaskar was an immense influence on the life of Satthianadhan, as he shared with her the realm of education. He too died, and it was just Satthianadhan and her mother. Her mother being of Hindu origin, but a Christian convert, still held tight to her Hindu practices leaving her to understand both worlds of religion[2].

This seems to be her inspiration for her two texts, Kamala, the Story of a Hindu Child-wife, and Saguna, A Story of Native Christian Life. After the devastating death of her brother, Satthianadhan was taught by European missionaries and studied in the English school system. She was indeed a brilliant child and was far too advanced amongst the other girls. However, under the guidance of an English women doctor she was mentored to learn medicine. She pursued medicine under the influence of her father’s missionary ideals to help others, but especially, for Satthiananthan, to help women in purdahs.

**Cornelia Sorabji**

A second Indian women that has also bestowed upon the growth of feminism in India was Cornelia Sorabji. She advocated for the livelihood of Indian women, and has attributed to the betterment of hundreds of women during the colonial period, along with being India’s first woman lawyer. The following biography on Cornelia Sorabji has been influenced by the accounts of Suparna Gooptu in Cornelia Sorabji: India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer. Sorabji was born on November 1, 1866 in Nasik, India. Born into the colonial period, her name was a blend of Indian and British culture. Her father Reverend Sorabji Karsedji was a Parsee convert to Anglican Christianity, and her mother Francine Ford was a Parsee who was adopted by a British family. Sorabji was raised in the lifestyle of the English, but it was essential to her parents that she held to her Indian culture[3].

She was educated in Ponna and was able to learn many of the native languages. In 1888, she achieved her first degree from Bombay University. Sorabji was a very intelligent student and was given a Government of India scholarship to study abroad at Oxford University to pursue Law. However, that scholarship was revoked because she was a female. The idea that a woman could be a possible candidate did not take notice, and therefore once it was known she was a female she was then rejected. Sorabji’s family and friends made donations for her studies and she was then able to go abroad. She was the first woman in Britain or India to enter and read law at Oxford University [4].

**Sarojini Naidu**

Lastly of the three is Sarojini Naidu, who was a important person not only for advocating women rights and equality, but also in attaining the nation’s freedom from the British. The following section discussing the background and life of Sarojini Naidu depends largely on the account of Vishwanath S. Paravane in Sarojini Naidu: An Introduction to Her Life, Work and Poetry, and also from Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s A History of Indian Literature in English. Naidu was born on February 13, 1879 in Hyderabad, India, to a Bengali Brahmin family. Growing up, education was very important in her family and this was instilled in Naidu as a young child. Her father was a political activist, and was among the the first members of the Indian National Congress. Naidu, as a young girl, was born into the British Raj and received an English education. She was incredibly intelligent and learned an array of
languages. Her interests were much in the realm of poetry.[5] One of her pieces was seen by the Nazim (a ruler of the princely state of Hyderabad), who was impressed by her abilities. At the age of sixteen, she was given a scholarship funded by the Nizam to travel to England. She attended King’s College, and later went onto other colleges of Cambridge University.

Satthianadhan used the novel as her form of self-expression, and at the heart of her novels is her own reflection of her experiences. In her second novel she used her own life as the plot of the novel, thus contrasting a life in Hinduism and in Christianity. Sorabji used narratives to share connections between the lives of her characters and with the traditional lives of many Indian women. This was a way to bring awareness and understanding to Sorabji’s readers on the importance of reform within such societies. Along to guide Sorabji’s texts, she also has written an autobiography that directly reflects on the core themes in her narratives. Through Naidu’s poetry she conveys her deep rooted beliefs on women’s equality and the necessity for change in the treatment of women confined within society. In addition, textual evidence written by many renowned authors and academic journals will be presented. In correlation to all these works, one will walk away having understood the great timeline of the injustices that faced many women in India, as well the birth of feminism in India as a result of the colonial period and social reformists like Krupabai Satthianadhan, Cornelia Sorabji, and Sarojini Naidu.

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REFERENCES