

# A PLEA FOR GENDER-SENSITIVITY AND INCLUSIVENESS IN THE WRITING OF THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF GUJARATI LITERATURE

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Received: September 04, 2018

Accepted: October 29, 2018

## ABSTRACT

*The writing of authentic, representative and detailed histories of literature is of great significance for making sense of the evolution of a society in its socio-political and cultural dimensions. The growth of feminist consciousness in literature have spurred efforts towards critical studies on women's literature in Indian languages and historicizing of the same. This paper makes a reasoned plea for a review and revision of the existing histories of Gujarati literature to make them inclusive of women's published and unpublished contributions. Gender-sensitization in the writing of the history of Gujarati literature would not only help in understanding the Gujarati literature in a balanced and holistic manner but also refine the analysis of historians regarding social history of Gujarat and struggles of women during the previous centuries*

**Keywords:** *Literary History, History of Literature, Women's Literature, Gujarati Literature, Gender Studies*

## I. Introduction:

Gujarati language – the sixth most widely spoken language in India – belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of languages, with a continuous history spanning more than nine centuries. The modern form of Gujarati language has evolved from an older form which originated around the 11<sup>th</sup> century and evolved to acquire its present form around the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The creation of various forms of literature has kept pace with the evolution of the Gujarati language. As far back as its origin the Gujarati language has witnessed the production of works in both prose and verse. Interestingly, literary development in Gujarati, unlike literature in several other languages in India, was not an outcome of the patronage given by rulers. It has been produced by far due to the spontaneous engagement of people with literary activities.

## II. Writing of the History of Literature:

Writing of histories of literature is an important field of literary research and criticism. Connecting literary texts to the socio-political, economic and cultural circumstances of the times in which they are written reveal significant trends not just about the qualitative aspects of the literature under review, but also about the historical features of the existing era. Writings in a specific language or a dialect from a particular region constitute an amalgamation of the diverse voices of communities, networks and social orders existing therein. These voices also contain gendered nuances which vary with changes in the time-space context. In this sense, conventional histories of the socio-political-economic developments and histories of literature intersect closely. Literature can be thus looked upon as a historical archive of sorts, even as it mainly contains fictional accounts.

## III. History of Literature and Women's Writings:

Writing is an outflow of both emotion and reasoning. Creative individuals are in continuous dialogue with themselves and with their surroundings. Their impressions borne out of these dialogical experiences take the form of creative arts. Having their underlying foundation in the lives which were lived, which are being lived and which would be lived, artists speak to and mirror their self in a myriad of ways. Women in all ages and places have also expressed their emotions and perspectives through literature. Women's literary creations are found in both oral as well as printed literature. Women have pursued both traditional and modern forms of literary writing. These writings by women convey the travails and potential of women as creative beings.

Women's writing emerged in India as an identified domain of critical studies in the 1980s. Till that period, these writings were studied as a part of general histories of literature which carried their own biases and preferences. Publication of the influential texts like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Eva Figes' *Patriarchal Attitudes* in the West encouraged the study of women's writings from a feminist perspective in India. The influence of the feminist movements and the resultant

development of feminist historiography and feminist literary criticism played a major role in spurring the development of interest in documenting and analyzing the history of women's writing in India. This enhanced interest in the history of women's writing gave a fillip to the activity of searching, defining, identifying, establishing and analyzing women's voices in various languages in India.

The critical studies of women's writings have been considered as an inter-disciplinary sub-field of gender studies and literary studies. These studies try to situate and interpret women's literature in the context of the patriarchal structures prevalent in the society. In this sense, a study of women's writings assumes significance for learning about the status of women in society and identifying the spaces of their expression and suppression. Such studies could map the ways in which women have resisted the attempts at their marginalization and voiced their desires. Life stories of women help us to comprehend the nature of gender relations and struggles of women during the periods of historical transition.

#### **IV. History of Gujarati Literature and Women's Writing:**

Several histories of Gujarati literature have been published so far, both under the auspices of the apex institutions like the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad as well as by individual researchers and critics. The purpose of this paper is not to assess the qualitative aspects of these published histories, but to interrogate as to how far, and in which ways, they do justice to writings by women authors within the overall framework of their historical narration and analysis. It is essential to enquire if the mainstream histories of Gujarati literature help us see women's writings in Gujarati in juxtaposition with the socio-political and cultural processes that had a bearing on women's life in Gujarat.

The historical origins of the oral literature in Gujarati go back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The last two centuries have, however, seen an extraordinary resurgence in the creation of Gujarati literature in several forms. The development of Gujarati literature is commonly divided into three stages. The first stage commenced from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and continued till the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This is, for the most part, called the early or pre-Narsinh period of Gujarati literature. The second stage that followed this period is known as the medieval age which extended till about the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This period is further divided into Narsinh Yug and post-Narsinh Bhakti Yug. The third stage of Gujarati literature commenced from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has stretched till today. This third stage is further divided into various literary eras (called Yugs) by critics. These eras are classified as reformist era (Sudharak Yug), scholarly era (Pandit Yug), Gandhian era (Gandhi Yug), modern era (Adhunik Yug) and post-modern era (Anu-Adhunik Yug).

Even as writings by women in the Gujarati language are not in as substantial numbers as the works by men during these phases of literary development, women's literature as a distinct category has existed as a noteworthy element during most of the periods of the medieval and modern age of Gujarati literature. During each phase of its development, Gujarati literature has reflected the state and desires of women of that time through the voices of women.

Beginning with Meerabai in the medieval age to the women scholars of the contemporary era, women's presence in Gujarati literature has been qualitatively noteworthy. Meerabai broke the tradition of the medieval times that bound women into certain domestic constraints and openly professed her love and Bhakti for Lord Krishna. She was followed by other women writers of the Bhakti tradition like Gangsati. In the nineteenth century, women writer like Savitagauri Pandya, Alibai Palankat, Bai Astor and Diwaliben Nathalal composed reformist lyrics and stories to promote reforms in the retrograde social traditions that hurt women's interests.

Women's writing witnessed a great rise in both fictional and non-fiction works during and after the Gandhian era. In the Gandhian era, authors like Vinodini Neelkanth, Jyotsna Shukla and Jaimangarui Pathakji pushed the boundaries and consolidated the feeling of patriotism and social change through their literary works. In the post-Independence period, writers like Heeraben Pathak, Saroj Pathak, Dhiruben Patel, Varsha Adalja and Kundanika Kapadiya have brought out multi-dimensionality of women' social existence and personal encounters. To be sure, Gujarati literature today has become an open space for women to speak out in conventional and unconventional ways. New and bold themes are reflected in their works. The voices of women have initiated discourse on justice, equality and rights for women in the public and private spheres.

Despite the fact that women have been writing in Gujarati as far back as the medieval period, and despite the fact that a tradition of women's writings in Gujarati has sustained for a very long period of time, there is limited awareness and acknowledgment of the same in the professional and academic circles. While the historical narratives of Gujarati literature acknowledge the contribution of Meerabai and her attempts to initiate an alternative literary tradition, the numerous other names of women writers have not received due attention, let alone recognition, in most of the historical narratives of Gujarati literature. A large number of

women writers in Gujarati have been entirely overlooked by literary historians. For example, a perusal of the Gujarati Sahitya Kosh published by the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad would show how women's writings have been placed and treated marginally in the larger corpus of Gujarati literature.

**V. Conclusion:**

Most histories of Gujarati literature have not taken adequate note of the writings by women, which gives an incomplete and biased view of the nature of literary development. These histories need to be rewritten and re-looked through the prism of women's perspectives. This would require the adoption of a new set of critical devices and tools of historiography to be able to assess, interpret and contextualize women's writings. This would also entail cultivation of suitable gender sensitivity among the scholars, historians and critics of Gujarati literature.

A point of beginning of the project of review and revision of the literary history of Gujarat is the building up of archives of writings by women, published or unpublished, in Gujarati language. Likewise, women's literary works that are obscure and in the private collections and journals need to be found and published. Literary feminism outside India has given a lot of importance to this task. It is essential that literary associations, Akademis, university departments and research centres address the imperative of compiling, categorizing, documenting and investigating women's published and unpublished writings in Gujarati from the historical and critical perspectives. This would greatly help in the holistic understanding of the literature, social history and gender relations in Gujarat during the medieval and modern ages.

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