



Sarojini Sahoo – a feminist writer or an advocate of femininity?

Dr. Kanchan Chakravarty, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj

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ABSTRACT

The present article examines Sarojini Sahoo's views on feminism and her approach to the concept of femininity. The study explores the difference between the two concepts – feminism and femininity – as perceived by Sahoo.

The purpose of this study is to place Sahoo within the context of the feminist movement and demonstrate the ways in which her perspective varies from that of the movement's well-known representative, Simone de Beauvoir.

Introduction

Sarojini Sahoo is an Indian feminist writer who hails from Odisha. She also writes columns for The New Indian Express and is the associate editor of *Indian AGE*, an English magazine published in Chennai. Sahoo writes in English and Odiya. She is the author of eight novels and nine anthologies of short stories. She has penned two anthologies of short stories in English, and has published a collection of essays called *Sensible and Sensuality* that provides an outlook on feminism and femininity from an eastern perspective. *Gambhiri Ghara* ('The Dark Abode') is one of the most acclaimed novels of Sarojini Sahoo. Originally written in Odiya, it has been translated into several Indian languages. Several of Sahoo's stories have been translated into Bengali, English and German.

In 1992, Sahoo received the Jhankar Award, and was conferred the prestigious Orissa Sahitya Academy Award in 1993. She has also been the recipient of the Bhubaneswar Book Fair Award and the Prajatantra Award. Sahoo currently teaches at a Degree college in Belpahar, Odisha.

Sahoo writes without apology and sans gêne about women's bodies and sexuality. Her novels and short stories openly deal with pregnancy, rape, menopause, lesbianism, sexual frustration in women, female orgasm and other topics that are inherent to women but have never been written about. Themes that writers chose to avoid, find centre stage in Sahoo's writing. As Menka Walia points out in *South Asian Outlook*, an e-magazine published from Canada:

"Sahoo typically evolves her stories around Indian women and sexuality, which is something not commonly written about, but is rather discouraged in a traditionalist society." (Rector)

Even when women writers relate the trauma, apprehensions and injustices meted out to their female characters, a certain restraint is often perceived in their voice. Often it is noticed that a woman writer treats sensitive issues with caution and with great skill, spins a tale over the gory details out of fear of what her readers, family or publisher may think about her for addressing such issues in a raw and explicit manner. The angst of a social scandal rocking her reputation, thus holds back the writer from fully expressing herself. But this is not the case with Sarojini Sahoo. In her literary works, feminine issues are treated in a candid and in-depth manner. Whether it is the shame of delayed menopause, the restrictions during adolescence and pregnancy, or even the fear of rape or condemnation by society, Sahoo unabashedly weaves a story around these issues.

In a literary interview on Sahoo as a fiction writer and trailblazer of feminism in Oriya contemporary literature, Sahoo explains her attitude towards her bold writing:

"I never find any 'inhibition' in relating reality while writing. Because while I write, I place me alien from the otherworld. Writing for me is a muse, a monologue, a kind of self-intercourse. I enter into the chore of the character's self and find where I am hiding there. I lift myself to the above, much more above from those characters and open and tear and alter them as if I am re-dressing, remaking myself. There is no place for the second or third person at that time. Inhibitions are caused when you are aware of another's existence. When nobody is there and you are going to open yourself, to whom you would inhibit? Is there any restriction, limitation, or shame to open anyone in front of one's own self?" (Nawale)

Sahoo's works have achieved recognition for their feminist perspective and sexual candour, and her brazen approach to women's reality has made her one of the most forthright feminist Indian writers of contemporary Oriya literature.

Sahoo's view on feminism

Sahoo has a very clear stance on feminism. She says:

“For me, feminism is not a gender problem or any confrontational attack on male hegemony so it is quite different from that of Virginia Woolf or Judith Butler. I accept feminism as a total entity of female-hood, which is completely separate from the man’s world.” [ibid.]

This quotation, extracted from an interview, underscores two important points. The first is what feminism means to her, and the second is how she positions herself among western feminists.

Sahoo believes feminism is an umbrella term that denotes male vilification. Although she is against patriarchy, she emphatically opposes the notion of championing matriarchy. She argues that it is inconsistent with her feminist principles to replace the current patriarchal society with a matriarchal one. Rather, she supports feminism as a broad social movement that aims to achieve equality for all people, regardless of gender. Sahoo cautions against the obsession with women’s empowerment alone since it could distort feminism’s core principles and encourage radical ideas. She stresses the need to take a balanced stance that recognizes and tackles the challenges that both men and women encounter within the framework of society.

The second point raised in the statement above relates to Sahoo’s position among Western feminists. Since she disagrees with some of the core principles of second-wave feminism, Sahoo rejects the label of feminist. Simone de Beauvoir offered an original perspective on femininity when she made her well-known claim that not all women genuinely embody womanhood (Beauvoir 23). After Beauvoir’s ground-breaking book, *The Second Sex*, a feminist ideology developed that regarded femininity as a negative and inferior part of a woman’s nature. This movement discouraged women from using makeup and taking part in activities that were regarded as emphasizing their femininity in an attempt to free them from reproductive responsibilities. Second-wave feminists objected to women engaging in sex work, dressing fashionably, or even embracing motherhood because they perceived these activities to be unmanly. For Sahoo, the overt rejection of femininity and the push to masculinize the female identity that characterized second-wave feminism, are unacceptable.

While Sahoo acknowledges the importance of women’s rights and supports the feministic stand against sexual harassment and violence, she does not share their overall outlook and approach to women’s liberation. She argues for the celebration of femininity rather than its suppression or alteration to challenge male dominance. According to Sahoo, feminism isn’t inherently a gender conflict or an aggressive assault on male authority. (Nawale). The movement does not specifically target men, nor does it act aggressively towards them. Instead, it opposes antiquated social systems that cripple both genders. Regrettably, contemporary feminism has been misconstrued as anti-male, adopting a hostile stance towards men (Rector).

Sahoo therefore believes the term ‘femininity’ must replace the term ‘feminism’ as the latter has lost its significance and identity due to its overemphasis on radical politics (Sahoo). Sahoo explains that the word femininity implies qualities such as sensitivity, gentleness, support, nurturing and empathy, which are essential for feminists to possess in helping the oppressed and promoting

equality. She also adds that femininity is not exclusive to women, as men can also embody these noble attributes. To be feminine is therefore a privilege, as it means “[...] to know how to pay attention to detail and people, to have people skills and to know how to connect to and work well with others.” (ibid.)

Sahoo’s position vis-à-vis Beauvoir

Sahoo is often called the ‘Simone de Beauvoir of India’. She however does not agree with this title that her critics often attribute to her. Sahoo has time and again insisted that while she shares a few similarities with Beauvoir, their stances differ on theoretical grounds.

Beauvoir is primarily recognized as a philosopher, drawing inspiration from a wide array of sources, including French philosophy spanning from Descartes to Bergson, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, the historical materialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and the idealism of Immanuel Kant and Hegel (“Simone de Beauvoir”). This rich blend of ideas forms the foundation for Beauvoir’s well-structured and elaborate theories. For instance, Beauvoir has drawn on the Hegelian notion of ‘Other’ to explain the position of women. She states that the reason women have occupied a subordinate position relative to men is because they are perceived as the ‘other’. According to Beauvoir, the concept of the ‘other’ arises when the self requires the otherness to define itself as a subject. And as man deems himself to be the self, or the subject, the woman is automatically relegated to the position of the object, or the ‘other’. Although self-understanding through alterity is theoretically reciprocal, in practice, men consistently assert themselves as the ‘essential’ which Beauvoir terms ‘transcendent’, and relegate women to the role of the ‘other’, the inessential or the ‘immanent’. Human existence is supposed to be an interplay between transcendence and immanence but as Beauvoir points out, throughout history men have cast women into the role of inferiority by defining the ‘other’ as the darker, inferior and weaker side of humanity (“Simone de Beauvoir – Freedom for Women.”)

Beauvoir argues that the disparity between men and women stems from their distinct identities. Each gender possesses its own inherent identity, which fundamentally differentiates them from one another. On every level — biological, psychoanalytical, and historical — men and women are different. Beauvoir affirms that biological functions such as menstruation, pregnancy and lactation accentuate these differences but contends that they do not subjugate women to an inferior position because of them. Even in spite of their physiological differences, women are not inferior. Beauvoir stresses that despite the fact that these distinctions exist, they shouldn’t be the reason for unfair treatment or discrimination. Rather, she states that equality and equity for all people, regardless of gender, should be encouraged by society while acknowledging and valuing these diverse identities. Beauvoir’s viewpoint highlights the necessity of recognising gender variation and preventing it from dictating unequal power dynamics or societal hierarchies.

Additionally, Beauvoir asserts that a woman’s identity is mostly defined by her environment rather than just her biology. Her well-known statement, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” implies that gender does not determine a person’s sex. A woman’s surroundings shape who she is and how society views her as a woman. Beauvoir challenges the idea that gender is purely

biological by highlighting the importance of socialization and environmental factors in the formation of gender identities.

Beauvoir represents a revolutionary shift with her bold analysis of women's place in society and her audacious claim that women and men are equal despite the fundamental distinctions between them. The fact that Beauvoir encourages women to value their uniqueness rather than strive to be like men in order to be treated equally demonstrates her avant-garde standpoint. This radical perspective on women's status within the female sex is also seen in Sarojini Sahoo.

Like Beauvoir, Sahoo also rejects the notion of evaluating a woman's position in relation to a man's, as she recognizes the inherent differences between genders. She firmly believes that a comparison between two distinct beings is futile. In an interview discussing the evaluation of women's social and sexual options, Sahoo highlights the distinction between the two genders must complement each other, and not be pitted against one another. She says:

"I believe that there are inherent physical, behavioral, emotional, and psychological differences between men and women and we affirm and celebrate these differences as wonderful and complementary. These differences do not evidence the superiority of one sex over the other but rather, serve to show that each sex is complemented and made stronger by the presence of the other."
(Singh)

Sahoo also shares Beauvoir's views that because of the disparities between men and women, the latter are judged and relegated to a subordinate position. That modern women consider themselves equal to men is something both Beauvoir and Sahoo agree on – an emancipated woman "[...] prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men" (Appignanesi 97). Both Beauvoir and Sahoo maintain that the mindset of the modern woman has changed, and she does not regard herself as inferior anymore. But this is where their similarities end.

Sahoo's approach to the woman's position is quite different. Unlike Beauvoir, she isn't a philosopher; instead, she is a writer who focuses on crafting novels and short stories that delve into the predicaments faced by Indian women. Through her stories, Sahoo not only advocates for women's equality but also brings out into the open the various challenges that inherently affect women. Through her storytelling, she brings to the forefront the different plights that often remain unspoken and unwritten. Her choice of themes underlines her dedication to raise awareness and normalize the various concerns that impact women.

Sahoo focuses principally on the concept of the female identity as an independent entity, rather than its value vis-à-vis that of the male identity. Sahoo's interest in femininity has led her to explore the various concerns that are unique to women – encompassing issues related to their bodies and mental well-being, including fears, dilemmas, traumas and societal discrimination. Her candid approach to female orgasm and promiscuity disregards the limitations imposed by patriarchy on women's sexual expression, positioning her as a forward-thinking figure akin to Beauvoir.

Conclusion

Sahoo's primary identity lies in her role as a writer. While her works are centred on the various plights, both physical and psychological, that befall women, this thematic concentration alone does not automatically label her as a feminist. Her thematical approach, which is considered bold and unprecedented in Oriya literature, and which has earned her the title of 'Simone de Beauvoir of India', does not necessarily classify her as a feminist either. And although Sahoo holds firm opinions and takes a unique stance regarding feminism, it would be inaccurate to call her a feminist.

"I consider myself more a writer and as a writer, I think I am always a genderless entity. A writer should not have any gender." (Dissanayake)

For Sahoo, writing transcends mere profession; it is a profound calling. Her interviews have often revealed her resilience and uncompromising determination in the face of adversity. She has often been disregarded as a female writer, questioned for the 'objectionable' content in her writing, forced to apologize and even removed from her service of lectureship because of her writing (Sahai). Yet, her passion for writing about women and their struggles remains undiminished. Sahoo's courage and audacity, coupled with her keen insight and perceptiveness, make her an exceptional storyteller. *The New Indian Express* aptly writes:

"You may call her creativity controversial and term her unconventional frankness as feminist but you can never afford to ignore this woman and writer of courage and conviction. Sarojini Sahoo is a noted short story writer of India and known for her brilliant boldness." (Sahoo)

Sahoo is thus a unique writer whose strong and clear views are reflected in her writing. Her stance on the liberation of women's sexuality, their innermost concerns about their bodies, the stigma or fear associated with womanhood in a patriarchal society are themes that she is deeply passionate about. Her position as a writer thus allows her to express her standpoint through her remarkable collection of literary work.

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