



## Concepts of Womanism/ Feminism in *A Life Apart: An Autobiography* by Prabha Khaitan

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**Abstract**— *Even though the concept of Womanism has roots in Black Feminism, still it can form some relevance and connection with Indian Feminism. Alice Walker (1944-) an African Black woman writer has positioned “Womanist/Womanism” in her critically acclaimed collection of essays, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose”. Roughly, in Post-Independence India, women’s active involvement in politics advances their positions. The proportion of women in the Indian Education System skyrocketed. Due to awareness, Indian women make decisions in the realms of social, economic, and religious issues as well. Now, women lawyers, activists, politicians, administrators, and others focus on the upliftment of women’s conditions in India. These give birth to women-specific organizations, acts, amendments, and laws. In Indian Feminism based on the above-discussed layouts, there have been three waves in the last eighty years. Indian Womanism can be one of the most significant segments of Indian Feminism of the contemporary era. The primary aim of the Researcher is to conceptualize Indian Womanism while unwrapping the palimpsest narrative of Prabha Khaitan’s autobiography named *A Life Apart*. The second contention is to situate Prabha Khaitan as the best possible exemplar of an Indian Womanist instead of an Indian Feminist in the background of *A Life Apart: An Autobiography*.*



**Keywords**— *Autobiography, Feminism, Indian, Prabha Khaitan, Womanism*

The different perspectives of women writers in India made Indian Feminism quite ambiguous too. In India, every woman-centric story, and life narrative has its feministic approach and critical dimension. We cannot overlook its multifarious strains. It became a prominent theory of practice when theorists and writers traced the history of women in India from the time of their active participation in Indian Freedom Struggles to the newly coined term that is ‘New Women’. In Literary texts, Indian Feminism locates women-centric themes. Some of them are the struggle for survival, the quest for identity, feminine desire, patriarchal oppression, recognition of dual consciousness, actual lived experience, sense of loneliness and alienation, fear of the loss of identity and selfhood, emotional crises, motherhood, and others. In Literature, Indian Feminist Writers also look at stereotypical images of women in India from multiple angles. They try to discover

the potential category in which readers, writers, and critics can work to highlight the untouched area of discussion. Broadly, Indian Feminist Writers portray women’s pictures as liberal, radical, conventional, modern, working, domestic, married, unmarried, etcetera. Indian women’s tussle to assail through the high tides in life, to individuate their existence, and to place themselves as professionally successful is a matter of dialogue peculiar to Indian Feminism.

In a nutshell, we can say that Indian Feminism covers the journey of women in India from the 1950s onwards. Broadly, there are three waves of Indian Feminism. The first wave lies between the 1950s to 1970s, the second wave is from the 1980s to the 2000s. From 2000 onwards, there was the third wave of Indian Feminism. Meanwhile, in the third wave of Feminism, the major topics of discussion and concerns for Indian Feminists, women

activists, and women lawyers in India are Marriage and Matrimonial law, Feminist Jurisprudence, Sexual assault, Rape, Sexual offenses, Dowry, Domestic violence, Women's Access to Law, the Legal System, and Justice, Courts of Women, women's sexuality, patriarchy, women's movement.

Peter Berry writes in *Beginning Theory*: "The concern with 'conditioning' and 'socialization' underpins a crucial set of distinctions, that between the terms 'feminist', 'female', and 'feminine'. As Toril Moi explains, the first is 'a political position', the second 'a matter of biology' and the third 'a set of culturally defined characteristics' ["] (122). In the case of Prabha Khaitan, 'feminist' terms problematize her identity marker. In general, women are not born with a different set of social rules and regulations to define their Identities. But, code of conduct, morals, ethics so on and so forth define women's identity and performance in society.

Prabha Khaitan (1942-2008) was a prominent Indian woman novelist, poet, and entrepreneur. Prabha Khaitan printed her autobiography originally in Hindi as *Anya se Ananya* (2007). The English version came out in 2013 named *A Life Apart: An Autobiography*, translated from Hindi by Ira Pande. The writer, the translator, and the publisher all are women. Coming together of Prabha Khaitan, Ira Pande, and Urvashi Butalia for a common purpose links *A Life Apart: An Autobiography* as a significant part of women's ecosystem. It also galvanizes the dire requirement for women's space for creation and connection.

Khaitan was born and brought up in a conventional Marwari family. However, she resisted the conventional set-up of her community and the high expectations of her family. Prabha Khaitan was the founding president of the Prabha Khaitan Foundation. She was also actively involved in women's affairs, worked for the upliftment of women's conditions, and wrote on women's questions in her own individualistic cum feminist way. In 1966, she founded a women's healthcare company named Figurette by keeping the views of Indian women who usually prefer to overlook their health and body. She also started a leather export company in 1976. Khaitan was the only woman president of the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce.

Womanist is a term first proposed by Alice Walker (1944-) in her 1983 collection of essays, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose". 'Womanist' is defined at the outset of the collection in a definition comprising four different parts, three of which are long and will be summarized in brief: (1) from womanism (i.e., opposite of "girlish", frivolous, irresponsible, not serious), a black feminist or feminist of colour; (2) 'A woman who loves

other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility [...] and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually'; (3) A woman who loves everything, herself included. The fourth part of Walker's definition can be given in full; (4) 'Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender' (Childs & Fowler 252).

Based on the above layout, some of the segments of the definition apply to Prabha Khaitan's personality and traits. She loves other women nonsexually. With that, throughout her life, she appreciates and prefers women's culture, struggles for women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength. If we look at Khaitan's life, she loves everything including herself. But she was sensitive and emotional too. She had control over her business but not over her feelings. Sometimes, her feelings drain her energy to become professionally sound. She consoles herself: "Love and its problems take up so much of our time that if women were to devote as much energy and dedication to their work, what could they not achieve! (Khaitan 13).

In her early life woman is involved in her responsibilities, duties, and preoccupations. Hence, she forgets her 'self', "she forgets her individual existence and becomes one with the surroundings. But once, when she is comfortable with her circumstances, she may well for the first time be woman herself. Women are well beyond youth when they begin often unconsciously to create another story (Thakore 69).

Formation of identity of either of the gender whether it is male or female is based on internal as well as external factors. There are different sects of Identity. Significant ones are 'sexual identity', 'local identity' 'national identity', 'racial identity', 'spiritual identity', 'intellectual identity', and others. Khaitan is a female, an Indian, a Brown woman, a Hindu, a writer, and many others. The different identity markers to locate Prabha Khaitan as an Indian Womanist is a cumbersome task. Prabha Khaitan has 'feminine' qualities appropriately, while the proportion of 'womanist' is higher in her personality than the proportion of 'feminist'. She represents women of the twentieth century. Based on the wide number of writings, we can consider Khaitan a liberal Feminist Indian Woman Writer, whereas based on her personality traits she is an Indian Womanist instead of a Radical Indian Feminist. That is why, the Researcher finds Prabha Khaitan a 'traditionally modern' woman.

Khaitan's love life seems disappointing. At the psychological level, her lover, Saraf discriminates against her. She lives like an emotional fool in the hands of Saraf. "My dependence on him now was not just a physical one, it was a peculiar kind of sickness that I came to look upon as love" (Khaitan 85). Her relationship with Saraf is not devoid

of toxicity. Her dilemma remains whether to tolerate injustices inflicted by her lover, Saraf, or not. "I can fight with society but not with Dr Saraf, I told myself. As it is, everyone looked upon me as the evil one and if I were to break up with him, I knew well where public sympathy would lie" (Khaitan 169). Despite her longing to be treasured and valued by the man she loved; she subsisted in life on her terms. She voiced her feelings, sense of discomfort, and unease at not being a legitimate woman and a wedded wife. She could handle business, foreign trips, and writing. But emotionally, she was dependent on Saraf. He was the man who gave impetus to her career and sometimes, curbed her finances as well as her movements. Such whims and wishes contextualized Khaitan as an Indian womanist instead of a feminist. It shows the odd position of educated well-off and unmarried Indian women.

Some of Khaitan's decisions and actions are not just objectional in the eyes of society but also unacceptable for her. Such as her action of falling in love with a married man, and her decision to remain unmarried. In *A Life Apart*, the autobiographer is neither a married woman nor just an unmarried woman, she takes the position of a legally excluded woman. Khaitan's position is highly complicated. Even if, Indian society nulls and voids Khaitan's decision to remain unmarried with a married man as his second woman, the kinds of marriage mentioned in Indian Scripture justified Khaitan's choice. In the 'Gandharva' form of marriage, mutual consent of two parties that are bride and bridegroom is required. It is not a matter of concern, even a couple can decide to remain a husband and wife without following the dictum of the Institution of marriage based on the Hindu Marriage Act. Thus, Khaitan and Saraf's relationship is acceptable even if it seems unethical and objectionable to some sections of people in India.

In *A Life Apart: An Autobiography* Prabha Khaitan has deconstructed the ideal image created for the representation of Indian women and womanhood in India. She showcases her status as a rebel in a true sense. Khaitan defies societal norms and dismantles the regressive attitude of Indians based on patriarchal ideologies. Based on that, we can consider her an Indian Feminist. But her rebellious attitude has limitations too. Many times, she has to compromise in her relationship with Saraf in order to maintain her image in the professional space. 'Ifs and buts' kinds of circumstance and compromised state of life place her in the ambit of Indian Womanism.

Khaitan struggled a lot to manage her business because of the involvement of Saraf and her stepson who tried to have the upper hand in the regulation of finance. "When I protested that he had no hand in my successful business, he would say what if he hadn't allowed me to start

one? (Khaitan 215). The above statement from *A Life Apart* reveals the situation of the majority of Indian businesswomen. When Saraf advised Khaitan to adopt his youngest son, Neeraj so that he would become the heir of Khaitan's business. She gave a practical response. "I have wasted twenty-five years of my life on you, why should I now try and make another fake relationship work? (Khaitan 185). Khaitan also had to deal with the dubious nature of her husband whenever she met with a male client or trade partner. "Is this what an independent life for a woman seems to you? You think that all independent women are whores, do you? I just want to be relieved of your guardianship. That's all!" (Khaitan 187).

In a weak emotional hour when Khaitan had an overwhelming experience with Saraf, when life seemed unbearable to her, for a shorter period she had an affair with another man. For that, she neither justified nor carried the baggage of guilty conscience. "I did regret my digression but it also gave me a curious sense of peace for I came to terms with the restlessness that I had battled for too long. Meaningless affairs were not the path to my future" (Khaitan 260).

On the whole, *A Life Apart* begins and ends with Saraf. "In Indian mythology, Sati- the consort of Shiva- is the embodiment of a woman who dedicated her whole life to a single man, and to him alone. I was always drawn to her and today, as I review my long life of over half a century and mentally bow to her, I also salute the remnants of the woman I once was" (Khaitan 1). Khaitan begins her autobiography with a reference to "Sati". She was supposed to live her life by following "Sati" as an example, but she digressed from her path for once. Such an ambiguous incident paints Prabha Khaitan both as a feminist as well as a womanist. Moreover, Khaitan did not include much in her autobiography after the death of Saraf. It makes Khaitan a complex woman to decipher and comprehend completely. It seems almost impossible to categorize her either as an independent woman or a dependent woman.

Indian women possess a lot of potential in various walks of human life, particularly in the field of creative writing. They have shown acute sensibility while expressing their thoughts and emotions. Being the victims of male-dominated society, they have gone through many unpredictable experiences. These experiences have been interpreted by them in the light of their insight. Since the centuries they are desperate for expression. But their desires, expressions, and their screams were suppressed within the walls of their sophisticated homes. The powerful clutches of patriarchy choked their voice in their throats (Aher 262).

Prabha Khaitan is the woman of the twentieth century. She makes her own place in the men's world through her business skills and writing. As an educated woman, she learns human skills to survive. During her University days, she turned into an Indian Feminist with her ideologies, experiences, and perspectives. Unfortunately, she has to adjust, compromise, and suppress her voice in many a situation with her lifelong companion, Saraf. Meanwhile, the Researcher finds her a true representation of Indian Womanism in particular and Indian Feminism in general.

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