

The Influence of the West in Krupabai Sathianadhan's *Saguna*

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ABSTRACT

The novel as a literary genre in India is largely influenced by the Victorian novels of the West. Realism, an imported narrative technique was more common than fiction among the novelists of the nineteenth century India. The novels of this period extensively dealt on the social issues and the position of women. *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* written by Krupabai Sathianadhan is a typical example that displays the influence of English literature. The novel employs the techniques of realism, deals with the social issues of the nineteenth century and addresses the woman's question.

Keywords:

nineteenth century India; novels in India; realism; Christianity

The nineteenth century India witnessed many reforms in the social upfront. There emerged a set of educated class of people who had access to the English literature which uncovered a set of new values for them. The Western education in India has deeply influenced many sections of the society. This new exposure also led to the alterations in the production of literary genres such as novel. The classic model for the novels written in English in India was the British Victorian novels. The concept of realism which was predominant in the Victorian novels was more suitable to the Indian writers than the other fictional forms.

The novels of the nineteenth century generated diverse critical perspectives upon society. It became an important tool to propagate the need for reform and to spread nationalist sentiments. It also communicates the tension between modernity and traditionalism.

The first Indian novel in English *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee discusses the issues of women following the Victorian model of narration. Women novelists in India who pioneered this new genre in the nineteenth century were Raj Lakshmi Debi (*The Hindoo Wife or The Enchanted Fruit* – 1876), Toru

Dutt (*Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden* – 1878), Krupabai Saththianadhan (*Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* – 1887-8 and *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* - 1895) and Shivantibai Nikambe (*Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife* - 1895). The literary texts of this period predominantly addressed the women's questions, acclaimed and condemned the concept of 'new woman' at various levels.

The position of women was the central question in the nineteenth century which is also called the period of 'renaissance'. The fear of losing the cultural values by imitating the West, led to the construction of 'new woman', "a new patriarchy that was brought into existence, different from the 'traditional' order but also explicitly claiming to be different from the 'Western' family. The 'new woman' was to be modern, but also have to display the signs of national tradition and therefore would be essentially different from the 'Western' woman" (Chatterjee 31). The national-cultural project emerged during this time considered the Eastern culture to be superior and thus fostered the new dogma which accepted to learn and emulate the science and technology of the West and rejected impersonating their cultural aspects.

Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life written by Krupabai Saththianadhan

serialized in the Madras Christian College Magazine in the late 1880s and was published as a book in 1895 is the first Indian New Woman autobiographical novel written in English. The novel throws light on the spread of Christianity, the Woman Question and Nationalism of the nineteenth century. She has also authored *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* which portrays the plight of child marriage and widowhood. She has also penned a few poems and wrote articles to local newspapers, magazines, and journals.

Krupabai Saththianadhan was born in Ahmadnagar in 1862. She was the thirteenth of the fourteen children of Haripunt and Radha who were the first Brahmin converts to Christianity in the Bombay Presidency. Krupabai's elder brother, Bhasker served as the best mentor for her as her father, Haripunt died when she was a child. It was from Bhasker that Krupabai gathered her interest in western literature. George Eliot's fictions play a major literary influence on her life. After failing to go to England to pursue medical course due to health problems, Krupabai joined Madras Medical College where she was one of the earliest women students. Though she stood first in her academics beating her male counterparts, she was unable to finish her studies due to health crisis. Later in 1881, she fell in love and married Samuel Saththianadhan who had just returned to India after completing his

studies at Cambridge University, England. After her marriage with Sathianadhan, she lived the rest of her life in various places of South India. During this time, she taught in Indian girls' school and also started a school for Muslim girls. Krupabai died in 1894, at the age of thirty-two. She is the most remarkable person for presenting an Indian protagonist to the West.

The long descriptive passages appreciating the Deccan such as,

“The shadowy cloudland, dark and gloomy, like a large bird with spreading wings hovered overhead, and the great world sleeping in the mist lay below its purity and whiteness, like a huge sea stretched at our feet. The billows in it heaved and rolled in silence. It was the silence of the eternity linked to the world for a moment. A soft starry dreamland light enwrapped and overspread all. Above the ocean of mist the neighbouring peaks, distant and dark, mysteriously loomed like fingers pointing to heaven” (71).

brings the beauty of the land live into the imagination of the readers. The characterization is also equally vivacious. For instance, Saguna describes her brother as “tall, handsome, full of fire and vigour,…” (20). The everyday challenges and sufferings of a woman in the Hindu community

household are vividly delineated in the novel through the life events of Radha, her mother. The novel also details the problems her family encountered with conversion to Christianity and her confrontation. For Saguna, Christianity is a liberating force that can “dispel the darkness of superstition in a land” (23). The novel expounds intrinsic problems of the period such as nationalism, restlessness with modernization and education for women.

The narrative takes the readers back and forth in time. At the same time, author's present time is also broadly discussed with an emphasis. There are also the stories of her neighbours and friends in the novel which reflects the society of those times. Krupabai wisely uses these techniques while recollecting her childhood memories. Lokuge in her *Introduction* to the novel appreciates the narrative technique as “The story ‘spirals and loops’, framing tale within tale, weaving a richly textured canvas of people, incident, legend and mystery, but with the narrator always in control, and progressing. *Saguna* is a literary masterpiece of its time” (1).

The mentioning of a few authors and books of the West such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Landmarks of the History of Greece*, Spencer's *Faery Queen* exhibits the proficiency of Krupabai in the English literature which has considerably influenced

her. The merits of western English education and individualism are conveyed in the novel. Saguna transpires as a new woman with the help of education. She credits Christianity for the fruits of autonomy that she enjoyed. The novel that has all the characteristics of the realistic Victorian novel propagates social emancipation.

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