



## **THEME OF MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: A STUDY OF WOMEN NOVELISTS IN INDIAN FICTION**

**SELLAKUMAR. S.**

Assistant Professor & Head  
Department of English  
Mahendra Engineering College  
Mallasamudram, Namakkal - 637503  
(TN) INDIA

### **ABSTRACT**

*Indian women novelists have made a substantial contribution to the growth and the enrichment of Indian novels in English. Their novels are essentially concerned with the gender discrimination and other problems related to women who are exposed to both physical and psychological abuse and ill-treatment in the male-dominated Indian society. While analyzing the character and the inner mind of the Indian woman from view point of feminine sensibility and insight, the women novelists depict how women struggle not only against aggressive male domination but also against the social, cultural and religious oppression prevalent in contemporary society. This paper attempts to compare the works of a few Indian women novelists by discussing the central theme of Man-Woman relationship.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a creative surge in Indian writing English in general and in women's writing in particular. After the writings of the triumvirate comprising Raja Rao, R.K. Narayanan and Mulk Raj Anand, the second generation that contributed to the works of their preceding counterparts, includes some eminent women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Despande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy and Raji Narasimhan among others. Numerous articles have been published on the contribution of individual writers. But no serious attempt has been made to compare their novels discussing the theme of Man-woman relationship. This study attempts to fill this gap. The themes of the novels of the women writers are discussed focusing on Man-Woman Relationship.

**SELLAKUMAR. S.**

1P a g e



Women novelists in India, with the keen understanding and observation of contemporary Indian society, deal with women's aspirations, hopes, desires, anxieties and emotional and social insecurities with artistic discernment. They also illustrate how legends, myths and orthodox attitudes and traditional beliefs strengthen the patriarchal practices which have made women inferior creatures and mere objects of pleasure. Besides exploring the moral and the psychological dilemmas and externalizing the inner conflicts and the mental agonies of the victimized women in society, they portray women characters that endeavor to face harsh reality and struggle for their identity and meaningful existence. Through their writings the women novelists try not only to redefine the position of women in society but also to bring out their identity and assert their independence as women. Moreover, the women characters they portray strive hard to overcome psychological impediments such as inferiority complex, inhibition, reluctance, diffidence, self-doubt and timidity and social barriers such as traditional beliefs and biased religious opinions. Prominent among these women novelists are Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Santha Rama Rau, Vimla Raina, Bharathi Mukherjee, Veene Nagpal, Kamala Das, Rama Mehta, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai.

Most of the Indian novelists who wrote immediately before and after the freedom movement showed greater pre-occupation with the social, political and economic realities of Indian life. They were inspired by the freedom movement, the advent of Mahatma Gandhi and the social regeneration that had taken place under the impact of Gandhi. Beginning with K.S. Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, the Indian novel in English showed a marked concern for the grim realities of the Indian scene. These writers depicted Indian life with an accurate awareness with all the political, economic and social problems that confronted the people. Novelists like Anand and Bhattacharya wrote with a crusading spirit and with a genuine passion for change and reform. Anita Desai, Shobha De, Nayantara Sahgal, Sashi Deshpande and Arundati Roy are women writers of this century. Also, these women writers have feminist concerns and they take up women's issues in their respective novels.

There are various women writers in Indian writing in English, especially in the field of fiction and poetry. While Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Santha Rama Rau and Attia Husian have made a significant contribution to the growth of Indian Fiction in English, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu have made an equally significant contribution to Indian poetry in English. Women writers, gifted with extraordinary talents, have made Indian English literature a matter of pride to readers and a source of admiration for Western readers. The first person narrative technique used in the novels in which the narrator is a woman and which have the semblance of an autobiography, particularly because the strands of personal



and autobiographical elements running through them are too pronounced for the readers to measure the gap between 'I' of the narration and the real self of the writer. East-West encounter forms an important area of concern in the works of various women writers.

The second generation that contributed to the works of their preceding counterparts, includes eminent women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Santha Rama Rao, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De and Arundhati Roy. The advent of these women writers gave a new dimension to the growth and development of the Indian novel written in English. An attempt is made in this study to discuss select novels of Indian women writers writing in English, focusing on the theme of Man-Woman relationship portrayed in contemporary Indian fiction.

Kamala Markandaya uses fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life. She started writing novels when India was just at the threshold of newly won freedom. Poverty, hunger and starvation were the major problems due to communal disturbances in India at that time. Industrialization and urbanization were eroding the very basis of rural life. Racial conflicts, cultural divergences, temperamental disparities, and sexual perversion are depicted by Kamala Markandaya as factors working in the form of barriers of communication. Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* tells the story of a South Indian Village where industry and modern technology play *havoc*. Hunger and degradation are the key elements of this novel. Her second novel *Some Inner Fury* is a tragedy engineered by politics. Her third novel *A Silence of Desire* focuses on the realm of spiritual realities. Her novel *A Handful of Rice* deals with urban economics. Whether it is Hunger and Degradation on the East-West encounter, the natural feelings of hunger and starvation and the real feelings of the East towards the West and the *vice versa* have been realistically depicted in her fiction.

Santha Rama Rau, one of the most well known writers of travelogues has written two novels, *The Adventuress*, and *Remember the House*. Her work assumes the nature of quest and yet quest is not the right word, for there is no restless enquiring into things. What we find is a simple inquisitiveness and curiosity about new lands and new lands and new people, and a faithful recording of them with imaginative touches here and there. Santha Rama Rau's novel *The Adventuress* illustrates the writer's fondness for a sentimental romantic with a modern, sophisticated, international setting. Santha Rama Rau is essentially an Indian writer because she has a sensibility which is essentially Indian. Mrs. Rama Rau's novel *Remember the House* which is based on her own, problem of identity, her own predicament, a west-educated Indian girl returning to India and encountering in herself the conflict between the East and the West as well as between two sets, of values. Baba, the protagonist of her novel *Remember the House* resembles the writer and explores her predicament in the context of Indian society and works out a kind of resolution or compromise, opposite her own.

SELLAKUMAR. S.

3P a g e



Anita Desai's works unearth her struggle for female independence against the backdrop of the patriarchal cultural pattern prevailing in India. Her portrayal of man-woman relationship has been influenced and conditioned by the existing intricate social situation. Her novel *Cry, The Peacock* discusses the failure of marriage between Maya and Gautam. Maya marries Gautam but their temperament and emotional responses never match. Maya's longing for love and understanding was not met out due to her loveless marriage. The tragedy of Maya and Gautam's married life comes to an end by Maya's killing her husband and afterwards her own self by committing suicide. Monisha's dilemma in *Voices in the City* is similar to that of Maya. Monisha is married to Jiban but their married life is devoid of happiness and satisfaction. The temperamental differences between Monisha and Jiban never allow them to maintain domestic harmony, which is inevitable for the successful marriage. Anita Desai is a mute observer and perceives everything mutely, minutely and delicately. Her character carries with them a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. Desai's themes deal with human nature and human relationship as that of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Her novels reverberate the sentiments of those women who set out on a journey of inner self-discovery. In *Fasting, Feasting* Desai stretches the thematic focus giving it a wider perspective by universalizing the predicament of women, pain and suffering, which is universal.

Shoba De, as a writer is gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life, differs considerably from the other contemporary Indian women writers. One of the major reasons of Shobha De's popularity as writer is her insightful understanding of the contemporary urban woman's position and the challenges she faces. Shobha De writes with a great deal of empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag. She is essentially a feminist writer. She is a modern novelist who recognizes upside down and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against male dominance. For this, she explores the world of urban women in India. Shobha De's novel *Socialite Evenings* is about the journey of a prominent Bombay socialite Karuna from an ordinary middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Her novel *Starry Nights* narrates the story of a film star Asha Rani who leaves no stone unturned to achieve her goal. Her novel *Strange Obsession* depicts lesbian relationship. The novel *Second Thoughts* offers a slice of urban life and it is an explosive tale of love and betrayal that exposes the hollowness of Indian marriage system.

*Ruth Praver Jahabvala* in her novels deals with the social and economical problems of the present century. Her first-four novels are set in Delhi, focusing in turn on the Indian arranged marriage. Her first novel *To Whom She Will* focuses on corruption in Indian public life. Her novel *The Nature of Passion* narrates the story of an Englishman stranded in India. Her novel



*Get Ready for Battle* condemns dishonesty, hypocrisy and exploitation of the poor. *A New Dominion* satirizes the chauvinism of independent India. *Heat and Dust* as well as *Winner of the 1975 Booker Prize* contrasts East-West relationships. Jhabvala uses fiction as a powerful medium for presenting the problems of the Indian society and suggesting ways and means to solve these problems. Nayantara Sahgal has a firsthand knowledge of India's political history and political figures in India. As she spent most of her childhood in Anand Bhawan, the ancestral home of the Nehru's in Allahabad, an important political event forms the background of each of her novels. For instance *Storm in Chandigarh* deals with the partition of Punjab on linguistic lines. The major thematic preoccupation of her novel *Rich Like Us* is the Emergency of 1975. Her novel *A Situation in New Delhi* focuses on the prevailing political situation after Nehru's death in which she portrays the corrupt politicians and the frustrated youth who become Naxalites. Some of Sahgal's characters are easily recognizable public figures. For instance, Kailash Sinha who stands for Krishna Menon in *This Time of Morning* and Shivraj who stands for Jawarharlal Nehru in *A Situation in New Delhi* are two such examples. Her men and women pursue high ideals in the fields in which they work. Sonali, in *Rich Like Us* is one such character. She is deeply concerned about the problems of this new woman, intelligent, educated and a careerist trying to make a dignified image for her in a patriarchal society. As a socio-political novelist Nayantara Sahgal strictly adheres to her ideal of freedom as an essential and indispensable ingredient for the progress of a country and an individual. In all of her eight novels she expresses this philosophy and her deep love for India and for humanity, surfaces in the finales of these novels.

Through the character of Indu, Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service, but Jayant does not approve of it. Indu's self-alienation increases as she is forced to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity, and her ambition to be a creative writer is not bothered. She now wants to become a true woman and throw off the mask of an ideal woman. As a woman, Indu is hardly left with any choice. Women novelists have dealt with these aspects in their respective novels. A woman like Indu is allowed no direct influence upon her husband. Her identity is lost and she has to live according to her husband's needs. Jayant betrays Indu's hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. Womanhood restricts woman and puts her on the periphery. Indu detests womanhood, which is thrust upon a girl for its association with the idea of "uncleanliness". In order to assert her right to an independent existence, she longs to escape from the burden and responsibilities of womanhood. She does not believe in mothering. Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman but Indu plays the role of an ideal housewife but it restricts her self-development. She is even denied the scope of giving free play to her artistic potential. Thus, marriage leads her to aimless days, infinitely repeated life that slips away gently towards death, without questioning its purpose. Shashi Deshpande is not only conscious of the problems and dilemmas of women but also tries to suggest a



solution. Only a woman can break the age old traditions and beliefs binding her feet with fetters. Indu ultimately decides to do what she wants to. She decides to resign from her job and do the kind of writing she had dreamt of doing.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* is purely autobiographical. The protagonist Ammu in the novel resembles Arundhati Roy's mother Mrs. Mary Roy. The story of this novel resembles Arundhati Roy's personal life in many ways. The narrative of the novel unfolds itself through the impressions garnered by the seven year old child Rahel, one of the twins of Ammu, the central character. Baby Kochamma, at an age of eighty plus wanted to capture her past which wasn't having anything but young age. During her hey days she tried everything to seduce, to tempt her lover Father Mulligan. She joined nunnery when her all ensnaring efforts enslave the father failed miserably. Again her family could see through her plans, so they withdrew her and she was left desperate forever. Then it was her father who, realized that his daughter had by now developed a 'reputation' and was unlikely to find a husband. He decided that since she couldn't have a husband. He decided that since she couldn't have a husband there was no harm in her having an education. And she was sent to the U.S. for studying Ornamental Gardening. Roy doesn't miss the chance to pass thus a satirical remark on the patriarchal notion of making marriage the utmost priority of a woman and the last one perhaps her education. Her physical separation from father Mulligan actually aggravated her love and then her growing frustration and depression. Ammu became an emblem of a victim of the male dominated patriarchal structure. Her frustration and disgust for her husband reached at the summit when he offered his wife, she herself to his boss, Mr. Hollick as a sort by bargain when he was suspended for alcoholism. She straightaway refused to the part of that deal. Ammu left her husband and returned, to her parents in Ayemenem. Baby Kochamma reflected the suppressive woman's acceptance of the fate of the female that a married daughter had no chance to come back home and as for a divorced daughter. Baby Kochamma believed, has no position anywhere at all. Ammu had been humiliated by her father, beaten and betrayed by her husband, insulted by the police and rendered destitute by her brother. Each of them jointly echoed the male chauvinism and patriarchal structure which left her nowhere as daughter, wife, sister and citizen. The women like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma succumb to the circumstances circumscribed to them by the patriarchal pattern of the society. It is the intermediate generation of females like Ammu and Margaret Kochamma who dares to defy the norms imposed upon them and loves and mates outside the bounds of race and class. Quite expectedly both of them, and in particular, Ammu, pay a heavy price for their non conformity and opposes. The present generation of women is embodied in Rahel. She passes her entire life as a Rebel and a defiant being. The novelist makes it clear that Rahel is not at all good as per the conventions go. She commits even incest-a violation which is a sin even in the twentieth century and twenty first century.

**SELLAKUMAR. S.**

6P a g e



Most women writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Raji Narasimhan and others seldom portray the psychic tensions and anxieties of woman, in a traditional society. Desai explores these troubled realities and presents them in accordance to the present day's understanding. In Jhabvala's novels the precedence is on the social background of the central character. In Sahgal the focus is on the social life of the upper class aristocrats, while in Markandaya, the political, social and cultural background is depicted. Desai shifts the focus from the external to the internal. Jhabvala's first-four novels are set in Delhi, focusing in turn on the Indian arranged marriage (*To whom She Will*), corruption in Indian public life (*The Nature of Passion*), an Englishman stranded in India (*Esmond in India*) and the growth of love within an arranged marriage (*The Householder*). After 1960, Jhabvala's fiction becomes grimmer in tone. *Get Ready for Battle* condemns dishonesty, hypocrisy and exploitation of the poor, *A Backward Place* lashes self-serving western expatriates and Indian urbanites. The novel *Heat and Dust* shows the impact of India on the European consciousness, as it presents the experiences of two different generations unfolded mainly through the parallel love stories of two English women. The novelist tries to mingle the past with the present very tactfully. She arranges the narration very carefully so that the two stories are unfolded simultaneously. In fact, the various sections are so organized that the parallel events are mostly shown side by side. The narrator, a young unnamed English woman comes to India to reconstruct the story of her grandfather's first wife Olivia, who had an affair with the Nawab of Khatm. While reconstructing the story of Olivia by actually visiting the places where she lived, the narrator also records her own life in the diary. In this way it is the story of Olivia alternating with that of the narrator. Here, the narrator makes the use of Olivia's personal letters to her sister, Marcia as a venture of her research. The past narrates how Olivia and her husband come to India, how she falls in love and elopes with the Nawab. The affair results in Olivia's pregnancy and subsequent abortion. Olivia has to run away from the hospital to the Nawab's palace where she is given a cottage and then she lives as the mistress of the Nawab. The present records the narrator's liaison with Child, an Englishman turned into Hindu. The narrator has sexual relations with Inder Lal who is her guide. The narrator too becomes pregnant, however, unlike Olivia she does not go for an abortion. In the hope of having the baby she joins an ashram and suffers quietly. The central theme in the novel is the inter-racial union of sexual passion between the Nawab with Olivia and the narrator with Inder Lal. In this way, the novel shows the effect of India on the European consciousness, as it presents the experiences of two different generations unfolded mainly through the parallel love stories of two English women. In the novel, two western ladies fall in love and go for sex. Olivia becomes untruthful, disgraceful, inattentive, numb and unfeminine because of her fall from sexual purity, while the narrator's desire to become a mother outside marriage is also unacceptable and this type of illegal child is not welcomed by society. The novel presents the parallel love story of the Nawab with Olivia and the narrator

SELLAKUMAR. S.

7P a g e



with Inder Lal. Moreover with the love story, the novelist also highlights India -its poverty, beauty and its heat and dust.

A study of the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Nayantara Saghla, and Shashi Deshpande reveals that the portrayal of human relationships- husband wife, parent-children, is a dominant concern of these novelists. While in most of Kamala Markandaya's novels, the husband-wife bond is harmonious and fulfilling in Anita Desai's novels, the relationship is sour and disgusting. In Desai's novels, over pampering or rejection in childhood creates psychological blocks in the way to maturity and healthy inter-personal relationship in adult life. In most of Markandaya's novels, the women, being submissive, adjust to the prevailing situations and are happy with the little they get from marital life. But Desai's protagonists turn the whole face of romance upside down. In fact, Shobha De's woman is the spokes person of the new Indian woman who shares the vision of many women like herself and that of her created. It is interesting to observe that the woman in Shobha De's works holds all the trump cards up her sleeve. She can ultimately outplay all her male counterparts with a strategy that looks beyond the male comprehension as it is subtle and manipulative a trick. The man- woman relationship in her novels is quite different from the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai. The protagonists in her novels are the victims of the male dominated society. The study attempted in this dissertation brings out various features of the novels of the women novelists in India. Basically, they are Indian women writers with Indian sensibility who present the social conditions of their times in their respective novels. They have feminist concerns and deal with man-woman relationship in different ways in their respective novels. Their novels have multiple points of view and they are great story tellers and adopt different narrative techniques. Their contribution is remarkable and they have created new wave of thought in Indian writing in English. It is hoped that this study will provoke further discussion and bring out new thoughts and features of these women writers writing in English.

## REFERENCES

1. Agarwal,R.G, *The Art and Achievement of Jhabvala, Recent Commonwealth Literature*, ed. R.K.Dhawan et.al. New Delhi: Prestige, 1989
2. Amin, Amina, *Imagery as a Mode of Apprehension in Anita Desai's Novels*, Litterit Vol. 1, X, No.1June, 1984.
3. Asnani, Shyam M, *East and West Encounter in; Kamala Markandaya's Later Novels Triveni*,\_Vol. 48, No.4, Jan-March 1980
4. Bala,Suman, *The Fiction of Anita Desai: D.K.Pabby*, ed. Vol New Delhi:Khosla Publishing House, 2002.

SELLAKUMAR. S.

8P a g e





5. Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Second Sex*, Transl. H. M. Parshley, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987
6. Belliappa, Meena, Anita Desai: *A Study of her Fiction*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971.
7. Belsey, Catherine and Moore, Jane, *The Feminist Reader* London: Macmillan 1997.
8. Bhatnagar, M.K., ed, *Commonwealth English Literature*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1999.