



WOMEN NOVELISTS IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Woman has been the focal point of the writers of all ages. On one hand, he glorifies and deifies woman, and on the other hand, he crushes her with an iron hand by presenting her in the image of Sita, the epitome of suffering. In the wake of the changes that have taken place in the society in the post-independence period, many novelists emerged on the scene projecting the multi-faceted aspects of woman. The voice of new Indian woman is heard from 1970s with the emergence of Indian English women novelists like Nayantara Sehgal, Anitha Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Mehta, Bharathi Mukherjee, and Jhumpha Lahiri.. These Feminist writers tried to stamp their authority in a male dominated environment as best as it is possible to them. This paper focuses on the way these women writers present the voice of the Indian woman who was hitherto suppressed by the patriarchal authority.

Key words: *suppression, identity, individuality, resistance, assertion.*

INTRODUCTION

Indian writers have contributed much for the overall development of world literature with their powerful literary expression and immense depth in characterization. In providing global recognition to Indian writing in English, the novel plays a significant role as they portray the multi-faceted problems of Indian life and the reactions of common men and women in the society. As the novelists have a special way of seeing and showing the vital cultural and social aspects of life, their presentation of the position of women in India may be considered as an index to the quality of its culture and character of its civilization.

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the image of Sita, the epitome of suffering. He finds delight in providing the models based on mythology and legends. Even their very names Sita, Savithri, Gauri, Lakshmi, Parvathi, Meera are suggestive of their epic and mythic parallels and they are not allowed to act otherwise. This impact of myth has tuned the writer's mind in such a way that he is able to create only stereotypical characters. They are ideals rather than facts, shadows rather than actual living beings of flesh and blood. They do not question their subjugated state but remain as models of virtue. Society speaks in them but they are not allowed to speak for themselves. Their mythological pomp and superlative politeness make them more like goddesses without power rather than real women with their strengths and weaknesses.

In the wake of the changes that have taken place in the society in the post-independence period, many novelists emerged on the scene projecting the multi-faceted aspects of woman but here too, they confined themselves to projecting woman as a docile girl, devoted wife and doting mother. In projecting this image, they were no different from their predecessors. After careful observation of the way a woman is treated in the literature written by men, the new woman understood the fact that the male writers failed miserably in presenting a judicious view of the problems and conflicts faced by women. This paved way for the women writers to come to the front with their raised voice and give expression to the diversified experiences of women. These novels written by women are radical in the sense that they explore not simply the suppressed state of woman but her struggle for existence in the male-dominated society fighting against all odds. They have succeeded in creating the new woman who is daring enough to break the traditional norms with her gritty strength and inner potentiality.

Through the centuries, the Indian woman in literature has been based on the mythical models from the epics and the puranas – Sita, the never-questioning silent sufferer and an epitome of virtue; Savithri, the *pativratha*, who fights with Yama for the life of her dead husband; Sumathi, the epitome of the ever-suffering chaste woman who carries her crippled husband on her shoulders to his concubine's house. These ideal women of Indian mythology who have been extolled as paragons of virtue are dutiful, truthful, chaste, self-sacrificing women of unswerving wifely devotion, whatever be the temptation. The legends associated with them consistently refer to their purity and selfless attachment to their consorts. The woman in India is brought up on the lives of these mythological characters; hence she often remains passive accepting the dynamic role of man in her life. Maithreyi Krishnaraj and Neera Desai attribute the present deplorable position of women in India to the portrayal of ever-sacrificing women in the puranas:

The Indian society like a number of 'classical' societies was patriarchal. Patriarchal values regulating sexuality, reproduction and social production (meaning total conditions of production) prevailed and were expressed



through specific cultural metaphors. Overt rules prohibiting women from specific activities and denying certain rights did exist. But more subtle expression of patriarchy was through symbolism giving messages of inferiority of women through legends highlighting the self-sacrificing, self-effacing pure image of woman and through the ritual practices which day in and day out emphasized the dominant role of a woman as a faithful wife and a devout mother (1990: 26).

Taught from the beginning to follow the footprints of the women in the Puranas, the Indian woman has learnt to play the role man wanted her to play, that is, to be subservient on all occasions. She suffered mutely when as a child, she was sold off to strangers for a bridal price; she never ever thought of lifting her head when she supplied dowry to her husband's family; she never raised her voice even when she was forced to immolate herself on the pyre of her dead husband. Though her condition has changed considerably in the age of modernity, still as Indu Prakash Singh points out, "the air of freedom which touches the women is like the kite though flying, yet, being stringed into the manipulative and maneuvering hands of their men" (1991:8)

Almost all the writers of all Indian languages have presented this image of ever-suffering woman from the Vedic period itself. Especially the male writers have portrayed the non-significant role a woman is destined to play in the patriarchal society. They followed the same pattern in presenting women as suffering mothers, wives, daughters and daughters-in-law. They never thought of presenting a woman of autonomous nature in their writings. In this context, one has to remember Albert Camus' observation that the Hindus are incapable of rebellion (1961: 105). He argues that since the Indian mind is preoccupied with the myths, all things are foreordained and held sacred. The problem of rebellion does not arise, as there are only answers and commentaries but not questions. Though one may not entirely agree with the views of Albert Camus, still the social and political scenario in India makes one believe that his opinion cannot be wiped out as far as a woman is concerned. She is always presented by the writers as the victimized being who is incapable of any sort of rebellion. But at the same time, there is discontent among the writers for their portrayal of the ever-suffering woman for ages. As they are aware of the effect of literature on the psyche of the readers, some writers have started to present the dual nature of women – kind and compassionate on one hand, powerful and malevolent on the other – so as to motivate the woman to find her place in the society.

Women in all societies have been relegated to the position of the 'other', the 'marginalized' and the 'colonized'. They are forced to pursue guerilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply embedded in, yet fundamentally they are alienated from those imperial



forces. This resistance itself complicates the position of the women, as the usage of the word 'other' in postmodern debate refers to the erstwhile marginalized slave or the oppressed being under a patriarchal system in colonized societies. Women remain the tools or 'the colonies of pleasure' in the hands of men till they muster courage to carry out a fierce collective battle against sexual oppression and exploitation. They share with colonized races and people an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors.

The voice of new Indian woman is heard from 1970s with the emergence of Indian English women novelists like Nayantara Sehgal, Anitha Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Mehta, Bharathi Mukherjee, and Jhumpha Lahiri.. They have made a distinct mark on the world literary scene with their rich cultural heritage and skilled language. They have received national and international recognition, fabulous royalties and prestigious awards. Sehgal herself once told in an interview in 1982: "I think we (women writers) are in a position to conquer English literature," (Ibid, 1989:552) and this is what precisely these novelists have tried to do in their own way. Eight women novelists won the Sahitya Akademi Award – the greatest literary honour for writers. Anita Desai's **Fire on the Mountain**, Rama Mehta's **Inside the Haveli**, Shashi Deshpande's **That Long Silence**, Nayantara Sahgal's **Rich Like Us**, Sunetra Gupta's **Memories of Rain**, Rupa Bajwa's **The Sari Shop**, Malathi Rao's **Disorderly Woman**, Esther David's **The Book of Rachel** have brought to the front the power of women writers. On par with great Indian male novelists, the contribution of women novelists is immensely significant. Their first novels are quiet effective in revealing the true state of Indian Society when it comes to the treatment of women. Their work is marked by an impressive feel for language and completely authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. They generally wrote about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know the best. Most of these writers are expatriates and though they have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India, they succeeded in recreating it through the lens of nostalgia. Their best works deal with Indian immigrants, the section of society they know at first hand. Sunithi Nam Joshi, Chitra Banerji Divakaruni, Jhumpha Lahiri, Manju Kapoor, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Gita Hariharan have written novels of Magic Realism, Social Realism and Regional fiction that this fiction has received national and international awards. They have probed deeper into human relationships which are closely concerned with mind and heart and their crusade is against age-old established systems.

Kamala Markandaya's fiction concerns with the struggles of contemporary Indian society juxtaposing eastern and western values. In her works, western values are typically viewed as modern and materialistic and Indian values as traditional and spiritual. She presented her women as ever suffering and exploited on all planes. The Indian peasants suffering, conflict



of values, the suffering of peasant as well as educated women in this male dominated society are her themes. Her strength lies in the delicate analysis of the relationships of persons, particularly when they are conscious of their problems. She has a gift in particular for delineating the self-imposed lacerations of the dissatisfied. Ruth Prawar Jhabwala is well known for her witty and insightful portrayals of contemporary Indian lives. Her first two novels won critical acclaim for their comic depiction of Indian society and manners. Her position as both insider and a detached observer allowed her a unique perspective when describing Indian family life, India's struggle to adapt to a new social mobility and the clash between the eastern and western ideals.

Anita Desai is undoubtedly one of the major Indian English writers whose reputation was established on her portraits of domestic disharmony in traditional Indian families and the suffering of women in a largely patriarchal world. She discusses in her works the problems of disharmony and alienation in marriage, the extent of patriarchal domination on women, the limitation of opportunities which damage women physically and psychologically with irreparable loss. She even focuses on the difficulties faced by women who attempt to assert their individuality within the family framework. Her later novels demonstrate that she writes equally well about the world of men, about Indians abroad and about westerners in India. Above all, she demonstrates again and again how gender issues are central to politics and nation as well as in the family.

Bharati Mukherjee as a diaspora writer covers many moods of expatriation – nostalgia, frustration, uncertainty and despondency. Her themes revolve round expatriation, immigration and transformation. In almost all her novels the woman protagonist finds herself by analyzing her novels we can understand how a first generation of immigrant suffers in an alien country. The expatriate and the immigrant are important figures in Mukherjee's writings because she uses them to integrate and interrogate spatial location and dislocation.

Anita Nair is a bold and straightforward writer. Anita Nair refuses to be labelled as a feminist writer. She makes an attempt to show the quality of strength in a woman. She traces the real position of women in the families as well as in the society. Her attempt to exhibit the plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions of her women's characters is remarkable. Her primary focus of attention is the world of women, the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. Her novels reveal the effect of social conditioning on women. They break the chains of social norms and do not confine themselves to the boundaries which limit women. She forces us to think of the importance of curbing adultery to save family life. The female characters in Anita Nair's novels come from different religions, reflecting thus the diversity of Indian culture, which would be difficult to generalize. Anita Nair is a contemporary Indo-English novelist who has presented the plight of Indian woman. She has



taken up issues of gender discrimination and social conditioning of women, husband-wife relationship and the suppression of women and sexual exploitation of women within and outside the marital frame. Marriage is set as an ultimate goal for girls, women have to mould and transform themselves to suit the interest of the male counterparts and suppress their self-identity.

Shashi Deshpande who is labeled as feminist novelist succeeded in depicting the plight and sufferings of a successful educated woman. She has written eight novels, six collections of short stories, and four children's books. Her popular novel **The Dark Holds No Terror** (1980) portrays the life of a woman who marries a doctor and becomes the victim of brutalization. It is a story of courage and perseverance that she developed from within herself to break loose of society's traditional norms to gain her individuality and freedom. She has achieved tremendous amount of popularity through her writings. She depicts the Indian middle class mentality in all her novels. Her protagonist emerges from cultural rootedness in middle class Indian society. Deshpande generally has the heroine as the narrator and employs a kind of stream - of - consciousness technique. Almost all her novels deal with a crisis in the heroines' life.

Manju Kapoor with her **Difficult Daughters** (1998), presents the story of a suffering woman set against the backdrop of partition which brought the writer instant fame and success. Both Manju Kapur and Jhumpa Lahiri have mostly common themes in their writings with the institution of marriage being one of them with various shades of relationship get projected, evaluated and experienced. There are some characters who marry because of social pressure, there are some that feel suffocated within the bounds of marriage and eventually break free from it and there are some characters who adjust somehow to make their relationship work. In presenting these types of characters, the writers tried to explain and explore the sensitivity of human hearts. The theme of suppression and resistance is found in their writings.

Arundhati Roy is the luminary among the contemporary women writers. She is one of the women writers who wrote about the plight of the downtrodden and the suppression of women in a male dominated society and the influence of Marxism on the lives of the downtrodden. When women writers maintained their reservations in offering a critical evaluation of Indian politics, Arundhati Roy emerged as a beacon of light to guide the Indian women writers. She received overwhelming response for her one and only novel **The God of Small Things** (1997), which has put her on the pedestal. It is also a comprehensive protest novel, which describes atrocities against the powerless, children, women and untouchables. Arundhati Roy is the only novelist, who being an activist, is constantly writing about social problems. Her monograph, **The Greater Common Good** (1999) reveals the truth about the Narmada Project. The book also shows her talent as an essayist and social reformer. She is the winner



of Booker Prize as well as the Sidney Peace Prize. These Feminist writers tried to stamp their authority in a male dominated environment as best as it is possible to them.

It was a very difficult path, as the women had to break through years of male dominance, taboos and beliefs that had heavily impregnated the society. In addition, critics argued that colonialism operated very differently for women and for men. This was so because women were subjected to double colonization - first colonized by the Britishers then colonized by their male counterparts. It is from these perceptions one should view the contribution of women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Mehta, Gita Hariharan, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy and a plethora of other women writers emerging in this century. Undoubtedly, it is understood that they have done a great job in exposing the fallacies of the male-dominated society and letting the public aware of the various atrocities heaped upon women who dared to cross the various rigid boundaries that were laid upon them by the society.

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Note:-

- 1) Most of the material is taken from the author's unpublished Ph. D Thesis on "Women in the fiction of Bhabani Bhattacharya – A postcolonial Perspective.
- 2) Some material is collected from various sites on the internet.