



WOMEN IN THE EYES OF INDIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS IN ENGLISH- A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Abstract: *The nineteen nineties has been the most significant decade for the Indian novels in English as it brought about a number of important changes in literary discourses. From time to time, various scholars and eminent critics of evaluate and interpret the major works of the major writers of this decade such as Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhanthi Roy, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur and many other significant names. However, it is clear that Indian feminist movement was meticulously carved by the Indian women novelists as they were highly conscious of the women's liberation movement. By and large they have portrayed women and their stories with consciousness of the injustice being meted out to women by society. These novels have a feminist undercurrent, having woman as the central character. These women mostly rebel against the existing social set up and discard the idea of being submissive, suffering and sacrificing. The present paper aims to depict the different representations of women that Indian-English women novelists have depicted in their novels. In India, the concept of independence, the pursuit of character, protest and the spirit of resistance have always remained alien concepts when they have been used for women. However, these Indian women novelists innately understood the worries and presented women as someone who fights against the cover-up and abuse of a male-dominated society. The novels of these women novelists express cruelty, pain, and hopelessness they experienced themselves living in a patriarchal culture. Thus, it can be said that their work has shaped the experience of women in Indian English fiction and beyond.*

Keywords: Indian women writers, Indian Literature, Indian English Novels, contemporary India.

INTRODUCTION

In a developing country like India, it has always remained a painful fact that from time immemorial, women have always been treated as the second citizens of this country. They have always been back seated or side lined by their male counterparts, thanks to the concept of the patriarchal society which has been prevalent right from so many decades. The same scenario has been reflected in the literature, irrespective of languages. In yester years, the works of Indian women writers had always been under-valued as they were never taken seriously not only by the male writers but also by the society, in general. There were a number of reasons behind this unfair discrimination. However, one of the prominent factors contributing to this prejudice was the fact that women writers not only dared to expose the hypocrisy of male dominated values of the Indian society but they also depicted the hidden domestic space that was unfortunately brimming with unfair injustice being done to women by her own family members. *For the first time, in all these years, the women were given the prominence along with their perceptions of their experience within it*¹. Thus, it was assumed that this theme was comparatively lighter and of no value comparing to the 'heavier' themes dealt by the male novelists. Also, the plight of a docile housewife and her frustrations did not attract the attention of the elite class and the social workers as compared to the oppressed lives of the women of lower class and their exploitation depicted by the progressive writers who were writing in regional languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu and other native languages.

However irrespective of the fact that along with the relevance of the questions of gender *whether they are traditionally feminine or feminist in nature, they are relevant everywhere*². As a result of their marginalization, we find more women writers rebelling against the male literary canon. From time to time, poems, stories, and novels written by women in English became common but controversial.

Women have a crucial role in society. Without women's equal involvement in family and society, no country can even imagine to progress. Although women's roles have changed along with times and changing cultures, one constant is that they have never been seen as fully equal to men. The very fact that she gives birth to another life should make her the most vital member of the family and the society but unfortunately, even today, women have been struggling for recognition in this conservative culture. As one proverb puts it, "a man's existence without a woman is like a flower without scent, a ship without a rudder, or a body without energy." *Women are*

constantly depicted in Indian classical literature only in connection to men. Marriage is valued more highly even than the blood relationships and a good wife has to be a decent and respectful woman who should be pure and most importantly virgin like Sita or Savitri and devoted to her husband³.

The vast body of literature written in English and set in India adequately deals with feminism. Cultural, economic, and political groups that seek to guarantee women's legal rights and full equality are all considered examples of feminism. The female writers in India have indeed made a genuine effort to assess the current social climate but those efforts were marginal. Several Indian writers have written works depicting the discrimination and inequality faced by women in Indian society. Many books written in English about India accurately portray the lives of a typical women in an Indian household. *As per Indian society, women should rely on their fathers as children, their husbands as young adults, their children as adults, and their son or daughter-in-law as retirees. No woman should ever try to achieve independence if she has no sons or the close kinsmen of her spouse; if she has no kinsmen remaining among her father's relatives; or if she has no paternal kinsman among the sovereign*⁴.

INTRODUCTIN OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

The arrival of English happened with the introduction of English language teaching in India in the late 19th century. There was an imperial mission of education colonial subjects in the literature and the belief of English, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen western cultural hegemony. Thomas Babington Macaulay's Education Minute of 1835 is regarded as one of the crucial documents in the history. The arguments of Macaulay were based on an assumption of the innate superiority of English culture which were reflected by a key sentence in his Minute :

[we] must at present do our best to form a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English, in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect⁵.

The establishment of colleges of English medium in this country resulted into the creation of an English language educated elite Hindu scholar who eventually became critical of his traditional cultural, religious and orthodox beliefs along with the age-old customs and social evils such as the caste system, child marriages and ultimately, British rule. The English education also helped the Indian writers to connect with the literary traditions of the West and enabled them to reach the readers of the western countries as well as India. *This was also the century in which reformers of India, both progressive and orthodox, came together to support women of this country and raised their voices against suppression*⁶. They firmly believed that the humiliation of Indian women could only be controlled with the help of education. However, the concept of education was then restricted to producing good homemakers and perpetuating orthodox ideology. Women were expected to support the traditional values of the society. In the mid nineteenth century, in states like Bengal, Christian missionaries joined hands with British government to start the schools for girls. Incidentally, these were also the states where British had built their first inroads. As a result, somewhere in 1880s (approximately), the Indian women started getting graduates from those universities. However, this was the case of only privileged few who could afford the education and who were dwelling in larger towns and cities. The majority of the females still were devoid of primary education.

Here, it must be noted that many scholars and critics see the use of the English language in this country as one of the many other post-colonial mimic activities, resulting from the imposition of the English language as a part of British colonial intervention in Indian education, language, culture and most importantly, literature. While, some look at the hegemony of English language and literature as a trend of continuing cultural imperialism. *Some critics debate that the widespread use, reputation and expansion of English in India in recent times, attribute to the post-war hegemony of the United States rather than to the British Empire*⁷. According to them, this was the major reason of the growing global importance of English as a medium of communication. However, according to Shashi Deshpande, a prominent women novelist of India, *English language can alienate a text from its culture of origin*⁸. The argument of Deshpande is based on the notion that English language is somewhat harmful to Indian culture not because it is the language of colonizers but due to the fact that it has always remained the language of the privileged few. In this regard, Deshpande has a valid point to make. She says that *she is well aware of the fact that whenever she writes, she always has the prior knowledge that her works will be confined to mere English-speaking readers or at the most to those people who have optimum knowledge of the language. But at the same time, she feels motivated by these same people as she feels that being elite, they will be able to understand her thoughts more aptly and will be able to appreciate her works*⁹. This argument of Deshpande explains why the Indian writers in English has remained a failure in depiction of social evils and therefore their efforts in eradicating them has always remained a distant dream. The basic reason behind this lacuna is the fact that since, most of the people of this country fail to understand the language including the women who are the main victims, any effort on the part of these writers will always remain futile.

A CURSORY GLAANCE TO INDIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH WRITTEN BY WOMEN WRITERS

It is a well-known fact that novel as a genre, entered quite late in to this country. Thus, before the beginning of the novel, many women writers wrote short stories in different languages such as Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada. Women have always been the harbingers of the rich oral tradition of story telling through myths, legends, songs and fables. Once, education started flowing in India, the same stories got transformed into poetry and drama. The novels didn't catch the attention of the women for a long time as women were less educated than man so it was natural that they found it difficult to write a long prose. It was in the late nineteenth century that novel as a genre came to India when the elite Bengali literary scholars brought it to this country.

As mentioned earlier, in comparison with the regional literature, Indian literature in English has always been very confined and has been written in a short period of time. However, in the last few decades, there has been a dramatic flourishing of women novelists in English in this country, whose works not only got acknowledged in this country but globally as well. It must be noted that most of these women novelists are modern, educated and belong to the higher class. Thus, it is imperative that *their writings concentrate on the discontentment of the upper caste and class traditional Hindu woman who is trapped in repressive institutions of marriage where they are exposed to domestic violence, gender discrimination, dowry, enforced widowhood, arranged marriages, prohibition on women education and discrimination at every level*¹¹.

Several Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity so as to establish an identity that is not imposed by patriarchal society. Hence the theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood i.e. the Bildungsroman became the recent strategy. The image of the New Women and her struggles for establishing her identity was becoming the prominent theme of the Indian English novels. However, such kind of struggles requires consistent support not only outside the family but within the family to enable women to survive. *Rich Like Us* written in 1986 by Nayantara Sahgal is a beautiful example of this fact. While earlier novels such as *Inside the Haveli* (1977) by Rama Mehta has a more traditional approach talking about the traditional Indian culture and debating on the importance of female education. Another example of western educated female protagonist's quest for her cultural roots is *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1922) by Githa Hariharan.

A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the last decade of the 20th century, coming up with excellent fiction which depicted the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. Since, all these women novelists were born post- independence, command over English language did not have colonial associations with them. Their work was further marked by the impressive usage of language along with an authentic presentation of contemporary Indian society, with all its regional and cultural variations. These novelists predominantly wrote about the urban middle class, the stratum of society, they knew the best. *Awareness on the writer's part of the individual needs of women like self-fulfilment and identity formation have resulted in these novels in patterns of alienation, communication gap, broken relationships and identity crises. Women in the of Nayantara Sahgal are liberal and unconventional. Saroj in "Storm in Chandigarh" refuses to succumb to socially acceptable norms of feminine behaviour. Ruth Jhabvala as a major woman novelist is less concerned with the personality development of her women; she is attracted by the double standards of Indian women in general. She can be said to have dealt with distortion of modernity and women's liberation. Shashi Deshpande is one novelist who is raising like a star feminist among women novelists of India. Her women are educated, self-conscious and sensitive. Their revolt against the rigid social and family set up comes out of necessity*¹². A number of women writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakurni used marginal realism in their novels. While writers like Suniti Namjoshi stood apart for her depiction of fantasy and surrealism. Another compelling theme is the depiction of Indian dystopia of 21st century which got depicted in the form of a chilling picture in *Idol Love* (1999) written by Anudha Marwah Roy. Along with these themes, many novels also dealt with the themes of various facets of college life like *Nampally House* (1991) by Meena Alexander and *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997) by Rani Dharkar. Another emerging theme has been the lives of women during the freedom struggle of the country which was well reflected in *Difficult Daughters* (1998) by Manju Kapur. While novelists like the Booker Prize recipient Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Kamala Das and Susan Viswanathan have been successful in adding the southern state of Kerala in the fictional map while the culture of other regions has been represented by some other women writers.

A very prominent novelist of Indian novels in English, Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, presents the image of a suffering women preoccupied with her inner world, sulking frustration and battling with the storm within the existential predicament of a women in a male dominated society. Through the depiction of characters like Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda, Anita Desai makes a plea for a better way of life for women. Her novels have been essentially Indian females as her central characters. She alternates between female-centred and male- centred narratives which makes her works more fascinating for her readers. After her moving to the USA, her later novels reveal all the characteristics of a diasporic fiction which has been a concern with the fate of immigrants and the growing distance from the reality of India which is viewed differently by the other countries.

Here, it must be mentioned that in way back in 1894, Kamala by Krupabai Satthinadhan explored the cultural clash experienced by a typical Hindu woman who was given a western education in India thus making her elite and getting her caught between two cultures. Since then, the conflict between two cultures remained one of the prominent themes of the Indian women novelists. There have been many such female novelists who are based in other parts of the world such as the USA, Canada, Britain and other western countries. In these novelists, some are recent immigrants while some are second generation immigrants like Jhumpa Lahiri. *These women novelists concentrated on writing about their own experiences and cross-cultural contexts – states of 'in-betweenness'*¹³. Expatriate representation has been always questions on several counts. Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions of modern India, thus, they tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia, in which they concentrate their attention more on their 'imaginary homelands'. Distancing lends objectivity but it also leads to the ossification of cultural constructs and even if memory is sharp, the expatriate is not directly in contact with the reality of India.

The East and West confrontation and the clash between traditions along with modernism has always remained as the main impulse behind the works of acclaimed immigrant novelists such as Meera Syal, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Uma Parmeswaran, Anjana Appachana and Kiran Desai. The theme of migration that leads to self-discovery with a negation of the traditions of the country of origin, has been a recurrent theme among migrant writers such as Bharti Kirchner in her novel *Shiva Dancing* written in 1998, Ammena Meer, in her novel *Bombay Talkie* in 1984 and Bharati Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine* in 1989.

CONCLUSION

"Rebellion is no easy process. It demands determination and a will to stand by the cause of rebellion at any cost"¹⁴. The Hindu moral code known as The Laws of Manu has denied woman as a separate identity apart from that of her husband or his family. This notion was further highlighted in the works of a number of novelists in India who started writing after the first novel Rajmohan's Wife written in 1864 by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee which was written on the same theme. Women were always portrayed merely as suppressed, docile and suffering wives, mothers, daughters and sisters in the hands of their own male family members. They were always silenced by the patriarchal system of India making them the worst victims of the adverse situations and a number of unfair practices. The ideals of the traditional oppressed women were never new in this country. *The concept of suffering females originated by the religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands to the extent of sacrificing their lives for the sake of their male counterparts. In this regard, Sita and Savitri always remained as the most ideal symbols of a typical Indian woman. In mythical terms, the dominant feminine prototype is the chaste, patient, self-denying wife, Sita was well supported by other equally docile characters like Savitri and Gandhari and even Draupadi*¹⁵. In the case of these great women, silence has always been a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition while speech symbolises self-expression and liberation. That is the reason, Draupadi doesn't typically come in the image of an ideal woman as she dared to voice her protest against her husbands and her in-laws for the injustice done to her.

However, along with time, the image of women in fiction underwent a radical change during the last five decades. Women novelists dared to move away from the traditional portrayals of self – enduring and self-sacrificing women towards the conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterised and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to the earlier works, female characters of the present century assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. In the contemporary literary scene, no Monisha commits suicide as in *Voice in the City* by Anita Desai rather she daringly takes the initiative to opt out of a problematic relationship for her self-respect like Shrimati Deshpande of *Gently...* Falls Bakula by Sudha Moorthy. The depiction of these women writers show how the advanced-age Indian woman is caught between tradition and innovation as she deepens her life and identity in her own unique manner. Needless to say, these women novelists challenged the long-held masculine perspective and have left an indelible impact on Indian English fiction. Recent novelists depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman rather than restricting their lives into one stereotype ideals. The literature emerging in the present century furnishes examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organisation. They also re-interpret mythology and present it in an entirely new shape using new symbols and subverting the canonical versions. Thus, it can be said the novels of women writers indeed have proved to be a turning point in making the Indian society not only aware of the existence of women but also their demands thus providing them a medium for their self-expression and re-writing the history of this country from a better perspective.

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