

Disrupting Traditional Patriarchy: Marginalized Women in Postcolonial Indian Fiction in English.

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ABSTRACT

One of the major developments in the Modern Indian Fiction is the rise of self-awareness among women writers that seeks to project and interpret experience from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Until 1960s and 1970s male Indian writers dominated Indian writing in English, except a few fairly distinctive women voices heard. It's true that the women writers are the products of post-colonialism, of independence but concerned more with personal matters of identity rather than the concept of patriotism or national/regional politics. The present paper studies selective fictional works of modern Indian writers, especially women writers in English and draw attention to the growing consciousness of women writers and their fictional characters emphasising the issues concerning women and their cause. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change in the postcolonial era or during the last four or five decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring and self-sacrificing women in the patriarchal society and female characters moving towards searching for self-identity. However, disrupting traditional patriarchal values, the modern or postcolonial fictional women characters seem more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression.

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Key Words: post-colonial, modern, shatter, patriarchy, awareness, consciousness, feminist.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of English education during pre-independence era heralded the origin of Indian Fiction in English. It is firmly rooted in Indian cultural background which makes it essentially different from English literature. It is unfortunate that division of labour in the early history gave way to an unjust and unequal social system representing the dominance of men over women and thereby occupying relatively advantageous position in the economic, political and social fields of society, besides manifesting prejudiced attitudes that promote negative evaluation of the other sex. These notions continued in society through institutions such as family, education, and media and become integral part of the process of socialisation, resulting in women not only becoming the victims of the oppression but also the architects of their own subjugation.

According to post-colonial notions Indian women are in the unique position of having been “doubly colonised”, in the sense that they have twice been forced into the role as “the Other”, first as the colonised, and then as women. Having been 'doubly Othered', Indian women writers, especially modern Indian women fiction writers began to acquire self consciousness, an awareness to protect their identity through adopting the strategies of subversion, deconstruction, and reconstruction in order to break their silence, retell tales, and recount their point of view. Women writers were acutely aware of the political climate and ongoing political upheavals, especially those brought about as a result of Partition. They reflect all these abrupt and drastic social changes through their writings.

One of the major developments in the Modern Indian Fiction is the rise of self-

awareness among women writers of postcolonial India that seeks to project and interpret experience from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Until 1960s and 1970s male Indian writers dominated Indian writing in English, except a few fairly distinctive women voices heard. Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. Proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intelligent, affluent and educated classes. Writer's works are often therefore, belong to high social strata and cut off from the reality of Indian life. As Chaman Nahal writes about feminism in India: "Both the awareness of women's position in society as one of disadvantage or in generality compared with that of man and also a desire to remove those is advantages" (17). The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. This subject matter is often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women.

In the post-colonial Indian society with the rise of feminist consciousness, many writers like Kamala Markandeya, Anitha Desai in the beginning and in the later stages even more polemical writings by Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Manju Kapur, Arundathi Roy, Kiran Desai etc. that deals with the issues relating to women started gaining ground rapidly. Indian fiction in English heralded a new era.

Today, the works Indian women writers in English have left an indelible imprint on the international readers. The image of women in modern fiction has undergone a change during the last four or five decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring and self-sacrificing women towards female characters searching for identity. However, the current

study highlights the shattering of the shackles of patriarchy by the modern fictional women characters that seem more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression.

Women in Modern Indian Fiction in English:

Anita Desai is indisputably one of the celebrated Indian English fiction writers who has a large number of creative works to her credit. She has been one of the first novelists to produce detailed depictions of the internal workings of the minds of Indian women. Desai's women characters in her novels rebel against patriarchal community in order to explore their own potential or to live on their own terms, regardless of the consequences. However, Desai's women characters expose the need of freedom within the community of men and women, as it is the only way that will succeed in fulfilling them.

Desai's *Cry The Peacock* (1980) was a landmark novel constructed around the real and the imagined fears and horrors of the protagonist Maya. In traditional Indian society the marriage is the ultimate world promising happiness for a traditional woman can prove to be disastrous not only for her but for other members as well. Readers experience how Maya loses her sanity at the detached and apathetic attitude of her husband. The non reciprocation of her steadfast and excessive love for life depicted through her intense emotional responses to the nature around her, she ends up killing her husband and taking away her own life (5). The act has been a major breakthrough in the recognition of her subjectivity and individuality subverting the societal expectations and stereotypes established on her status of 'otherness.'

In her *Fire on the Mountain* (1975), for which she won the Sahitya Academy Award, the author takes a peep into the psyche of her protagonist Nanda Kaul whose muteness at the face of her adulteress husband and the burden of looking

after the great household teaming with children and grand children, finally driven her to search her own values away from the societal obligations as a wife, mother and a grandmother at the family house, Carginano, at Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh. Throughout novel Desai preoccupies with natural surroundings to hold the mirror to dominant and vibrant human emotions. As Maya remarks: "In the evocation of images that transcribed the human conditions and in the poignant fictionalisation of the human predicament, Anitha Desai's skill is comparable" (135-136).

Moreover, Anitha Desai can be considered a model of an emancipated woman. Bimala in the novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is an unmarried woman. Through Bimala, Desai points to a kind of feminist emancipation that lies in not limiting women to their traditional roles but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities. Bimala, through her individual freedom, exemplifies Simon De Beauvoir's description of an independent woman in her book *The Second Sex* where she emphasizes – "... ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumble; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator" (76).

Shashi Deshpande has been another novelist for whom the women occupy the central stage and the narration in her writings projects her feminine consciousness. Human relationship has been her most dominant themes of her novels. Most of her women characters are from educated middle class, bold, more self- reliant and rebellious. She cannot bear the traditional/ mythological, submissive or surrender attitude of womanhood but radical in her vision. More common representations of mother – daughter attachment, glorification of women power of tolerance, remaining silence over her private issues etc disappear from her fiction making room for feministic approach.

Dehpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1999) projects a female protagonist Saru, a doctor by profession; share her mental agony for the sadistic sexual behaviour of her husband Manu, with her father as she comes to meet him after the death of her mother. Manu's unexpected brutish behaviour during the nights that seems to be the projection of his insecurity as a male at the better social and professional status of his wife, has left her bewildered and traumatic. Saru's physical distance from her husband and sharing her grief with her father at her parental home ease down her mental and emotional anxiety, cleanse her vision and help her emerge stronger and more confident to face life back home. P Bhatnagar aptly comments: "Thus Shashi Deshpande makes her heroine choose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory nor of defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposite ideals and conflicting selves. This is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude." (128)

The issue of rape within marriage shattering the old belief of the happy and peaceful marital existence of our older generation crops up in the novel *The Binding Vine* (1993). The novel highlights the theme of helplessness on the part of a woman. Whether she is a mother, daughter, sister or wife, the society always desires that she should be docile, timid and submissive. The novel sketches her middle-class female protagonist predicament in a male-dominated world. The protagonist Urmi in the novel is the central and multi-faceted

character, cleverly used by the Deshpande to represent the sufferings of women of various strata of the society. Urmi, being a lecturer in a college, was united in marriage with Kishore, only to experience desperate situations in life because of her ego. The problem with Urmi is her overflowing ego and confidence she has

secured through financial independence. Her super ego begotten through economic stability made her reluctant to submit herself to her husband. Moreover, she cannot tolerate the submission of Vanaa, her sister-in-law and her mother before their spouses. But she was able to recognise erotic feelings growing within her for she was deprived of true love and finds it hard to control her wishes: "I could put my desire into a deep freeze and take them out, intact and whole when he returned" (65). Here, Deshpande is trying to highlight mere financial security cannot curb the basic needs of a person to be cared within love and faithful relationship.

Even in the novel, *That Long Silence*, for which she won the Sahitya Akadami award, the questioning of the limiting effect of marriage on women is dealt with through the character of Jaya. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, is caught between realisation and restriction. She strives hard to strike a delicate balance between her role as a mother, wife, daughter, and sister through her fragmented, episodic, narration. Jaya ponders over her relationship with Mohan: A sheltered tree. Without the tree you are dangerously unprotected and vulnerable...this too followed, equally logically. But in *sapthagiri* we had a creeper that was watered and manured assiduously; yet it died – of too much water, of white ants in the manure that destroyed its roots. And so...? The truth was that...So many things can be lost, abandoned and misplaced – but the habit of caring is very hard to get rid of. Which was I listened to him so patiently as he talked. (32)

Deshpande usually highlights the issues concerning the middle class Indian women through her feministic consciousness that is particularly Indian in the sense that issues or predicament that arises is placed between contradictory identities. The women characters are with traditional approaches trying to

balance family and profession to maintain the virtues of Indian culture.

Manju Kapur is other notable novelist under the study. In her writings she has emphasised the issues of patriarchy, inter-religious marriage, family bond, male-female bond and coexistence of the present and the past. Her first Novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) received the Common Wealth Award, for presenting the image of suffering women. The novel highlights the saddest plights of human life during post-colonial era, dealing with the theme of destruction. The novel also provides a sad commentary on breakdown of human

values. She has narrated her women protagonists as a victim of biology, gender, domestic violence, and circumstances. Kapur observes: "There is a man within every woman and a woman in every man. When manhood is questioned womanhood is fragmented" (13). Her fiction *A Married Woman*(2002) unfolds a seductive story of love during political and religious commotion narrated with great sympathy and intelligence. The protagonist Astha in order to achieve self dependence proceeds through her own status threatening her husband Hemanth's male superiority. Trapped between the pressures of modern society and shackles of ancient prejudice, she finds comfort in entering lesbian relationship there by canonising and commemorating her insulted feminine sensibility. Manju kapur speaks through Astha: "A woman should be aware of self controlled, strong willed, self reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in deeper psychic sense" (90).

Kamala Markandaya has been another prominent novelist of the modern Indian fiction. is who writes under a pseudonym Purnaiya Taylor. Though her predominant concern is cultural clashes between Indian urban and rural

societies, she also contributed towards woman cause through her writings. Her *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955) projects a strong protagonist Rukmini. As she narrates her story, the readers are involved in her pain. Rukmini and her daughter undergo untold sufferings throughout the novel. Seeing Ira Losing sons and later becoming a prostitute but Rukmini still stands strong. She works hard and is devoted to her gentle husband. Ultimately, Rukmani has faced Poverty, famine, and divorce of her barren daughter, the deaths of her sons, her daughter's prostitution and finally her husband's death.

Kamala's *A Silence of Desire* (1963) deals with the agony of the female protagonist Sarojini who is seen coping with the male hegemony and patriarchal dominance in her domestic sphere. Her husband Dandekar, a clerk in a Govt office has double sets of values for himself and for the women. He considers a wife is an asset and an inevitable support in the household with no personal demands of her own. Sarojini's secret visits to a swami, a faith healer due to a growth in her womb breaks the monotony punctures the conventional image of an Indian family life. Dandekar suspects her of extra marital relation, turns himself a prostitute, ignores his duty and children in order to maintain his masculine super ego. On the contrary Sarojini feels empowered through her interaction with the swami restores her faith and hope towards life. Ultimately, Dandekar realises his mistake and learns to respect the true worth of his wife as a subject.

The problems regarding female sexuality and woman's right etc are repeatedly addressed by Nayanthara Sehgal in her fiction. In traditional Indian society female body is

always associated with the concept of honour. This notion has been used to exercise control over women. With this background Jasbir Jain observes: “Men want to possess not only their present but also their past; thus feeding the ancient myths of the virgin bride and the virtuous wife” (7). In *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) Inder dominantly punishes Saroj when he learns that she had a illegal affair with a man before the marriage. In *A Situation in Delhi* (2008), Devi a widow enters into fulfilling relationships with Michael and Usman Ali outside the formality of marriage. Though these fictional works project woman in binary division between wife and whore, good or bad, they shatter their fixed cultural and gender identities and enter into postmodern diaspora only to learn to cope with different cultures.

There are other famous and renowned novelists the international reading community could recognise like Bharathi Mukerjee, Ismat chugai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Mahashwetadevi etc who have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English, especially they have contributed towards women’s cause through their writings. Due to time and space concern the study restricts itself to the exploration of the above novelists.

III. Conclusion

Globalisation has impacted transformation, otherwise revises and rewrites values in consonance with the changing times of society. Though our country has been adopting itself to the scientific and ideological advancement at global and national levels, it is unfortunate that still a large number of women in India occupy peripheral space in the socio cultural and political arena due to predetermined and prejudiced mind set with the desire to control. In this context awareness created by Ellaine Showalter from western perspective and

subaltern concepts of Gayatri Spivak influenced many of our modern Indian fiction writers in English to create awareness among women through their fiction. They substantially contributed towards women's cause by shattering the stereotypes around women, providing space to realise their potential and render a great service to the humanity and society at large.

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