

Feminist Issues in Indian Women Novels in English

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1. Status of Woman in Postcolonial Indian Fiction

Dr. P. Sanjotha and Dr. M. Soma Raju

Abstract

Women's struggle for equality, justice and liberty is prevalent since ages. The nature of Women's movements has been changing over time and women have been subject to suppression, oppression and implicit as well as explicit forms of discrimination. However, the pre-independence issues were quite different from the post independent ones because of the development of society at different levels. Anitha Desai, the leading author of the twentieth century Indian fiction, holds a vision of feminism that addresses the confrontation of women against patriarchal oppression. In most of her novels, contemporary Indian middle-class women strive to overcome societal limitations imposed by patriarchy. She is unique among other feminists as she emphasizes individual salvation through self-exploration and motivation. The contemporary women writers deal with themes related to women and society or more specifically the man-women relationship in their novels. Arundhati Roy in her novel "The God of Small Things" visualizes the entire cultural scenario emphasizing on isolation, oppression, depression, frustration and amalgamation. This article is an attempt to discover how women suffer silently and look for freedom in the fiction of contemporary feminist writers.

Keywords: Equality, liberty, suppression, oppression, discrimination, feminism, patriarchy, isolation, postcolonial.

Introduction

History witnesses that patriarchal societies in many aspects, suppress women and consider them inferior to men. Despite the fact that women make equal, and occasionally even greater, contributions to the development of the nation, these accomplishments are not recognized. In postcolonial Indian society, woman is regarded as mere 'object' and 'other'. Anita Desai, the leading author of the twentieth century Indian fiction, holds a vision of feminism that addresses the confrontation of women against patriarchal oppression. In most of her novels, middle-class women in contemporary India strive to overcome societal limitations imposed by patriarchy. She emphasizes individual salvation through self-exploration and motivation. Indian female novelists Anita Desai and Manju Kapur represent the anguish and tension faced by contemporary educated women as they battled with the opposing forces of tradition and patriarchy against individuality and independence. They are aware of the dilemma and choose to fight and protest against the traditional and culturally accepted norms and currents. They also have responsibilities and try to fit themselves in the socio-cultural modes of the changed society. In their novels, they represent the modern woman who struggle between tradition and modernity in order to establish their identity and to live an economically independent life.

Anita Desai, in her novel "Clear Light of Day," portrays Indian women as marginalized characters facing challenges and burdens imposed by patriarchal society. They represent colonial subjects whose lives are fractured. The female characters Bim, Tara, their mother and Aunt Mira are dominated by male dominant culture that underestimates female subjectivity. All these women manage their insecure situations and stand up to a society controlled by men. The novel reflects on these women's lives to find how they find different ways to assert their

existence. One way in which these female characters survive is by entering male dominated society and adopting their language and culture. As these women are unable to improve their circumstances, they struggle to establish their own identity using the oppressor's language and culture.

The theme of self-sacrifice of Indian woman is also seen in Desai's "Fire on the Mountain." Nanda Kaul does not even think of leaving her husband as long as he is alive because she got used to his aggressive ways and also to her own submissive ones. Maya in "Cry, the Peacock," however, breaks the good-girl syndrome; her obsession with her father and her pampered life before marriage drives her to an alien world. She kills her husband Gautama and still she does not lose the sympathy of the reader. But Maya commits suicide, showing the novelist's serious concern for the societal do's and don'ts. Her women have an extremely sensitive nature and face a conflict between their parental culture and that of the in-laws, as also between their original protected surroundings and the adopted urban culture.

In Desai's novels, women do not give up the strife, rather indulge in self-analysis, self-discovery and ultimately compromise with the situation to live life stoically becoming assets to the family by developing the power of sustenance. Fact is that some women characters prefer to remain in the world of illusion while many others endeavour to find a way out.

Manju Kapur, in her novels depicts the picture of rebellious women who seek self-discovery, self-respect, self-autonomy and self-govern as they are caught between feudal values and the fast-approaching modern life. They struggle to strike a balance between society and self. Shobha De's protagonists are enterprising, bold, innovative and ready to accept challenges. In her novels like "Sisters," "Strange," "Obsession," "Sultry Days," "Snapshots," "Second Thoughts," she deals with

patriarchy besides economic globalization and subterranean complexity. She is a writer of social consciousness, and her women are vulnerable to exploitation in the context of tradition and culture, which appears very disastrous for the cozy atmosphere of the society.

Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande has written a great deal about middle-class women's issues and the challenges they encounter in their families and in society. Her books are renowned for depicting women's life and their fights against oppression by patriarchy. She has brought attention to gender discrimination and women's oppression in a culture that is bound by traditions through her works. Her literary works, including "That Long Silence," "The Dark Holds No Terrors," "Roots and Shadows," "A Matter of Time," and "The Binding Vine," highlight the predicament of women in a patriarchal society. She explains why she portrays women as having only the ideal of selflessness, endurance, devotion, and quiet suffering. The significance and complexity of Sarita's story are continuously lacking in "The Dark Holds No Terrors". "Roots and Shadows" explores into the inner lives of Indu, Mini, and Akka. Jaya in "That Long Silence" is not a silent sufferer. In "The Binding Vine," Mira says she hates her mother's subservience to her husband. Shashi Deshpande is a reflection of a woman's identity, her status in society, and her psychological development. She concentrates on the misfortune of women and their attempts to prosper in a world that is changing rapidly.

Deshpande has portrayed the anguish of a troubled adolescence as well as the intricacies of man-woman relationships, especially in the setting of marriage, in her novels. She has demonstrated how, in contrast to reality, women are frequently represented as helpless and obedient in the works of art created by male authors. As daughters and then as brides, the female protagonists are victims of the terrible gender discrimination

that is prevalent. They fight against the repressive and unfair social standards and regulations that restrict their capacity and existence as wives because they are aware of the extreme social disparity and injustice that is directed towards them.

Githa Hariharan is a prominent modern female novelist as well. The literary world was shaken by her work "The Thousand Faces of Night." The book promotes the female bond and makes an effort to develop fresh ideas for how women could recreate their identities. The story of Devi's search for her identity is told in the book. Mother-daughter relationships are "deformed" and motherhood is constrained under a patriarchal system. Devi eventually went back to her mother after failing to define herself within the parameters of the male-oriented societal systems, i.e., as an arranged marriage wife or even as a disobedient love. Devi sought to discover her identity through her relationship with her mother. The story of Mayamma, whose motherhood was viewed as unsuccessful by society, and Sita, who personified ideal motherhood, were entwined with the story of Devi, a woman who was becoming on her own terms. Thus, "The Thousand Faces of Night" vividly depicted the dark side of Indian women's life as well as their uniqueness through the lives of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma.

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy accurately captures the condition of Indian women, including their immense anguish, worries, and fears, as well as their submissiveness, persecution, and unjustifiable humiliation in a culture dominated by men. It depicts the women's never-ending battle to find a sense of identity in a world that is completely hostile and jealous. It is possible to distinguish clearly how Mammahi, Ammu, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, and Kochu Maria (the household cook) represent downtrodden Hindu women. Arundhati Roy depicts three distinct generations of women, each of whom responds to the patriarchal society's oppression

in a unique way. Ammu's life reflects the ongoing struggles that women encounter on a daily basis. The novel tells the story of women's struggles against patriarchy, conventional values, and colonial power. Gender stereotypes and gender assumption are two areas where inequality is depicted throughout the novel. Both of those have had a significant impact on Ammu's life. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are unaware of their twisted roles in the home because they have accepted all patriarchal social conventions. In Kerala's traditional and tradition-bound society, they are quiet and unheard.

Nayantara Sahgal is a prominent Indian English novelist who has written extensively on the status of women in India. Her novels are known for their feminist approach and socio-political commentary. In her works, she portrays women as strong personalities who are capable of breaking free from the shackles of patriarchy and societal norms. Her novels are preoccupied with modern Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Man-woman relationship is a prominent theme of Sahgal's fictions. Her work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal value but also the changing values of a society exposed for the first time to both freedom and power. But her fiction is equally concerned with the problems of women in contemporary society. Her fiction is coloured by her personal experiences and, therefore, has strong autobiographical basis. Her initiation into the values of humanism, love and freedom, her unconventional love marriage, clash of egos and subsequent divorce -all has gone into her fiction. She, therefore, articulates her feminine sensibility and aspirations through her women characters.

Nayantara Sahgal as a woman novelist and a human being is passionate about women's liberation and their ability to recognize who they are. The protagonist of "A Time to be Happy," Kusum, initiates this procedure. The author sees her

female characters primarily as wives, daughters, and mothers rather than as wage earners or professional women. It is in these roles that these women yearn for freedom, self-awareness, and acceptance as equals. Every woman is seen through the perspective of marriage. Except Kusum's marriage other marriages in this novel are arranged ones but these are not necessarily happy ones. Nayantara Sahgal is concerned with women in both "This Time of Morning" and "A Time to be Happy," but in "This Time of Morning," she focuses on the freedom that young women want outside of marriage, while in "A Time to be Happy," she is more concerned with self-expression within marriage. Maya and Kusum are substantially different from Nita and Rashmi, who are the results of altered societal circumstances. They desire to live their own lives and are not meant to be submissively obedient. With an unhappy marriage, Rashmi yearns for emotion and independence. Her demeanor seems abnormally quiet to Rakesh. She seemed confused in his opinion. So, marriage was what had changed her, turned her into a moth trapped in cement. Nayantara Sahgal epitomizes the emergence of the new woman in Nita.

"Arranged Marriage" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a collection of stories that depicts the difficulties and predicaments faced by Indian women who live in India or elsewhere. It is a realistic representation of Indian women living under the shadow of patriarchal societal conditioning, showing their internal conflict between deep-rooted traditional values and the aspiration for change in their lives. Whether it is about adjusting to life after marriage or the experience of immigrants in the new society, integration issues exist. Some of the characters bravely act to live up to their own ideals and choices, which aid in the creation of their own identities, while others occasionally give in to the situation and accept their fate.

Writers like Markandaya reveal how women have been deliberately kept illiterate. Woman education, ambitions, and desires are far less important than her role as mother, daughter-in-law, and wife. In "Nectar in a Sieve," Rukmani's mother asks: What use . . . that girl should be learned! Much good will it do her when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after. Look at me, am I any worse that cannot spell my name, so long as I know it? (16) She admitted that "I am sure it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was... (17) Her works explain how women find affirming solutions to an indifferent way of living. Maybe her pictures are gloomy or depressing. However, she offers hope: a meaningful existence is still possible when people work together and understand one another.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani is strong and unwavering; she passes from innocence to mellowness, rebellion to agreement. Rukmani's initial impression of her husband's home is heartbreaking; she wanted to cry. "Merely a mud hut and nothing else...and she sank down." (50) When she finds out her husband made it for her, her disappointment transforms into admiration. Many people can learn from her wise observation regarding the man-woman relationship: "They say a woman never forgets her wedding night, but I had other nights when I went to my husband and he was mature both mentally and physically." (66) When she surprises her husband Nathan with the necessary amount of rice, dhal, and money for Ira's wedding, she demonstrates her visionary nature. She gains the skills from her pals Kali and Janaki to change into a peasant's wife. There are at least two instances where her strength is evident. Her comment regarding her poverty, given her extreme tolerance, was: "Want is our companion from birth to death, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?" (113) She has the serenity to console her husband who is down with physical and emotional

crisis: "Have we not been happy together? Always, dear, always." (110) She reaches the summit of wisdom at the end and evaluates her life "... with calm of mind with all passion spent." (135)

The two facets of Indian women in *Possession* are Lady Caroline Bell and Anasuya. Anasuya embodies traditional values; she is intelligent, refined, yet reserved and deeply spiritual. She belongs to a group of women who have the means to show that it is possible to lead a decent life without a man. Caroline is a complete package of vices, self-centered, obsessive, and mercenary. She reminds the British Raj in India; she is a dictator. The sheet anchor among the many themes of scarcity, tradition, moorings, morals, and success ethics is Nalini from "A Handful of Rice." Being a woman of custom and manners, "Nalini never complained....he (her husband) had never heard her complain...neither of the ills of her pregnancy, nor of him." (165) Kamala Markandaya's unyielding fervour is to the fore in Nalini – the visible fragility becoming an asset through her faith in family bonds and personal relationships more than anything else.

Bharati Mukherjee's portrayal of female characters in his works transcends limitations and universalizes their female subjectivity. Her writings expose the true status of women in Indian society as well as the mistreatment they endure under the pretense of "Unity." She portrayed people of the urban middle class, which is the most familiar part of the population. With every new spatial structure, the characters created by Bharathi Mukherjee redefine themselves. However, in "Jasmine," Mukherjee explores what happens to a gendered identity that has been smashed by hammer blows, and melted down to insignificance. Jasmine, the title character and narrator of the novel, was born approximately 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnpur. She tells her story as a twenty-four-year-old

widow who is pregnant, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her odyssey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs.

Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes again and again: from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy, Jazzy to Jase and Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnpur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends. The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation makes Jasmine symbolic of the quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. Uprooted from her native land India, Jyoti does her best to introduce herself into the new and alien society as an immigrant; the culmination finally indicated in Jasmine's pregnancy with the child of a white man - Bud. "Jasmine" changes herself constantly, ferrying between multiple identities in different spaces and at different times. Jasmine shows the most predictable crusade towards Americanization and its obvious uncertainty and without feeling infuriated she survives to make a new start in the host country.

Anita Nair is one of the popular writers who received global recognition for her remarkable contribution to Literature. Her

novels primarily deal with the experiences of the women protagonists, who face traumatic situations in their family life. Subjugation of women in the patriarchal family life in India, female infanticide, prostitution, lesbianism and rape are the issues she has projected in her fiction. Her novel "Ladies Coupe" is one of her striking feminist works which was translated into more than twenty-five languages of the world. Nair presents India as a state which suffers from stereotyping oppression of women under patriarchal household. This novel could be termed as a discourse on Womanhood. Every character in this novel confronts painful experiences of domestic violence in Male dominated house and also, they attain relentless elasticity not only to keep themselves alive, but also to ascertain their inner source of vitality and artistic origin. This novel presents a woman's quest for inner strength and individuality. It comprises six women who accidentally meet in a train journey and their life experiences narrated by each woman during the journey in the novel. Akhila is a protagonist who tells and also listens to the stories of these five women in the compartment and tries to ascertain a solution to their questions which bothered her in her life. The persona of Margaret Shanti in the novel strongly reflects the victimization of women in Male dominated society and how some of them show resistance towards the harsh challenges. Margaret's husband Ebenezer symbolizes male chauvinism and doesn't realize the importance of his wife as a woman in the novel.

Another novel "Mistress" also revolves around the subjects of feminism. This novel discovers the deepness of relationship between a couple Shayam and Radha. In this failed relationship Radha finds herself a caged creature by the owner who confined her freedom and liberty of life. English renowned feminist critic and writer Simon De Beauvoir asserts that the marital relationship has somehow spoiled the spontaneity of feelings between the husband and wife by "transforming freely given

feelings into mandatory duties and shrilly asserted rights.” (3) However, a woman should be valued for more than her physical appearance. She is both a Being-in-itself and a Being-for-itself. Shayam’s cold and aloof attitude made Radha miserable; later in the novel, she finds love in Chris, another man. Shayam was unable to show her much love, so their connection remained spoiled and meaningless. As a result, she went to another man in order to satisfy her physical desires. Radha rejects Shayam’s controlling demeanor and speaks out against the society’s ungentleness and greed. In addition, she almost criticizes her married life. She does not want love to be solely a feature of male dominance since she sees love as a kind of male possessiveness. After having an affair with a married man before getting married, having an abortion, and then having an affair with Chris, Radha realizes that she does all of this out of genuine love. She encounters a number of harsh realities from past experiences as she returns to her uncle’s life. Radha, disturbed by her ugly life, remains strong in her desire to establish order. She also made an attempt to learn more about her uncle’s and Chris’s pasts, who are still very much connected to her private past, and this helped her come to some realizations about herself. Her own process of self-realization gave her a new purpose and the strength to bring Shayam back to her home. Furthermore, the intriguing story of a woman yearning for independence and love is revealed in this classic postcolonial work by Nair. A triangle of desire is interwoven in the narrative about the captive of tradition in modern India, symbolized by Radha’s persona and her lack of desire for her husband Shayam, Chris, and an American travel writer.

Conclusion

Over the years, the way women are portrayed in literature has progressively changed. Modern writers have addressed the challenges and obstacles that women face in fulfilling their

duties both inside and beyond the house and family, in addition to concentrating primarily on the issue of selfless, obedient women and their predicament. A variety of characters depict a range of situations in different tones, with women behaving in a way that is consistent with the power of deeply embedded conventional value systems. Female writers do not embrace moral aesthetics at the cost of femininity. The important question is not whether these women have stuck to their principles, but rather whether they are true to themselves and work for their objectives. It is evident that all female authors have tried to center their works around women, regardless of their position. Anees Jung rightly comments: "In this complex pantheon of diversities the Indian woman remains the point of unity, unveiling through each single experience a collective consciousness prized by a society that is locked in mortal combat with the power and weakness of age and time. She remains the still centre, like the centre in a potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration."

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