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An exploration of the Indian women writers

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ABSTRACT

This work is to analyze the progress of Indian women in the field of writing right from the creation and sense the glitches faced by them. The themes of sexuality and man-woman relationship from the origin till the contemporary authors are discussed which became the theme of writing this paper. But they are found not merely as the raw material and each has engrossed various angles and given inimitable solutions. Their versatile treatment of women's issues reveals their sensitive nature as a woman writer, and this quality affirms their works as an outstanding contribution to Indian literature in English proving their uniqueness.

Keywords— *Sufferings, Emotion, Relationship, Problems*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Komarovsky's words, to be born as a woman means to inhabit from early infancy to the last day of life, a psychological world which differs from the world of men. They never rebelled against the male-dominated society. The Indian woman accepted and adapted herself to demanding circumstances. She was never recognized as a person and her ideas were never identified. She was deprived of opportunities to prove her individuality. She was constantly reminded of her commitment to the forthcoming family and her husband. Thus the society refused to give equal rights to the women folk. So, Indian women were examples for dependent figures, depending on father or husband or to the society.

The position of women underwent a metamorphic change down the years. The present-day feminist's thought seeks to destroy masculine hierarchy but not sexual dualism. Indian Independence in 1947 marked the beginning of this change. Changes and revolutions took place in all walks of life and women too advanced to acquire their own identity in society. They have awakened women who inspired other women also.

As India after Independence laid great stress on women's education, it endorsed refinement of their role in family and society. Women's higher education inculcated confidence and they emerged successfully in all walks of life. They started proving their mettle and showed their best selves in all emerging fields.

A woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. In an age of development and flux in every field, one cannot easily ignore half of the population. Indian writers in English have started acknowledging the status of an Indian woman in the patriarchal society. A woman who has been suppressed and marginalized in the writings of male writers has come to the forefront in the novels written by Indian women writers in English.

The Western impact of feminism brought a drastic change among the women in India. Feministic movements took a new dimension as a result of this. New definitions were given to feminism. Chaman Nahal defines the feministic movements in Feminism in Indian English Fiction as,

The concept of feminism and feminist movements made great changes in women's writing also. Women are, in their view to be no longer treated as property. Nayantara Sahgal, the noted Indian novelist, in *Emergence of New Woman in Indian Fiction*, explains:

The social changes in India have brought significant changes in the structure of families and relationships. The feminist movements made women confident and independent. Literature takes a vital role in defining the image of women and their importance. It has become the medium of communications which expresses these changes through its characters.

Feminism in India although a byproduct of feminism in the West, got its sustenance from our struggle for independence. The Indian feminist writers stick to the Indianness with their realistic Indian middle-class characters. Feminist movements demand equal rights for women. This has gained much strength and popularity in recent decades. Chhote Lal Khatri says about the beginning of feminism in India:

In India too, women writers had come forward to voice their feminist approach to life, the patriarchal family setup. They believe that the concept of gender is not merely a biological phenomenon but it has a social construction. (113)

Feminism in literature refers to a mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience in it. Feminism has its origin in the history of women's oppression all over the world.

Feminist fiction is a work in which language and imagery are employed to impart a new version of reality. This reality is perceived for a woman's authentic mode of seeing, feeling and measuring her existence without subscribing to the male cultural codes. Till the last few decades, the suppressed women tolerated their suffering by maintaining a deep silence. But, with the blossoming of the feminist literature, all these locked up feelings are unleashed. The themes of the women writers began to project the conflicts and suppression of Indian woman in their works. After the 1950s these women writers began to analyse the individual's conflict in society. R.S. Pathak in his book *Shashi Deshpande: The Making of the Novelist*, says thus:

After the 1950's, however, Indian novelists' interest moved from the public to the private sphere. They began to delineate in their works the individual's quest for self in all its varied and complex forms along with his problems and crisis (11).

Economic compulsions have led to a significant widening of the horizons of a woman's life without a corresponding re-definition of social values, placing her in the proverbial horns of a dilemma. The woman in the third world countries shares many similarities in their upbringing and lifestyle. One element that binds these women, is their predicament, which is caused by their estrangement from those around them. The women have always been assigned an inferior place as far as culture and religion are concerned.

The feminist ideas in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, and Betty Fredan began to affect the consciousness of many an intellectual, educated Indian woman. The 1980s has to its credit, a number of novels by women writers on the theme of womanhood. The novels are clearly imprinted with a feminist sensibility, although the treatment varies from an imitative Western style feminist to the nativized Indian variety as in the novels of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur.

Very few women novelists adorned the literary scenario of the bygone centuries. Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Brontes, Virginia Woolf, Mrs Gaskell and Dorothy Richardson had established their own tradition. Although even today women do not have either a room of their own or financial independence, women writers have made their mark in Indian fiction in English. It is, however, only after the World War that several women novelists of rare calibre have begun to enrich Indian fiction in English.

Women writers of India have significantly contributed to the fictional canvas in India. They have started writing naturally and this is worth noticing and praiseworthy. Broadly speaking, feminism is a dominant issue in contemporary women's thought. In their writings, they began to portray women as facing the conflicts and problems of fusing tradition and modernity. The women writers had to struggle much to reach this stage and through their writings, they have been projecting their views for a change in the attitude of society towards women. As T.Asoka Rani says in her book "Women in Literary Works, "Woman is often marginalized, repressed or silenced in literary works." (25)

The traditional Indian society is marriage oriented. A woman is supposed to seek fulfilment in marriage and in motherhood. In the "Atharvaveda", there is a hymn, "O woman, give birth to a male son; Bringing forth another male after him. The mother shall then be of sons. Born and hereafter to be born" (23:2). The woman is projected as 'fickle - minded' and equated with a lunatic and drunkard and thus incapable of holding any household transaction.

Even now the average Indian woman has to lead a miserable life, has to bear insult, abuse and injustice. The seeds of disparity can be found in our scriptures. The Holy Bible describes the formation of woman as follows:

Then the Lord God made the man fall into deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took out one of man's ribs and closed up the flesh. He formed a woman out of the ribs and brought her to him. (2)

The 'Great Event' at the beginning of the creation contains the germ of the disparity between man and woman. Man dominates because a woman has come out from man; she is one of the ribs of man. In the Hindu religion, a woman's status is sometimes degraded and sometimes upgraded. Manu, the Hindu law-giver, in one of his laws observes:

To be mothers, women were created and to be fathers, men. The teacher is ten times more venerable than sub-teacher; the father a hundred times more than the teacher but a mother a thousand times more than a father. (2)

Here Manu shows the natural ability of a woman. The status war between male and female finds its expression in the myths and legends, stories and history. The detractors of female think that crookedness is a natural part of a woman because she was created out of the crooked part of man, his rib. The champions of female say that man was created out of the dust of the earth but the woman was made out of God's own image. As a matter of fact, the woman is a nucleus in the family of life. It is she who gives birth to children and rears up the coming generation. The home cannot be imagined without a woman. In a sense, man and woman are complementary to each other. Plato has a very positive opinion about women. He observes:

From the points mentioned above, it is seen that woman's status in ancient times was not certain, sometimes it was high and sometimes low. But in modern times women have shown their competence in every field and sometimes excelled men. Digging out deep into history, one can come to the conclusion that women have shown their worth as an individual.

The history of Indian women novelists in English begins with Toru Dutt (1856-1877) who died at the early age of 21 lesser than John Keats of the Romantic School of poetry. Her novel *Bianca* (1878) which gained a lot of significance deals with an autobiographical projection of the novelist. Though the characters are Spanish and French, the delineation is entirely Indian. The novel is full of love and affection as well as sincerity and purity which are the characteristics of an ideal woman. The novelist deals with archetypes of Indian womanhood like Sita and Savitri. The novelist occupies a place of eminence as she is keenly alive to the pathos of human life.

Cornelia Sorabji, (1866-1954) a Parsi Christian, is the other great figure in the domain of Indian English novels. She is known for her three important works –*Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1910), *Sun-Babies in the Child Life of India* (1904) and *Between the Twilight* (1908). She reveals in her novels various moods going in under the 'purdah'- the ecstasy, tragedy, comedy and many more things which are unnoticed even by a feminist philosopher. To her, a woman is no longer an object of pleasure but a reservoir of all healthy values of life. She portrays a realistic and miserable picture of Indian women.

Nargis Dalal (b.1920) in her novel *Minari* (1967), portrays the character of an Anita of the daughter of a retired General, who is married to the faithful manager, Ranjan, but he fails to provide her with any romantic companionship. Dalal's another novel *Two Sisters* (1973) deals with the pathetic life of Rita who has to suffer insult and humiliation, both at home and outside because of her not being born as beautiful as her twin sister Nina. She feels lonely, bitter and frustrated. When the novel concludes Rita has retired to her village with her grandmother, who is good enough to shield her from the wretchedness of existence. In Dalal's *The Inner Door* (1976) the theme of enforced sainthood is handled skillfully whereas the East-west encounter is seen in her *The Girls from Overseas* (1979). Dalal has handled various themes successfully.

Santha Rama Rau is known as a travel writer. Her output of novel is meagre. She is mainly a freelance writer writing on popular themes. She made her mark with the two novels, *Remember the House* (1956) and *The Adventures* (1971). Both the novels were set in the year 1947, the year of India's independence. Rama Rau has travelled widely, particularly, in the Eastern and the South-eastern parts of the world and she has recorded her experiences in these places in her travel books like, *East of Home* (1951), *View to the South-West* (1958), *My Russian Journey* (1959) and *Gifts of Passage* (1961).

The Adventures is an excellent example of how Rama Rau maintains her Indian sensibility, though the themes and background are typically Western. Kay, the adventuress and protagonist of the novel, has been stranded in Japan during the Second World War and the novel narrates her efforts to leave the country for her homeland, America. Thus Rama Rau's *The Adventures* is a novel about a young woman who has become a victim of the war.

The 1960s witnessed its first foray into Indian fiction in English by women writers who wrote primarily about woman's experience from a woman's point of view. These writers refused to be slotted into the category of women writers. To them, human society is the subject of their work. Their characters are those whose experiences they can comfortably and confidently devise. The women novelists of 1960s and 1970s concentrated on the complex problems of women, namely their career, motherhood, marriage, sexual and economic freedom. The battle of women's freedom has not ended triumphantly. The women writers are still deeply concerned with the problems of the women erupting every day.

They wrote necessarily for –women, but this does not mean that it was anti-men. They brought out the victories as well as the defeats of the women folk through their artistic works. In this instance, it will be relevant to discuss some of the women writers, who deal with the plight of Indian women caged in foreign countries as immigrants in most of their novels.

Women writers' like-Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Jai Nimbkar, Sobha De, Kamala Markandaya, but male writers like Tagore, MulkRaj Anand, R.K.Narayan, were more popular in this period.

More Indian women novelists have turned towards the woman's world with great introspective intensity and authenticity. They have launched a voyage within to explore the private consciousness of their women characters and to measure them.

If the Indian writing in English today has occupied a respectable position it is due to a good number of women writers who have succeeded in bringing to light various aspects which were not dealt by their male counterparts. If women are removed from history, it will create only a vacuum and remove all zest for life and adventure. Anuradha Roy observes:

In this complex pantheon of diversities, the Indian woman remains the point of unity, unveiling through every single experience a collective consciousness prized by a society that is locked in mortal combat with 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. (1)

Kamala Markandaya (b.1924-2004) is the most outstanding Indian English woman novelist in the post-war period. The most striking feature of Markandaya's fiction is that it reflects the changing ethos of post-Independence India. Her novels belong to the literature of concern. She depicts a faithful picture of contemporary Indian reality with historical consciousness. She also depicts in her fiction interaction between the Western quest for scientific rationalism and Indian traditional spiritualism.

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) portrays a picture of the agonies of industrialization which ruins the age-old village structure. She portrays the realistic picture of Indian society. The novel is set in an unknown village in South India and depicts the sufferings of peasants in colonial India. Her next novels, *Some Inner Fury* (1957) and *Possession* (1963) focus on Indo-British personal relationship. In the former, the love of Mira for Richard is shattered by the violent freedom movement which tears the lovers apart. *Possession* is the story of the conflict between Lady Caroline and a 'swami' for the possession of the soul of Valmiki, the rustic artist, who is lured to England by her, but later he returns to his mentor. Her novel *Silence of Desire* (1960) has a theme of spirituality and mystic vision of India. Here, the Western-oriented rationalist Dandekar wants the protagonist Sarojini to get herself operated for a tumor, but the latter does not want to do so as she has traditional faith in God. Markandaya presents an age-old confrontation between the mind and the soul.

The Coffer Dams (1960) is a new leaf in the cap of Markandaya. She presents a comprehensive picture of the Indo-British encounter which results in despair and disappointment. It is the story of British engineers who construct a river dam in independent India. The novelist has introduced an innovative style. It is characterized by an oblique expression, twisted syntax, and jerky sentence structure. The novelist focuses her attention on the contemporary aspects of India's confrontation with Britain, and the conflict between India and Britain due to the latter's political supremacy over the former.

The Nowhere Man (1972) deals with Indo-British encounter. The novel has an English setting. Srinivas is an old Indian widower who lived in London for the major part of his life finds a sympathetic soul in old Mrs Pickering a divorcee. But during anti-immigrant wave of the 1960s, Srinivas is persecuted by a number of fanatics. He dies when a fanatic sets fire to his house. His discovery that he has developed leprosy has already spelt tragedy. The image of the disease is suggestive as it suggests the protagonist's sense of isolation and disintegration.

Nayantara Sahgal (1927) is to be regarded as an exponent of the political novel; however, politics is only one of her two major concerns. She herself has declared that each of her novels 'more or less reflects the political era we are passing through'. (239) Sahgal is the only woman novelist who tries to expose the political world as it exists in India today.

Sahgal's first novel *A Time to be Happy* (1978) presents the dawn of Indian independence. This is the story of the protagonist, Sanad Shivapal, the son of a rich zamindar, Govind Narayan, Sanad joins the English firm of Selkirk and Lowe at their office in Saharanpur and cultivates sophisticated Western values. He marries Kusum and when freedom comes, at last, he has the best of both worlds. But Sanad, the stereotype of a particular class, suffers from a sense of alienation and rootlessness.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala (b. 1927) was born in Germany, educated in England and married the Indian architect C.S.H. Jhabvala. She left India in the year 1977, the same year when she won the prestigious Booker Prize for her novel *Heat and Dust*. The contemporary of Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala has left an indisputable print in the history of women novelists in English. Jhabvala's novels portray urban middle-class Indian life coloured with domestic problems of an average joint Hindu family.

Jhabvala's eight novels are classified into two distinct groups. The first group consists of comedies of urban middle-class Indian life and the second comprising ironic studies of the East-west encounter. The comedies which belong to the first group are *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960) and *Get Ready for Battle* (1962); to the second group belongs, *Esmond in India* (1958), *A Backward Place* (1965), *A New Dominion* (1973) and *Heat and Dust* (1977).

Anita Desai (1937) one of the major Indian English women novelists, is more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in political and social realities. Writing, for her, in her own words 'is an effort to discover, and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things'. (241) Desai's protagonists are alienated, persons. They are mostly women who have reached different stages in life from school-girl to grandmother. They are all delicate introverts.

Cry, the Peacock (1963) is the tragic story of Maya who is haunted by the astrological prediction of the death of either wife or husband. She has no children and this leads to her isolation. She is segregated by society and as per the astrological prediction in a fit of insane fury, she kills her husband.

In *Voices in the City* (1965) the scene shifts from Delhi to Calcutta, 'the city of Kali, and the goddess of death'. Nirode and his two sisters, Monisha and Amla are rebels against conventions. Nirode ends up as a drifting bohemian, Monisha commits suicide and Amla is heart broken when her love is rejected.

Bye-bye Blackbird (1971) is a symbolic novel in which Desai presents East-west encounter in the lives of Indian emigrants in Britain.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) Desai portrays the tragic inner reality of Sita, who is the protagonist of the novel. She has four children. The cruelty and callousness of urban life suffocate her and when she is in the family way again, she shudders at the thought of bringing a new, delicate being into this harsh world, and runs away to the small island with which she is associated from her childhood. Her husband finally persuades her to return.

The novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) indicates the main theme of seeing the light. The protagonist, Vimla, is an elderly spinster living in a decaying house surrounded by a neglected garden containing a disused black well with a neurotic younger brother. The arrival of her younger sister with her family stirs old memories of shared childhood and past traumas.

In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) Desai presents the psychology of two different women characters Nanda, an unsentimental old widow leading a segregated life in a lonely hill hut, and Raka, a shy, gentle and lovely school girl by nature and instincts.

Desai is an important feminist novelist. She peeps into the mind of her protagonist and lays bare what lurks in it. Her fictional world is just like an ice-berg mostly hidden and partly visible. Her preoccupation as a fiction writer is to expose the truth. In a sense, she is very near to Virginia Wolf, James Joyce and Henry James. Thus, Anita Desai has opened a new era in the domain of psychological portrayal of the character.

Shashi Deshpande (1938) – the recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her *That Long Silence* (1988) deals with the middle-class women who represent the majority of the modern Indian society. Deshpande is of the opinion that all good writing is socially committed, it comes out of a concern for the human predicament.

Shobha De (1950) emerged as a novelist in 1988 with her debut novel *Socialite Evenings*, which was followed by *Starry Nights* in 1990, *Sisters and Strange Obsession* in 1992, *Sultry Days* in 1994, and *Snapshots* in 1995. Her novels grew in popularity due to their contents, her mastery over the art of story telling and her use of the language.

Kiran Desai (1972) is the daughter of a renowned novelist Anita Desai. She made her debut with the publication of her novel *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard* in 1998 and emerged on the literary scene at the age of 26.

Gita Hariharan is the post-colonial woman novelist. She writes about women's problems. Hariharan's first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) for which she got the "Commonwealth Writers Prize". The novel projects thousand dimensions of the roles Indian women are allotted to play. It is a story of a woman, Devi who is also the protagonist of the novel. She is a plain-looking young woman educated in the United States and returns to India for the sake of her mother. She is married to a corporate thinking Mahesh. As she suffers she elopes with Gopal. Eventually, she comes back to her mother. In the novel, Hariharan deals with the female world. A woman's quest for self-identity is the theme of her novel.

Arundhati Roy won the 'Booker Prize' for literature by her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) a novel which registered a tremendous sale all over the world. *The God of Small Things* is a bit autobiographical in nature. It deals with a pale reflection of the haunts of Roy's own childhood on the limpid backwaters of Kerala and the society she lived with caste prejudices. In this novel, Kerala, the most educated state with many different castes and classes, has been beautifully represented. The whole story revolves around the village, Ayemenem near Kottayam. In theme, the book peeps into the life of Keralite society, their rites and customs, traditions and patriarchal domination; and the caste-ridden mentality of a certain section of people.

Manju Kapur's famous novels are *Difficult Daughters*, (1998) *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006) and *The Immigrant* (2008) all of them deal with the state of middle-class women in Indian society. While *Difficult Daughters* depicts against the backdrop of India's partition, *A Married Woman* has the political and religious upheaval of Babri Masjid and Ayodhya temple as its background. Virmati and Astha both protagonists of *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* rebel against traditional conventions. In *Home*, she portrays the seeming clam world of a middle-class joint family in Delhi. In this orthodox family, men go out to earn their living and women live within their home performing household work.

To sum up, the contribution of the above novelists in Indian English writing clearly shows that women have made their permanent mark in the field of English fiction. They have won recognition not only at national but also international level. In their writings, they have tried best to free the female mentality from the age-old patriarchy. In their novels, the women protagonists rebel against the conventional mode of thinking. They want to get rid of the dependence syndrome and to be on their own legs. Moreover, they crave for self-identity for which they have to struggle. The feminist's movements of the 19th and 20th centuries have awakened women to their right as an equal partner to men. These fiction writers have inculcated among women a new consciousness in the realm of traditional thinking.

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