

DIFFERENT SHADES OF INDIAN WOMEN IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

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A woman has been creating different shades of her personality depending on the roles she played vis a vis the treatment she accepted in the hands of her counterpart starting from pre independence period to the modern age of today. In order to take a glimpse of different shades of women through the ages, we have to know the story of women's own domesticity, the story of their own seclusion within the home and the possibilities and impossibilities provided by that. We further need to know, why women had to write, where women are today and how their writings have contributed to the modern age emancipation of women.

The freedom enjoyed by a woman depended upon the awareness for equality of gender and cultural growth besides many other factors in the society. There have been gender biases of varied magnitudes since ages and unfortunately, it depicted even in the work of male writers of yesteryears. There are a few male writers who bothered to depict female characters but the depiction was never authentic: **because Firstly men did not have access to the insides of a house which was the only space women moved in, secondly only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches and these shoes were certainly not worn by men and thirdly howsoever sensitive these male writers may have been, they still did not consider women's lives as exciting enough to become apt material for fiction.** The suffering wife, the weeping widow, or the sacrificing mother were the only images found in fiction.

Indian woman is a complex figure, a mystery too deep to understand. Throughout the centuries, she has been identified with the mythical figures of Sita, Savitri Durga, Laxmi and Saraswati. In the novels of this period, the Sita & Pativrata image of women found acceptance, and submissiveness was still considered a virtue. Women either upheld

conservative ideals or they were labeled immoral. Traditional moral aesthetics dominated these narratives.

In a country where even the political power in the hands of rural and urban uneducated women is used by their men, it becomes very significant to explore the changes brought about in the literary scene by women writers.

Women write to celebrate their womanhood; they sing women's dream and speak their bodies. For as long as women did not write they were not heard. Women's writing is like a raising consciousness. Their writing impacts their very existence in the socio-cultural milieu as it expedites their shift from a marginal position to a central one.

Women's entry into the writing arena made way for the shattering of the Sita and Pativrata image. Suddenly there was a shift in the traditional virtue syndrome. Instead of extolling the so called virtues of the sacrificing, submissive woman with tears in her eyes and not a word of complaint on her lips, the female writers started presenting the fighter spirit of women in their novels. With this came the end of the submissive image of women in the society as well in the writing arena simultaneously.

"A woman writer is engaged at another level with assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially the paradigmatic polarities of angels and monsters." (1) Gilbert and Gubar.

A close look at the women novelists of Indian English Fiction (IEF) may draw one's attention towards certain interesting facts. Almost all women novelists write from their personal experience; almost all of them end up in one or the other form of feminism. Some of them give us their autobiography in fiction, and virtually all of them identify with their female characters. It is not surprising, then, that their female characters tend to overshadow all other characters

The credit for writing the first English novel in India goes to Krupabai Sathianadhan whose *Kamala: The Story of a Hindu Child-Wife* was published in 1894. The protagonist, though apparently an apostle of sacrifice and docility, grows into an independent woman strong

enough to stand her grounds as also to protect other women from being crushed by the parochial norms.

The appearance of fiction by women was few before Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and Ruth Pravar Jhabvala's *To Whom She Will* (1955). Kamala Markandaya is the first woman novelist to present a varied repertoire of fictional women. The theme of marital dissonance finds place in Ruth Pravar Jhabvala's fiction as well. Whatever conflicts arise in a marriage is mostly due to women's growing awareness of their self and the resultant sense of alienation from the male culture.

IEF is marked by a gradual shift in narrative paradigms but what really cast a lasting impression on women's writing post 1975 is the publication of *Towards Equality* and the birth of the feminist journal *Manushi* in 1979. Rama Mehta's "Inside the Havel" in 1977.

The shift in women's writing may be seen in their proclivity towards feminine aesthetics as against moral aesthetics. Feminine aesthetics finds its expression in the female authors' conflict between their loyalty to the dominant tradition and their compelling need to break through the conventional barriers to establish a new tradition. The change in the fictional woman is concomitant with the change in women's status in society: "The new opportunities for education and employment, the emergence of new socio-economic patterns and the privileges of new and equal political rights for women are slowly changing the traditional conceptions of the role and the status of women in contemporary society."(2)

The *sita* image was in for a jolt and as women's sense of individuality matured, *Satu* cleared the way for *Draupadi* (3). This paradigm shift may be seen in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and more recently Arundhati Roy, besides many contemporary women writers of Indian English fiction.

With Nayantara Sabgal there was a major shift in terms of female perspective. She was soon joined by Anita Desai and together these writers gave push to a new tradition of writing. Contrasted with the novels of yore, which dealt with the question of morality and put the onus on women, this new generation of writers talked about the self-realization of women.

The protagonist's quest for selfhood and freedom transported the fictional woman onto a terrain hitherto unseen and unknown in IEF.

Extra literary inheritance may clearly be seen in the exploration of self. The high class, educated, sensible women became protagonists of Sahgal. It was an altogether new class of women whose lives were not infested by problems of dowry or poverty. These women lived a blessed life as far as material standards are concerned, but there was something wanting, some vacuum in their lives. These women were facing the problem of identity. Sahgal became the first writer in India to break the long engendered norms of conduct. In her fiction personhood is the norm and she proclaims: "It takes half of life to achieve personhood but perhaps there is no greater glory."(4)

Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* is a projection of Sahgal herself and her search for identity runs parallel to Sahgal's search for self assertion. *Devi* in *4 Situation in New Delhi* is an exception not only amongst Sahgal's women but also majority of women. Sal defiant character in the *Rani* (5) of *Vijaygarh in Mistaken Identity*: From being a purdah clad woman as a strong person who refuses to cow down to her husband's demands and does not think before leaving her home finding the love of comrade Yusuf with whom she experiences the bliss of complete compatibility. While all the other women of Sahgal look for compatibility, the *Rani* openly asserts her sexuality.

Sahgal's fictional women thus uphold the need to be granted the right to choose ; their life is governed by their choice instead of the patriarchal norms:

Anita Desai's appearance on the scene with the publication of *Cry, the Peacock* led an a shift in women's spaces. Desai's novels mark a new beginning in Indian English fiction. The conflict that forms the mosaic of her novels is not between tradition and modernity but that between: "the need to withdraw in order to preserve one's wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life.Confinement in futile domesticity is a major concern in Anita Desai's fiction.

The problem of maladjustment may be seen in Desai's novels in its various dimensions. 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. Women in Desai's work are not satisfied with their feminine space but they do not have the courage to do much about it. R.S. Pathak's comment aptly sums up for Desai's women:

Anita Desai has conveyed her women characters' fundamental dependence on men through her lexicon and tropes of mastery, command and domination. Her women sometimes do attempt to assert their independence and self-sufficiency, but their quest for identity is thwarted at significant junctures... No woman in Anita Desai's novels. has been fortunate enough to free herself from the shackles of femininity (6)

Shashi Deshpande occupies quite a unique place in the history of IEF. Deshpande's uniqueness comes from her women's belief in the message of Bhagvadgita: *Yath - echhasi tatha kuru*, which gives them the right to do as they wish. Freedom of choice is the most important freedom and it is this that makes truly emancipated beings

The growth from childhood into adolescence, the first awareness of a feminine body puberty are situations that Deshpande depicts verily and beautifully. She also gives mother-daughter relationship a new dimension in her portrayal of the same in *Kamala-Sarita* (The Dark Holds No Terrors) and *Inni-Urmi-Vanaa-Mandira Sakutai-Kalpana* (The Binding Vine). Deshpande's characters are ensconced in the entwining interpersonal relationships.

Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides matching the pace of the world. We see them bursting out in full bloom spreading their own individual fragrances. They are recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavour of the soil that they bring to their work. These women writers have given literary work in India an unmistakable edge. They are able to sensitively portray a world that has shown women rich in substance.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a path breaking novel that created quite a few ripples in the socio-moral as well as literary pool in India.

Roy told one of her interviewers: "Writing *The God of Small Things* was a fictional way of making sense of the world I lived in." (7). Roy's protagonists revolt against the 'combined forces of religion, tradition and society,

Roy's protagonists are women with fortitude and gumption. They represent the fluidity of tradition thereby challenging its imposition as a closed phenomenon. On one hand the narrative takes up a cross-caste love relationship and its consequences and on the other hand it also tackles such issues as the daughter's right to inheritance in her parental property. Elaine Showalter in 1977 posited three major phases that she claimed were common to all literary subcultures:

1. A phase of imitation
2. A phase of protest
3. A phase of self discovery, a turning inward, freed from some of the depending of opposition, a search for identity.

While Nayantara Sahgal's protagonists become the proponent of the third phase, Anita Desai's major characters are in the phase of self-analysis and perception which leads to a kind of ennui. Shashi Deshpande's novels oscillate between the imitation and protest stage, and reaching finally to the self discovery. It is in Arundhati Roy that the final phase of self discovery reaches its culmination.

In the earlier novels, women rebelled against various unjust practices against them. In contemporary novels, there is more depth and complexity in the choice and treatment of women. The new woman in Indian fiction is talented, intelligent and indulges in deep self-analyses and introspection. She has refused to accept unquestioningly the rules fixed for her by an ancient outmoded culture.

The fictional women created by these writers have emerged as strong individuals deeply rooted in their culture, thus completely erasing the picture of a weak, docile shadow of men. These women have shattered the myth of subalternity that haunted the postcolonial women's psyche for a long time.

Finally I conclude by saying that, women writers in India have hugely contributed firstly in proving their prowess in the world of literature and subsequently in creating a "New Women's" image and a rightful place in the society sensitive against gender bias. The 'subaltern' has come to hold a platform where from she can speak and she does speak out her mind. Woman has traversed the land of silence and has arrived at the land of speech

References

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In the epic Mahabharata, Draupadi is the daughter of King Drupada, and becomes the wife of the five Pandavas and then known as Princess Krishna Unlike women in her times she challenged the patriarchy and became the very epitome of feminism and femininity.

Sahgal, p. 30.

Sahgal has used the lower case for Rani through the novel

Pathak, p. 193

Frontline Interview with Arundhati Roy, 8 Aug 1997.