

AN EXPLORATION OF CONTEMPORARY OF INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

It is Indian women authors who most often address issues of male ego and female independence. Women writers often use their work as a way to protest male power. Women authors in India write on the cruelty, pain, and hopelessness they experienced living in a patriarchal culture. Many of the works represent a rebellion against the constraints that society imposed on women. Arundhati Roy, Geeta Mehta, and many more are just a few of the many passionate women authors that India's English literature has produced. All of these women authors are well-known for the strong opinions they expressed in their works. Their work has shaped the experience of women in English literature and beyond. To sum up, we may say that the protagonists of their stories are women who are marginalized by male-dominated culture. As a result, it's hard to fault them for their overall contribution. Today fiction by women writers contributes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Contemporary women's fiction is a challenge to master narratives. It focuses on "differences that make a difference" to women in dominant masculine culture. It is also significant that women writers have not simply been confined to the private realm but have moved beyond it. It provides insight, a wealth of understanding, reservoirs of meaning and basis of discussion. The world is being seen in a new dimension through the eyes of women fiction writers. This paper will focus on the writings of novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandeya. They have chosen the problems and issues faced by the women in today's male dominated world as the theme of their novels. They have visualized the spirit of Indian cultures and its traditional values.

Keywords: Women writers, women suffer

INTRODUCTION

There is a concerted effort in Indian English literature to record and analyze all the authors see and experience in the world today. Although many male authors have broached the subject of gender in their works, the contributions of female authors in this area are particularly noteworthy. By the middle of the nineteenth century, women in India were beginning to write in English. Women authors from India have paved a new path for the country's literary canon. They will always be remembered as giants in the history of English literature. Most female authors have sought to liberate female readers from men's historical hegemony over their gender in their works.

It is a matter of great pride that Indian women's fiction has come into its own and is recognized as literature with a substance. Over the past few decades women have contributed significantly to life and literature by interrogating and exploring their own lives and that of other women. Today Indian women's fiction is dealing with multiple issues concerning self and society. Much of women's writing is primarily a critique of social justice and equality in a patriarchal society.

Indian women novelists are progressing leaps and bounds. However, the success of women writings is highly acclaimed that it has won international recognitions breaking the barriers of Gender, Race and Region. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved from the

traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized in terms of their victim status rather they assert themselves and challenge marriage and motherhood.

It is important for us to look at women's writing not as a monolithic whole dealing with the question of self and identity. Much of Indian women's writing in English is focusing on the middle class woman and her subsequent roles in an upwardly mobile society. These roles are well within the parameters of a family. Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society.

Thus, the theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood, that is, the Bildungsroman, is a recurrent strategy. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's first novel *To Whom She Will* (1995) and her later *Heat and Dust* (1975) which was awarded the Booker Prize, and Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) are good examples. Sex is implied on these novels, but depicted more explicitly in *Socialite Evenings* (1989) by Shobha De, in which she describes the exotic sex lives of the high society in Mumbai.

Contemporary women's fiction is a challenge to master narratives. It focuses on "differences that make a difference" to women in dominant masculine culture. It is also significant that women writers have not simply been confined to the private realm but have moved beyond it. It provides insight, a wealth of understanding, reservoirs of meaning and basis of discussion. The world is being seen in a new dimension through the eyes of women fiction writers. Today fiction by women writers contributes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English.

Trapped in a socio-cultural milieu women suffer inwardly in the novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur. Marriages fail due to lack of understanding between man and woman. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices*, (1997) uses magic realism in her novel. Suniti Namjoshi stands out for her use of fantasy and surrealism and Anuradha-Marwah's *Idol Love* (1999) presents a chilling picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. Other novels deal with various aspects of college life, such as Meena Alexander's *Nampally House* (1991) and Rani Dharker's *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997). Another theme to emerge is that of the lives of women during India's struggle for Independence, as seen for example in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998).

There many Indian women writers based in the USA, Canada, Britain and other parts of the world. These authors write about their situation in cross-cultural contexts, states of 'in-betweenness'. The East/West confrontation, the strange love-hate relationships, the clash between tradition and modernity, cultural alienation and loss of identity faced by expatriates and immigrants are some of the aspects that are presented with a deep insight by writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meera Syal, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Baldwin, Chitra Banerjee and Kiran Desai.

The theme of migration that leads to self-discovery, with a negation of the traditions of the country of origin, is the recurrent theme among the migrant authors, Bharti Kirchner's *Shiva Dancing* (1998), Ameena Meer's *Bombay Talkie* (1994) and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) being good examples.

The image of women that we chiefly get in Indian Writing in English is an ambivalent one. Sometimes she is presented as meek, passive and obedient as Sita or Draupadi; and sometimes a defying and rebellious, recalcitrant and self-assertive. Women now are no longer controlled and regulated to gratify their sexual needs. Shobha De, Shouri Daniels, Arundhati Roy, Uma Vasudev and Kamala Das have dealt with such type of women protagonists in their novels. Shobha De's women like Karuna and Anjali project their passions on to others as female power in order to deconstruct the male ego. Her novels evince the struggle of women against the predatory male dominated society. Her novels are pulp fiction, which sell well and are read well but fail to meet the aesthetics of feminism.

This paper will focus on the writings of novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya. They have chosen the problems and issues faced by the women in today's male dominated world as the theme of their novels. They have visualized the spirit of Indian cultures and its traditional values.

DISCUSSION:

Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande have a different picture of women as that compared to Anita Desai. Their novels portray their female protagonists as self-confident and self-assertive, as women with a new sensibility and a new impulse. Anita Desai's novels have added a new dimension to the Indian fiction in English. In her novels we find a shift from the objective to the subjective and from the communal to the personal. Desai's thematic approach is the exploration of the feminine sensibility.

The dominant and leading woman novelist, Shashi Deshpande is the second daughter of the famous Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit Scholar Shriranga. The ten novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a screen play prove evidence that Deshpande is one of the most prolific women writers in English in contemporary India.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande are a realistic and an optimistic portrayal of the Indian middle-class educated women. Deshpande successfully presents these women as they are engaged in the complex and difficult social and psychological problem of defining an authentic self. Deshpande's novels remind us of the reality that traditionally India has a malist society and culture. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is an anti-matriarchal novel where Saru, the protagonist is discriminated against by her mother who values her son Dhruva above her daughter. Saru, through marriage wants to assert and affirm her feminine sensibility. Against her parental wishes she gets married to Manu, to secure the love which she had longed for in her parental home. Manu's male ego asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults on Saru who bears this sufferings silently. Saru wants to leave her profession but Manu doesn't allow her because it will affect the family budget and she is allowed to live with her father as it will affect the family prestige. She left like an abandoned and deserted child, severely constrained by her womanhood, and further burdened by her family responsibilities. There is no way that she can wrest a second chance of life. She cannot control events, but only acclimatize herself to them.

She is the winner of the Sahitya Akadami Award, for her novel 'That Long Silence'. The quest for an authentic selfhood on the part of the protagonist finds an artistic expression through the heroines' rebellion against the patriarchal core of society. Deshpande explores Jaya's public and private realms of experience. In this novel we are exposed to the life of the sense as well as the agonized feelings of the narrator- protagonist, Jaya, a housewife and an unsuccessful writer. She resolves to assert her individuality by breaking that long silence, by putting down on paper all that she had suppressed in her seventeen years' silence.

Shashi Deshpande delineates the hapless plight of educated middle class women under male domination. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu struggles for the release from the clutches of the tradition and the tradition-bound institution of marriage. She is in search of an autonomous self, only to realize like them. *Roots and Shadows* comes out with its feminist approach in Indu's exploration into herself. It also moves beyond feminist boundaries into a realization of the predicament of human existence.

The Binding Vine is a novel with a difference. The protagonist, Urmila is regaining her composure after the sudden death of her infant daughter. She gets involved with Kalpana, a young victim of rape and wants people to realize the indignity that is heaped upon a rape victim by a man. Only the victim knows the shattering physical and psychological effects. Urmila is typical feminine voice who struggles through the gloom of her existence, not subduing but revolting, trying to sort out things for her. In her we hear the conscious-raising voice of the determined self-affirmation in itself. Deshpande makes it clear that women have to fight their own battles through the protagonist's conscious-raising voice, struggling to assert her femininity, Shashi Deshpande gets to the root of existence and gives vent to a kind of female subjectivity which refuses to reconcile and identify herself with a patriarchal and male dominated society. Through her female protagonists she seems to convey the message marital polarization curtails human potential and individual happiness.

Another renowned novelist of the modern Indian fiction is Kamala Markandaya. She moved to Britain after India's Independence and is known for writing about cultural clashes between Indian urban and rural societies. Markandaya has published her first novel, 'Nectar in a Sieve' (1955). It is a best seller and considered a notable book by the American Library Association. Her other works are Some Inner Fury (1965), A Silence of Desire (1961), Possession (1963), A Handful of Rice (1966), The Nowhere Man (1972), The Rising (1973), The Golden Honeycomb (1977) and Pleasure City (1982).

The most striking feature of Kamala Markandaya's fiction is that it reflects the changing ethos of the Post-Independence India. Her accurate and meticulous delineation of the social, economic and political changes with her special focus on the concept of cultural continuity reveal her extraordinary sense of historicity. The emphasis in her fiction is on the ideological speculations and the dilemmas in the interaction. She depicts the changing and varied image of man and society. Her novels reflect the changing traditional India in post Independent India. Kamala Markandaya is keen and aware of the moral, psychological and other human problems.

A Silence of Desire deals with the theme of clash between fiction and reason through the conflict between Dandekar and Sarojini. The novelist is basically concerned with traditional mode of spiritualism or superstitions and the scientific rationalism. Like V.S. Naipaul, her Indian sensibility is colored by her western outlook. She depicts the cultural dualism, but also seems to advocate a cultural synthesis through the complexity of human relationship. In Pleasure City the multinational corporation consists of foreigners and Indians. The project taken up by the company to build a holiday resort 'Shalimar' signifies the co-operation the both; transcending all cultural and national barriers. The Pleasure City is a blend of imagination and reality. The village of fisherman becomes a haven for holiday maker. The excess money spent on holidays in 'Shalimar' mocks at the poverty of the villagers. Markandaya combines the contrary values and lifestyle of the two races; but also contrasts the economic backwardness and illiteracy of the Indian people with that of the scientific and technological advancement of the British.

In her first novel Nectar In a Sieve, Markandaya's focus is on poverty and suffering of rural life. Along with the simple inhabitants of the village, she depicts its simple beauty being bulldozed by the establishment of a tannery. On one hand the novel is a passionate cry against the social injustice on the other, it is critical of the technical progress and materialism.

In the Coffers Dams, Markandaya tries to fuse the traditional Indian values with the growing materialism. In this novel British Engineers set out to build a dam across a river in South India. Like the multi-corporation of Pleasure City, there are British technicians, Indian Engineers and the local tribals. The tribal settlement with its world of nature is in direct clash with the world of technology.

Kamala Markandaya has also focused on the themes of the man-woman relationships through her various novels. In Possessions, Lady Caroline Bell is an autocrat, typical of British colonizers. She symbolizes the dominating forces of the British. Her possessive nature proves suffocating for Valmiki. She exploits his talent, moulds him into a man, an artist and a lover, but takes away his Independence in the process. Valmiki, who stands for the spiritual strength of India, wrests himself free from Caroline's influence and comes back to India.

In Two Virgins the clash between the traditional Indian values and the modern Western outlook is represented in Aunt Alamelu and Appu. Here the feminine sensibility is fused with a rural background. The author has attacked modern society and materialism associated with cities. In the Golden Honeycomb, the honey comb symbolizes the union of the English and their counter parts. The rajahs begin to disintegrate because they alienate themselves from the aspirations of the common man. The novel also highlights the gap between the rich and the poor. In Some Inner Fury, the conflict between India and Britain is of central importance. It is dramatized in two ways; political agitation and cultural disparity.

Kamala Markandaya's A Handful of Rice fictionalizes the sociology of India by awakening the polite society to the plight of the rural people. The novel deals with hunger and poverty and the consequent degeneration of human values. The novel begins and ends with Ravi's struggle with hunger. Living in poverty, Ravi cannot hear

the voice of his conscience. He drowns his morality and his misery in drink. Kamala Markandaya presents Ravi's moral dilemma quite convincingly. Torn between the worlds, one dead and the other yet to come, Ravi makes a choice which ultimately proves to be life-denying

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most gifted novelists to the Contemporary Indian fiction writers, who catches the spirit of India and its problems, to capture it with the modern age. Her novels portray the anguish of human beings trapped in circumstances beyond them. She deals with a diverse and varied themes ranging from the social, political, spiritual and feminine issues.

Anita Desai is the foremost Indian novelist of the Post- Independence era. She is unquestionably one of the celebrated Indian - English fiction writers. Anita Desai holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelist of India. She was born of Bengali father D.N.Mazumdar, a businessman and German mother Toni Nime, on 24th June 1937, in Mussoorie. At just the budding age of seven, she began to show her literary spark by her creative writing and published her first story at the age of nine as a small piece of art in children's magazine. She has published ten novels and other literary works of immense value. She interested in the psychic life of her characters. Her attempt is to reach the world of mind and penetrate into the soul of the character; particularly women very skillfully unveil the real self of a woman which is hidden beneath surface.

Anita Desai is a strong feminist writer with her delicate feminine sensibilities. Her dual heritage has strong impact on her writing at the thematic as well as stylistic level. Being a woman Anita Desai realizes the feminine sensitivity more intensely by exploring the emotional layer and the delicate heart of a woman. Desai portrays the different facets of feminine psyche, revealing an awareness of various deeper forces, nine-tenths of which submerged make up the truth.

'Cry, the Peacock', the first novel of Anita Desai is concerned with the protagonist Maya's psychological problems. One cannot separate the body and the mind (soul) of a woman. A sound mind dwells in a sound body. Maya, the protagonist is a very sensitive woman who wishes to love and to live. She makes her mind to marry Gautama who is much older than her as chosen by her father. Maya is unhappy and unsatisfied with her husband's rationalistic approach towards life. With his negation and denial she feels alienated. Furthermore to add to her miseries she haunted by the prophecy of albino astrologer, who creates a fear psychosis in her mind. Unable to bear with it she kills her husband and herself.

In her novel 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' Anita Desai propagates the reality of a women's plight and her agony to be a part of society with her own identity. Anita Desai describes the marriages in India and the various complexities involved with them. Self-revelation is the main thrust of the novel 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' The entire story deals with mental and emotional struggle-an inner fury which makes us think about the various problems of the Indian women in society and life.

In the novel 'Fire on The Mountain' she explores the inner emotional world of the ageing women in India. The protagonist Nanda Kaul is not happy with the arrival of her psychological ill and unsociable great granddaughter, Raka. Nanda wants a complete isolation and alienation after her husband's death and being deceived by her husband who had an affair with a teacher lasting all his life. As Vice-Chancellor's wife and the head of a large family, Nanda had a hectic and disturbed life. She had longed for privacy all through her life and at last she got it in the hills of Kasauli. Now she does not want anyone and nothing else, a bare and empty life.

Trying to stop a child-marriage for monetary gains, Ila Das is ended up with rape and killing by the child-bride's father, to prove women as the weaker section of society and he rules the women. Sexual violence in India has placed women even at her older age insecure and how violence can intrude in society and life.

In her another novel Voices in the City, Monisha is an intelligent girl. She is deprived of freedom like Maya. She is also worried and unhappy. Like Maya, she yearns for freedom. She wants to assert her individuality. So she has to face the hostile attitude of her father, husband and her mother-in-law.

Anita Desai, an expert in delineating the lacerated psyche portrays the ontological insecurity, alienation and anguish of uprooted individuals in Bye-Bye Blackbird and Baumgartner's Bombay. Desai depicts the gnawing

sense of immigrant sensibility in *Bye Bye Blackbird* through the three different yet related characters Dev, Adit and his English wife Sarah. Adit employed in England marries Sarah. In order to accommodate oneself in a new culture and country, one has to tolerate and adapt to the circumstances. When Dev visits England to pursue higher studies he is shocked to find Adit swallowing the humiliations thrown at him. But Adit loves the culture there, for the economic and social freedom. Adit slowly realizes that he is still a misfit and his final visit to his in-laws disenchant him. The truth that he is an Indian and can never breathe freely in England, dawns on him. Adit is shocked when Sarah shuts him out with a long and a snap.

Baumgartner's *Bombay* is the moving account of a homeless, nationless man. He has nowhere to go to regain his lost identity. Hugo is an exile driven out of Germany due to racial discrimination. Baumgartner's *Bombay* is the story of Hugo from his affluent childhood days in Germany to the horror of his murder in India by another German.

Desai has brilliantly portrayed the dilemma of uprooted individual through these two novels. Desai contracts the ways of the West with those of the East in her novel *Fasting, Feasting*, where socio- spiritual awareness results in lasting ecstasy.

Anita Desai has given a new dimension, vision and face to the Indian novel in English by emphasizing from outer to inner reality. She explores the inner world of her protagonists and reveals the deeper forces in creating the feminine sensibility. She also conceptualizes that feminism is never static; it depends a lot on their socio-cultural and regional background along with the traditions. She highlights that the body- psyche relationship is mutually interdependent and complimentary in nature.

In her novels, Desai broadly and effectively deals with the themes of alienation, marital discord, disharmony, seclusion, existentialism, quest for identity, rectitude and feminization of ageing. Anita Desai's characters can be classified in two distinctive groups- those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and those who compromise. Like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Desai's themes too deal with human nature and human relationship.

CONCLUSION:

Among all literary forms, fiction reflects the contemporary social conditions. With the advent of the 20th century, the novels emerged with varied perspectives of the attitudes towards the imposition of traditions, re-interpretation of mythology, an analysis of the family structure, caste system and the status of women in the patriarchal social organization. The early writers presented the traditional image of a woman like Sita or Savitri but the contemporary writers emerged with a new woman, who does not want to lead a passive married life of sacrificial and shadowy creatures. Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, making society aware of women's demands and a medium of self-expression. Thus, not re-writing History of India but 'Her-story'.

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