

## (RE) DEFINING THE INDIAN WOMAN: INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Indian woman who constitutes half the population of the country have a paradoxical existence, as sometimes she is worshipped, sometimes reduced to the most helpless and suppressed member of the society. Since time in memoriam, literature has been the mirror of the society as it reflects the culture, traditions, and life of the people of that society. The dichotomy of Indian woman's life is recorded in many pieces of literature. The first novel, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, written in English was published in 1864; since then Indian English fiction has revealed to the world, the woman of the Indian society. There have been many milestones in Indian English fiction like Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, which clearly played the defining role in the representation of Indian woman. But as society has evolved; so has the Indian woman. The literature produced shows the evolution and brings out the change in the role, dreams, desires and expectations of a woman.

This paper examines how literature especially, Indian English fiction has depicted the changing status of Indian woman and at times how it has also been the medium for woman to express her needs and expectations.

*'Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi  
Rupecha Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitrii.  
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayanetu Rambha,  
Shat Karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni.'*

[Like a slave while working/serving; a minister when counselling/advising; Goddess Lakshmi in her looks/personality; the earth in forbearance/endurance; a mother while feeding; Rambha, the celestial prostitute, in bed; these six are the true characteristics of an ideal wife.] (Acharya 351)

Who is the ideal woman? One who has these six characteristics? But then who decides, who is the ideal woman? Going by the history of woman in the Indian society, the characteristics of an ideal woman was clearly enlisted by Manu in his famous *Manusmriti* which gradually became the law. Hence since ages our tradition has ingrained into us that a woman is a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother, but rarely an individual. Her only aim in life is to please or keep the men in her life happy. Our art, folklores, literature, traditions all have been the exponents of this thought, where we applaud the sacrificing mother, the obedient daughter and the chaste wife. In the said footsteps Indian English fiction also inscribed the woman in the Indian society, but their representation evolved with the evolution of the Indian woman. This paper is an effort to chronologically present the changes in the status of woman which were reflected by the Indian English novelists in their work.

Indian English literature which started with Bankim Chandra's *Rajmohan's wife*, received recognition as a separate genre only after three stalwarts came into the literary scene, namely, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayana. With the themes potent to Indian subcontinent and philosophy of life deeply inspired by Indian culture and tradition, they wrote novels in English. The "big three" as they are mainly called started writing in the 1930's and gave altogether a direction to the Indian English Fiction. Mulk Raj Anand's works such as *Morning Face*, *Untouchable Coolie* etc. brought recognition; while R. K. Narayana created a niche for himself by his work *Swami and Friends*, *Guide*, *Bachelor Of Arts*, *The Dark Room* *The English Teacher* etc.; and Raja Rao with his *The Serpent and The Rope*, *The Cat and The Shakespeare*, *Kanthapura* etc. Their writing is mainly said to have focused on social realism as it mainly explored themes like poverty, social discrimination on the basis of caste and struggle for independence. However, the women characters that they depicted were mainly part of the family or society that was the centre of the story. Even in some cases, where women were important characters, they were depicted in the traditional image of women- subordinate, self abnegating and sacrificing.

Some deviations were seen where the female character was shown as an individual like R. K. Narayan's Rosie in *The Guide* and Mulk R. Anand's Gauri in *Gauri*. But often repeated image of women with no individual identity was depicted. Their existence was seen in relation to either their men, their relation or to the society. They were considered as the silent observer of the happenings. Their existence went unnoticed and as they remained the silent sufferers for no fault of theirs. It was the men and the society who outlined and framed their orchestration and they remained the subservient followers.

Besides the great trinity, Bhabani Bhattcharya, and his *Music for Mohini*, *He who rides a Tiger* and *Shadow from Ladakh* contributed to the corpus of Indian English Fiction. Manohar Malgoankar with his passion for history endeavoured to bring authenticity in his works. Another well known writer of that era was Khushwant Shigh whose *A train to Pakistan* won rave reviews for its realistic depiction of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Yet what can clearly be noted that all these writers concentrated on the social issues but did not treat women as a separate entity. Her condition in spite of its degradation was dealt with the other themes like poverty, struggle for independence, caste issues and social prejudices.

In this regard, Dr.R.S.Pathak in his book *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, states:

The earlier novels by Indian women novelists project the traditional image of woman. But as times changed, the portrayal became realistic with a thrust on her sense of frustration and alienation. The characters created by them, like their creators, were torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. Their crisis of value adaptation and attachment with family and home pulled them asunder. The plight of the working woman was still worse, aggravated by her problems of marital adjustment and quest for and assertion of her identity. (12)

In the decade of the fifties Indian English fiction, which was dominated by male writers saw the emergence of a few women novelists like Kamala Markandaya and Shanta Rama Rau. These women wrote novels focused on women characters of different social classes. However, the image of women that they portrayed was the one inherited from their male counterparts and their predecessors. They continued with the established traditions and sustained the depiction of the heroine as the suffering wife. Hence, they presented the different version of the same image of woman idealised in her patient suffering.

Kamala Markandaya's very first novel *Nectar in the Sieve* (1954), which dealt with the theme of rural poverty and a woman's constant struggle against it. Her other novels *Some Inner Fury* (1957) *A Silence of Desire* (1961), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966) etcetera show her women characters struggling between their desire to assert as human being as well as accomplish their duties of a daughter, wife and mother that they inherit from tradition. While delineating the Indian society she also brings out how turbulence in the society and family affects women more than men. Kamala Markandaya is one of the most accomplished first generation women novelists of India. And her achievement lies in bringing the Indian women to the forefront. Her works revolve around themes like east-west encounter, confrontation between tradition and modernity as well as clash of values, all in context of women.

Ruth Praver Jhabwala who came to India at the age of 24 after her marriage to a Parsi architect became a critic of the Indian society and published eight novels. Her writing revolves around the upper middle class people of Delhi amongst whom she lived. Her works show her awareness of the changing position of women in the Indian family and the conflict arising due to the change in attitude of women. Her fictional world pervades domestic atmosphere where women occupy the central position and tussle hard to achieve liberation, within the limits of the family. Jhabwala skillfully presents the conflict in the domestic life and familial relations of Indians under the influence of western culture.

Besides, these novelists grounded in their milieu, wrote stories related to issues such as effects of industrialisation on a village, migration to urban area, confrontation between western and eastern ideals. Therefore, in the works of these writers the social and political problems formed the backdrop. Their concern for women was usually related to social problems like poverty, which dominated the lives of most of their protagonists. Compared to their male counterparts these writers gave some prominence to female figures in their works. But the focus on their novels was not so much on the woman herself as on the themes that carried social overtones.

In Indian English fiction of the sixties the transition of the heroine from a traditional self-effacing woman to the bold educated woman came after the emergence of a new generation of writers. These women novelists revolted against the idealised image of woman. Writers like Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, not only revolted against the literary traditions but also broke away from the traditional image of the Indian woman. They brought to light not what the tradition expected woman to be but what the actual modern educated middle-class woman was and what she aspired to be.

In her novels, Nayantara Sahgal portrayed urban middle-class women who are conscious of their emotional needs and struggled for self-fulfillment, questioned the existing traditions and social norms. Her first published novel was *A Time to Be Happy* (1957) but her novel, *This Time of Morning* (1965), which deals with the criss-cross of personal and political ambition, is considered her best work. However, in spite of their revolutionary ways Nayantara Sahgal's protagonists remained an enigma as their minds were left largely unexplored. Besides, most of her novels depict a strong political background which is as much the focal point as the heroines. A great deal of Indian English fiction in the earlier decades was therefore addressed by the political and social landscape during and after independence and this structure had no room for the stories of women who live "ordinary" lives. In most novels with a broad canvas external factors determine the way the story takes shape. In all her novels we observe that along with the political scene she often combines themes like man-woman relationship, their marital problems and emancipation of women. She portrays the complex cultural formations where women characters seek fulfillment and self-expression within marriage but if it is not possible, they step out of the bond to live as free individuals. She emphasises the need for renewed wisdom in which a woman is treated as man's equal and the relationship gets strengthened with reciprocal conviction. Jasbir Jain in her essay on Nayantara Sahgal commends the strength of Sahgal's female characters by adding that,

Placed within domesticity her early heroines gradually move on to wider spaces, areas of competition and face problems of survival and this movement blurs the boundaries between the home and the world, rather than submit to the separation between them. The self is always in question as the individual struggles with the imposition of roles which tradition and convention thrust on her. (116)

An important development in Indian English fiction came with the gradual shift from the portrayal of the external world to the inner world of the individual. Literature took a turn towards the depiction of states of mind rather than holding up a mirror to society. It was Anita Desai, who with her path-breaking novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, ushered the trend of the psychological novel in India. In her works, the focus of interest lies in the portrayal of the innermost thoughts and feelings of the characters rather than action. Stylistically, she brought the stream of consciousness technique to Indian English fiction and revolted against the conventional plot by replacing it with the quest motif. Through this technique Anita Desai explores the working of the thought process which is a constant feature of a human mind. She introduced the psychological aspects of the Indian women which were till then an undiscovered realm. Her writing presents a kaleidoscopic image of the inner turmoil within the psyche of her protagonists. Anita Desai probes deep into the dark interiors of the human psyche and successfully portrays the problem of isolation and alienation in modern society. Her female protagonists are unable to connect with society and therefore feel tormented by their own consciousness that lead them to the problem of hyper sensitivity.

Anita Desai's success lies in her concentration on women protagonists to show the turmoil and tension of the woman as a sensitive person. She also portrayed the assertive and educated woman. Through Anita Desai's novels, for the first time the Indian woman had found a voice. Commenting on this issue, Vijayalakshmi Seshadri remarks :

Anita Desai's heroine, Maya, was the first of her kind to represent the author's documentation through fiction of a radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of ideal womanhood. The passive female surrenders her place to an intelligent sensitive woman who asks endlessly questions of life in order to elicit meaning from experience.(57-58)

Hence her works were a revolt against the traditional portrayal of female figure as a passive heroine idealised in her suffering and self-effacement. She introduced the modern educated woman with her fears, frustrations, anger, helplessness and alienation caused in the transitional Indian society. Her novels show a break from the collective to the personal, from the communal to the individual. They depict the quest of a woman who struggles to find a "space" and "voice" of her own.

Towards the seventies the middle-class emerged as a dominant class in urban India. A product of this class was a new generation of writers like Dina Mehta, Rama Mehta, Jai Nimbkar, Raji Narasimhan, Bharati Mukherjee and Shashi

Deshpande. What was common in all their writings was the same pre-occupation with the predicament of the modern educated woman. Following the path shown by Anita Desai, these writers explored the mental state of the urban woman caught in the conflict caused by her traditional upbringing and the revolutionary ideas.

The Indian English women novelists of the last few decades of the twentieth century portrayed the post-independent educated woman brought up in the urban middle-class family. Enriching their works with their own experiences, they gave life to their heroines by making them realistic rather than idealised. Vijayalakshmi Seshadri terms their writing as “new tradition” and enlists the following features which brought in a new trend in Indian English fiction:

Firstly, it is assumed that the new tradition thrives on a deliberate rejection of a *lineage* as far as the thematic aspect of the novel is concerned and that it is primarily interested in the individual, that is to say the woman. The conventional plot (i.e. romance in its many variations) is replaced by the quest of the heroine.

Secondly, the journey to selfhood and freedom that constitutes the burden of the ‘female experience’ becomes a central motif. This motif of self-exploration, which runs through the entire corpus of women’s fiction, by its very nature, rids the female figure of all the existing stereotypes and turns her into a ‘questing protagonist’. (60)

The novels of Shashi Deshpande concentrate on woman as the central figure and theme. She brought to the forefront, first of all, the sensitive woman troubled and hemmed in by the social shackles, which bind her to traditional attitudes and expectations. She does not use the thought pattern given to her by the patriarchal order. She attempts to evolve her own thinking process and her own intellectual pattern. Hence, Shashi Deshpande probes the mental states of the protagonists, their social and inter-personal relationships and their roles as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. Moreover, she depicts the discord and disappointment in marital relationships caused by the traditional attitudes held by men. There is a complete lack of communication and understanding because women are meant to deny their needs. They need have little potential beyond the domestic sphere. Hence, what mostly dominates her works is the woman’s frustration in her attempt to achieve personal autonomy within the conventional marriage by seeking equal partnership and mutual understanding. The crux of her works is the modern woman’s journey towards self-realisation and fulfillment and the difficulties faced in it because of her domestic roles as wife and mother. The quest for self-fulfillment is often manifested in the form of a conflict between tradition and individualism.

Meena Shirwadkar in her book, *Image of Woman in Indo-English Novel* comments, “Writers appear not to have paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated earning wife and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family.(45)” Shashi Deshpande completely revolutionized this unexplored realm with her writings. She has continuously published novels and won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, which established her as one of the prolific writers in Indian English Fiction.

In this regard **Antonia Navarro-Tejero, in her essay *Modern Indian Women Writers in English*** remarks,

Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonic versions. In conclusion, the work of Indian women writers is significant in making society aware of women’s demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression and, thus, re-writing the History of India.

After 1980s with writers like Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Namita Gokhale, and Shobha De the problems faced by educated Indian women in diverse section of the society became a common theme. Arundhati Roy is the author of the novel, *God of Small Things*, which received the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997. Her novel claimed immense critical acclaim from readers and critics throughout the world. The novel presented Ammu as a bold and courageous women who defies the norms of the society for her love for Velutha, an untouchable. Manju Kapur the winner of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book (Eurasian section) has earned critical acclaim as well as commercial success both in India and abroad with novels which emphasises her consistent effort to bring to forefront the predicament of women in the Indian society. Kapur projects strong assertive female protagonists and through them addresses issues like female emancipation, their physical aspiration and their efforts in repositioning themselves in the present social environment. Kapur has presented her female characters as educated aspiring individuals but are caged within the confines of a male dominated society. She has presented women from Indian traditional backgrounds to those who have migrated to foreign lands. And in all her work she consistently maintains the questioning attitude of women and her inability to accept subordinate position. Her famous character, Virmati is the precursor of liberated

women who revolts against traditional role of a woman even in the pre independence era. Virmati marks the strength of the Indian woman who strives to fulfill her dreams under immense pressure but does not surrender.

Namita Gokhale is also a well known name in Indian English Fiction. She has attracted readers as well as critics' interest through her works in which she has explored myriad themes from changing status of women to the reinterpretation of mythologies. In her first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* she projects and gives voice to a woman's vision and her ideas of independence, and *The Mahabharata* interweaves real life characters with old mythological characters to create new meaning. Shobha De another popular women novelists of recent times is often criticized for her sagas of Page 3 society and its derth of values. Anita Nair is another name amongst the emerging contemporary women novelists whose work focus on understanding human psychology by positioning her women in different situations.

Apart from the above discussed novelists there are many aspiring new novelists who have contributed towards enriching this genre through their commendable works and are projecting the change in the life of Indian woman. Some of their fiction is also termed as chick lit, like Advita Kala's *Almost Single*, Rajshree's *Trust Me*, Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor*, *Marrying Anita* by Anita Jain, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's *You Are Here*, Tishaa Khosla's *Pink or Black*, Smita Jain's novel, *Kkrishnaa's Confessions*. All these novels depict the modern independent women's views on marriage and sexuality. Although most of these writers write exclusively for the urban crowd they have contributed immensely in changing the image of woman. Their writing does not talk of the balance between family and career. Their heroines represent the ambitious women whose primary focus in life is career and whose sexuality is not a taboo or a symbol of the family honour rather their sexuality is their personal matter. They present a new set of 'new woman' as Rama Lakshmi in her 2007 article published in The Washington Post remarks, "Indian bookstores these days are stocking up on a new kind of English-language novel – the kind in which twentysomething urban women put their careers first, ridicule arranged marriages and wrestle with weight gain" (Lakshmi). Although the writing and the content is far removed from fitting into the category of *écriture féminine*, this new woman created under the "chick lit" label completely deconstructs the image of Indian woman as they present what V K Karthika, publisher and chief editor at Harper Collins India, says this woman "is single, has a career and is willing to have fun, take risks and find a man her way, and not necessarily her family's way. It is a woman we have only read about in books from the Western countries and now, suddenly we are finding her on Indian roads" (Lakshmi).

## CONCLUSION

Hence, while analyzing the changing status of woman in India we find that the traditionally imposed image of woman better known as 'Sita-Savitri' image has undergone a major change. Indian woman today cannot be defined as someone silent, subordinate and sacrificing human being. She is an individual with a voice of her own, with aspirations and identity. The Indian English Fiction which highlights the status of woman in the Indian society clearly celebrates the new Indian woman by showing the change in the woman and her aspirations. The credit goes to the Indian women writers whose writing was initially criticized as kitchen literature, chick lit or feminist literature catering only to the female issues. It did focus on female issues but not exclusively as revolt but a gradual change that the life and thought process of Indian woman underwent. In their endeavour to write about this change the contemporary women writers wrote about the feelings and aspirations along with the burden and frustration of today's modern educated, middle-class woman in the society. Since 1980 the Indian woman has taken a centre stage and is not just a supporting character in the novels produced by Indian writers. She is the central character, it is her story that is the focus, her problems and dreams are not always man centric, rather they are mostly her individual aspirations in conflict with the patriarchal norms.

So, if education, industrialization, and many other factors changed the life of the Indian woman, Indian English fiction recorded it, step by step, inch by inch. It recorded her discomfort with the patriarchal order, her dream to prove herself, her dilemma to choose between career and family, her physical and psychological needs, her struggle to gain individual recognition in family and society and most importantly it recorded her break from the Sita-Savitri image of self- abnegating, sacrificing, subdued member of society and family.

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