



The Contribution of Women Writers in Indian English Literature

Dr. Pankaj D. More

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Late Dattatraya Pusadkar Arts College, Nandgaon Peth, Tq. and
Dist. Amravati, Maharashtra, India

ABSTRACT

In post independence India when women's education had already commenced and life had started changing, a new woman started emerging. The spread of education inculcated a sense of individuality among women and aroused an interest in their rights. Post-independence literature in India portrays all these trends and voices the clamourings of women for a new and just way of life. Indian English literature came under the impact of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960's, a second wave of feminism. Women started to write their womanhood. They speak women's dreams and speak their bodies. The women writers include Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Anita Nair and Arundhati Roy brought these changes in their works. The Indian literary scene, dominated by men as active forces, always had a gap – it told the story of half of humanity through the voice of the other half. These women writers filled the gap and raised the voice of women in their novels.

Keywords: archetypal, feminism, emancipation, peasant, conflict, alienation, identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is regarded as a traditionally male-dominated society where individual rights are subordinated to group or social role expectation. In these roles, personality must not dominate the roles assigned in the societal frameworks. Consequently in such a set up, a purely social, platonic or intellectual relationship between man and woman becomes nearly impossible. A woman's individual self has very little recognition and self effacement is her normal way of life. Indian woman too as a part of that set up, has accepted it and lived with it for ages. Roles outside this i.e. woman as an achiever, as a leader, or as a strong individual are, by and large, either non-existent or rare. There are also exceptions but they represent the extraordinary types not the average ones. Both male and female Indian writers have seen women in these relationships. There are defied, archetypal images and there are also debased and degraded images. Literature also portrays a few insurgent minorities who protest against the existing ills. In the ancient Indian history, by and large, women have been defied, glorified and also regarded as myths. However, in reality most of the times, the contradictory state of affairs also existed. There was and perhaps it is there even today, a duality in the projection of the image of woman in literature. Simone de Beauvoir says:

Much more interesting are the insurgent females who have challenged this unjust society, a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful work. (Beauviour 718)

In post independence India when women's education had already commenced and life had started changing, a new woman started emerging. The spread of education inculcated a sense of individuality among women and aroused an interest in their rights. Women started economically independent and there was a striving for the realization of their own aspirations. Post-independence literature in India portrays all these trends and voices the clamourings of women for a new and just way of life. Indian English literature came under the impact of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960's, a second wave of feminism. Women started to write their womanhood. They speak women's dreams and speak their bodies. For as long as women did not write they were not heard. Women have inspired literature and the feminine theme has been a pivotal importance too. She herself is also a creator of literature and is all pervading. This is true of Indian women literature also. Indian women writers presented a rich variety of themes - from the theme of conventional woman to that of the new woman, reflecting in the process the changes that have been going on in the society. Post independence literature in India portrays all these trends and voices, the clamoring of women for a new and just way of life. The women writers include Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Anita Nair and Arundhati Roy brought these changes in their works. The Indian literary scene, dominated by men as active forces, always had a gap – it told the story of half of humanity through the voice of the other half. These women writers filled the gap and raised the voice of women in their novels. This paper is highlighting the significant contribution of these women writers, the change they brought about in the literary landscape. The shift from women as seen and projected by men to women as lived and experienced by women is most welcome. We find their self experiences of true liberation, social, cultural, educational, legal, economic and so on. We also find women's search for identity, equality, emancipation and East-West conflict in their novels.

Kamala Markandaya is the most outstanding novelist. She deals women from all strata of society. Her women are rooted to the tradition yet they are strong in mind. They are undeniably the forerunner of the doomed female of modern India. They fight a lone, silent, protected battle for their right to love and happiness. Her debut novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' (1954) presents a story of a peasant family. The outstanding character of this novel is Rukmani. She represents traditional Indian woman. Her daughter Ira represents the modern progressive woman. Both however are similar as far as their feminine sensibilities are concerned. Rukmani is the archetype Sita who follows the husband through thick and thin and in the process forgets that she is a person in her own. She accepts her husband's betrayal and moral weakness with calm resignation. She suffers silently. It does not mean that she lacks sufficient strength and courage to protest her husband. She accepts her husband because she loves him deeply and profoundly. Ever sacrificing and always supporting the family there is hardly a time when she questions her identity. Markandaya shows Indian woman as the pillar of the society supporting, strengthening and enduring everyone around her. Her women characters do not question the established norms. They accept their faith and follow the norms of the patriarchal society. Yet all the characters she has portrayed have feminist traits in the sense that they emerge as strong individuals after a break-neck fight with the circumstances. Some of the circumstances, reported in Markandaya's fiction, give evidence of her intense awareness of her identity as a woman and her attention to feminine problem.

Even Ira, the helpless girl in 'Nectar in a Sieve' emerges as a strong figure taking hold of the situation and finding her own solution. Though she is deprived of a happy married life on account of her barrenness, she gives birth to an albino child. A mother does not distinguish between a legitimate and illegitimate child. But society particularly traditional Indian society does not welcome such a child nor does it respect an unmarried mother. Ira shows the will power and mental strength to bring forth the albino child. Sarojini is again the

central suffering woman character in the novel 'A Silence of Desire'. This novel presents a conflict between tradition and change, spiritualism and scientific rationalism, faith and scepticism. Sarojini has been an ideal wife to her husband for 15 years. Like Rukmani, she accepts her husband's extramarital sexual relation. She says : 'Yet a husband destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere or devoid of good qualities..... must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife.'(Markandaya 44) These extramarital relations point up the inequity of the moral law in its application to men and women. Thus female characters are the meek victims of the atrocities of society. In the novel 'Some Inner Fury' Mira is torn between her passionate love for Richard and her patriotism. Despite their deep and lasting love for each other, she is mature enough to understand the hindrances to their union. In Mira we find the adolescent Indian girl changing into a fully mature woman. She is ready to meet the challenges of life. 'A Handful of Rice', 'The Coffer Dams' and 'The Nowhere Man' are the notable novels where the women are depicted in a effective way.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is also a prominent figure among Indian women novelists. She has produced a number of novels which deal with the problems of Indian women. Her novels include : 'To Whom She Will', 'The Nature of Passion', 'Esmond in India', 'The Householder', 'Get Ready for Battle', 'Heat and Dust', 'Three Continents'. Her novels have reflects the scenes of Indian women who are influenced by western culture and struggle for cultural identity.

Anita Desai, a very famous name in Indian English literature attained immense popularity because of creating real pictures of Indian women. Her projection of women is life like. She does not rest on revealing the feelings of alienation, neglect, submission and all kinds of women's suffering in her novels, but she raises a voice against gender discrimination. Her important novels are 'Cry, the Peacock', 'Voices in the City', 'Bye Bye Blackbird', 'Where Shall We Go this Summer', 'Fire on the Mountain', 'Clear Light of Day'. The chief women characters of her novels Maya, Monisha and Amla, Sita, Nanda and Ila Das, Vimla and Uma represent Indian women who suffer differently in a patriarchal society.

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the major Indian women novelists who has given a voice to women in her writings. Coming from a strong political background, she has dealt with politics in her novels. 'A Time to be Happy', 'This Time of Morning', 'Storm in Chandigarh', 'The Day in Shadow', 'A Situation in New Delhi', 'A Voice of Freedom' are her important novels. Modern politics which has gone a distance away from values and ethics can easily be noticed in Sahgal's novels. Maya in 'A Time to be Happy', Rashmi and Uma in 'This Time of Morning' and Saroj and Mara in 'Storm in Chandigarh' all believe in premarital and extra marital relationships. Sahgal's portrait of women characters symbolises so-called modern ambitious women who embrace and involve themselves in all kinds of activities, sometimes ignoring traditional, cultural and moral norms.

Shashi Deshpande's novels also investigate women's problems in the male-dominated Indian society. They deal with traditional and cultural values and at the same time with women's struggle for their rights, freedom and thirst for individual identity. Her important novels are 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', 'Roots and Shadows', 'That Long Silence', 'The Binding Vine', 'A Matter of Time' and 'Small Remedies'. Her three chief characters Saru, Indu and Jaya of first three novels represent modern women who enjoy freedom from traditional, cultural and social restrictions. Saru, the protagonist of 'the Dark Holds No Terrors' believes in inter-caste marriage and marries a man of a lower caste. She does not like the rotten tradition. She is a pure romantic and wishes to enjoy her life with full freedom. Indu, the protagonist of 'Roots and Shadows' is also like Saru, a modern girl, who does not believe in casteism. She is also an example of a romantic girl who believes in love and not in

social customs. Through these characters the novelist invokes in the young women the will to fight against social restrictions which come in the way of their progress and development.

Manju Kapur's prominent novels are; 'Difficult Daughters', 'A Married Woman', and 'Home'. Her 'Difficult Daughters' has been translated into many languages. Set around the times of Indian independence and partition, the novel deals with the theme of woman's struggle for existence. Virmati, the chief character of the novel, is a modern girl and marries Harish, a married professor of English. The novel explores different roles of a woman in the family and her demand for love and affection from a man. Being the eldest among eleven children, Virmati plays the role of the second mother. She looks after her brothers and sisters besides the household work but instead she is abused by her mother Kasturi. Her second novel 'A Married Woman' is set around a socio political turmoil of Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid. It is a story of an educated, upper middle class woman. It is an honest and seductive story of love, passion and attachment.

Shobha De, a true feminist, deals with the issues and problems in the contemporary society in a quite different manner in her writing. Her female characters are multidimensional like human beings, a splendid mixture of virtue and vice. Her characters are working women, socialites who are intrinsically attracted towards the world of glamour. Their problems are different from the rural women as portrayed in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. De painted confident, demanding and asserting Indian women. Her writing was a big blow to the established norms in our society which viewed marriage and men as the only orbit in which women's world revolves. De's novels make a deviation from traditional norms. Her female characters resist to the idea of marriage. They are modern new woman, independent in every way. Their breaking out of the bonds of matrimony and finding her feet into a profession of their choice display the shades of their character. They show off the traditional conventions of moral values and seductively rise to the social status of the upper classes. Whether it is Karuna in 'Socialite Evening' of Asha Rani in 'Starry Nights', their struggle is more with the inner self than with the outer world. Married women of De speak about their inner life. There is no emotional attachment, no love, no sharing. Her novels are realistic and concrete portrayal of life experiences. Shobha De gives significant priority to sex in a woman's life. She recommends a mature attitude to sex. Hence all of her women are conscious of their sexual appeal. De has shattered the concept of marriage in her novels. Most of the De's women go out of the marriage like Karuna who finds her marriage uninteresting. Her two novels 'Snapshots' and 'Second Thoughts' deals with the restraints and frustration a woman feels in a marriage. Her novel 'Strange Obsession' deals with homosexuality through the characters of Amrita and Minx. All of De's protagonists speak the same language of dissatisfaction. Bored out of their unfulfilling marital relationship, some of De's women even go for divorce.

Anita Nair is notable woman writer in Indian English literature. Her works include: 'Malabar Mind', 'The Better Man', 'Ladies Coupe', 'Mistress', 'Magical Indian Myths', 'Goodnight and God Bless'. She too brings in light the suffering and identity crisis of Indian women in her novels.

Arundhati Roy came into literary limelight after winning the Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut novel 'The God of Small Things'. Kiran Desai, the successor of Arundhati Roy also got international fame after winning the Man Booker Prize in 2006 for her second novel 'The Inheritance of Loss'. The novel has the theme of a 17 year old girl, Sai, who lives in Kalimpong near Darjeeling and begins love affair with her mathematics teacher, Gyan, being unaware of the future consequences.

Thus Indian women writers have tried to focus on the grim reality of woman's life. They delve deep into their lives and bring out all that the social order restricted since time immemorial. They have portrayed man and woman relationship that they experience in patriarchal society. The themes of confrontation between tradition

and modernity and women's struggle for emancipation are the main thrust of their works. Somewhere they reflect racial conflicts and clash between Indian spiritual faith and western materialism and the reconciliation between both to show that both are complementary to each other.

II. REFERENCES

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