

Mirroring Indian Women: Reflections on the Works of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy

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ABSTRACT

The works of Indian women writers have always been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. In the realm of fiction, Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. They are no longer puppets in the hands of man. They have shown their worth in the field of literature through their powerful weapon of writing. Many Indian women novelists like Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy have explored the female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. As the country progressing from tradition to modernity, the Indo- Anglian literature reveals a chain of women writers lining up with each other. In such a transitional period women have been playing an important role as a harbinger of the change. Fiction by women writers contributes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. It provides insights, a wealth of understanding, and reservoirs of meanings and basis of discussion. Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women's issues and predicaments; they have women's perspective in the world. The emergence of women novelists is a distinct and major feature, if not a tradition of the Post-independence Indian English novel. These women novelists, who have high educational and intellectual standards, have sharpened their observation of life and have imparted a psychological depth to their writings. So these writers have created a new canvas for the younger generation of Indian women novelists and have projected an insider's view of female psyche, inner aspiration and their peculiar responses to men and things. This paper tries to mirror the Indian women by analyzing the three prominent Indian women novelists of the modern period.

Key words: Women, Fiction, Female psyche, Tradition and Modernity

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. The factors contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women writers have observed no domestic space. The Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. Proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intelligent, affluent and educated classes. Writer's works are often therefore, belong to high social strata and cut off from the reality of Indian life. The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers.

In the realm of fiction, Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. They are no longer puppets in the hands of man. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively and are showing it even today without any hurdle. The works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English. A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centered approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility.

Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. The theme is from childhood to womanhood-developed society respecting women in general. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self- sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their

victim status. A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. Women's presentation is more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past is.

As the country progressing from tradition to modernity, the Indo- Anglian literature reveals a chain of women writers lining up with each other. In such a transitional period women have been playing an important role as a harbinger of the change. Fiction by women writers contributes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. It provides insights, a wealth of understanding, and reservoirs of meanings and basis of discussion. Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women's issues and predicaments; they have women's perspective in the world. The emergence of women novelists is a distinct and major feature, if not a tradition of the Post-independence Indian English novel. These women novelists, who have high educational and intellectual standards, have sharpened their observation of life and have imparted a psychological depth to their writings. So these writers have created a new canvas for the younger generation of Indian women novelists. These women writers have projected an insider's view of female psyche, inner aspiration and their peculiar responses to men and things. The following are the three prominent Indian women novelists of the modern period.

Shashi Deshpande

The dominant and leading woman novelist of this generation is Shashi Deshpande. She is a popular contemporary Indian English woman novelist, short story writer and an author for children. She was born in Dharwad in 1938 in Karnataka, a daughter of renowned Kannada writer and Sanskrit scholar, Adya Rangachar, popularly known as Sriranga, a cerebral man who wrote plays of ideas. This Kannada playwright was described as the Bernard Shaw of Kannada theatre. She emerged on the Indian fictional scene in 1970s. Her first novel to be published was *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in 1980. Then it was followed by a short novella entitled as, *If I Die Today* in 1982. And in 1983, her second novel, *Roots and Shadows* was. And her prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award winner novel, *That Long Silence* was published in 1988, and *The Binding Vine* and *Come Up and Be Dead* both appeared in 1993. Her three latest novels are, *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000) and *The Stone Women* (2000). Deshpande published her tenth novel, *In the Country of Deceit* in 2008. Genuinely her writings reveal that she never wrote with the Western readers and critics in mind, as well as never wrote from the point of view of 'marketability'. She wrote of simple day-to-day Indian middle class life. Each of the novels of Deshpande offers sufficient food for thought especially in the context of human relationships and emotions.

The contemporary women writers project Indian women from different perspectives based on their interests and ideologies. Deshpande emerges as a novelist, preoccupied with middleclass women, typically housewives and middle class career women. The novels of Deshpande present the scenario of the typical Indian joint families, the working out of relationships within families and marriages and detached relationships in the family. Her work is not restricted to the urban middle class; instead she explores the lives of people who barely manage to survive within the norms of respectability and households which lack modern facilities and sophistication. The novels of Deshpande broadly project the social milieu of many complex relationships. In her novels many men and women are living together, journeying across life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. The young and old are equally caught in a world of transition faced with incessant quest for new moorings and guidelines. The younger generation women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationship within their given social world. Like Anita Desai, Deshpande, too was immensely influenced by Jane Austen's presentation of family crisis and its effects on other members especially of the younger generation under the umbrella of modernization. In the last few decades due to the modernization, the concept of marriage is going under the drastic changes and consequently it seems that new woman is suffering with various ordeals and predicaments in her marital status. The confusion, the subjugation and ultimate desperation or sudden desertion of the new woman in her marital life has been the central theme in the novels of Deshpande. Very skillfully and successfully she has represented the new relationship between human beings as brother and sister, mother and daughter, father and daughter and above all between husband and wife. Deshpande also deftly dwells on sense of guilt and loss, loneliness and alienation of young married woman pitted against ill-mated marriage and hostile circumstances around her. Traditional barriers and cultural shackles have no place in the lives of her heroines. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women who have suppressed under the male-dominated and tradition bound society. Thus her sincere attempt is to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, their inner cries, disappointments and frustration makes her novels realistic.

In presenting women's point of view Deshpande has very keenly put stress on clash between tradition and modernity, which is reflected in the form of generation gap and the conflict between women. Her young characters rebel against the traditional way of life, its rituals, ceremonies, customs and patriarchal values. She emerges as a very serious Indian English woman novelist who has very consistently and faithfully depicted different aspects of Indian woman's life, especially the middle-class woman's life.

Anita Desai

Anitha Desai is the best known of the contemporary women writers. Of all the contemporary novelists, she is indisputably the most popular and powerful novelist. She has made commendable contribution to the Indian English

fiction. She is known as the grand dame of Indian English Literature emerged as a prolific and promising novelist in India today. She was born of Bengali father D. N. Mazumdar, a businessman and German mother Toni Nime on 24th June, 1937, in Mussori and just at 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. Undoubtedly, she is one of the major voices and replicas of desolate Indian women, and thus echoing since 1960 as a most powerful contemporary Indian novelist in English. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is Desai's debut novel which sets exciting pace for her career as a novelist. With this novel, she became widely recognized as an exponent of the psychological novel in Indian English fiction. Her second novel, *Voices in the City* (1965) explores the existential themes of alienation from society, and husband-wife alienation. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), Desai's third novel, portrays the lives of Indian immigrants in England. Her other novels are – *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The Village By The Sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1987), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and *The Zigzag Way* (2004) that fuelled her into the arena of fame.

Like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Desai's themes too deal with human nature and human relationship. In the post independence Indian English fiction earlier women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabwala and Nayantara Sahagal and others, rarely portray the psychic tension and tribulation of contemporary woman in a traditional society. Unlike them, Desai portrays these trials and tribulations, and presents in the perspective of the present days understanding. In her novels, Desai broadly and effectively deals with the themes of rootlessness, alienation, anxiety, material disharmony, interpersonal relationships and patriarchal dominance. She has given a new dimension, vision and face to the Indian novel in English by shifting the emphasis from outer to inner reality. Her artistic skill lies chiefly in the delineation of the psychic conditions of the characters who indulge in self-analysis and discover themselves in the process. Sometimes they alienate themselves from their surroundings. Sometimes they grow neurotic, psychotic or schizophrenic. The young men are in arms against tradition and their own families, while the women are exposed to far greater tragedies and spiritual struggles.

Desai's female protagonists represent 'the creative release of feminine sensibility', which began to emerge after World War II. Her women characters are not ordinary, mainstream women but they are mostly from affluent families and do not have to worry about daily subsistence. Her protagonists, mostly centred in the cities, turn out to be drifting alienated products of a mixed heritage. Desai explores the inner world of her heroines and reveals the deeper forces at work in creating the feminine sensibility. The new emerging woman of the eighties is demonstrated best in the heroines of her novels. Man woman's complex relationship may be considered as the major theme, used regularly and recurrently by Desai in her novels to dramatically depict the psychological development and inward reality of her characters. She depicts characters who feel a terrible isolation in their suffocating darkish life and longing for love and communion which they perceive as 'the panacea of the ills of the world.' Her characters suffer intensely because of their futile attempt to find emotional contact, response and understanding and to escape from the tyrannical walls of sounds and from stifling dungeon like atmosphere. Her chief concern is human relationship.

Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which she projects through incompatible couples, very sensitive wives and ill-matched husbands. She is a mute observer, perceiving everything minutely and delicately and presents it dexterously in a form of action. Though her characters are self-conscious of the reality around them, yet they carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into fathom of the human psyche to score out its mysterious turmoil and chaos inside the mind of her characters.

Thus the projection of young women with their predicaments in the novels of Desai certainly evinces the onset of a new age. she appears and emerges as the true inheritor of Jane Austen, for her depiction is unsparing in revealing the warped violence of family life and lack of proper proportion and sense of responsibility among parents. Desai has portrayed the hurdles of marital discord in almost all of her novels and her characters or protagonists pass through crisis after crisis. Most of them are in a quest of better partners to seek their hearts within.

Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy is the luminary among the contemporary women writers. She is one of the women writers who wrote about the plights of the downtrodden and the suppression of women in a male dominated world and the influence of Marxism on the lives of the downtrodden. When women writers maintained their reservations in offering a critical evaluation of Indian politics, Arundhati Roy emerged as a beacon of light to guide the Indian women writers. She has got overwhelming reception with *The God of small things* (1997), which has put her in the forefront of all the other writers. Arundhati Roy, a prominent woman novelist of the decade shot into international limelight by her Booker prize winner debut novel *The God of Small Things* in October 1997. In this debut novel, she has very aptly and beautifully portrayed class antagonism and class exploitation; the problem of love laws; a forbidden relationship between a touchable and untouchable and above all, a highly debated theme of incestuous relation between the twins. In the last decade of the century young women writers in the Indian sub continent have been generally preoccupied with the woman's subordination under traditional laws. Roy has also included within her focus the oppression of the other marginal group i.e. 'untouchable'. Roy tries to sensitize this society to the cruelty of some of its traditions and

dehumanizing taboos. She depicts how the women and the untouchables are treated as impersonal and subjugate objects in this social structure, how things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology of an ancient culture which also cultivates the pervasive snobbery and violence by the 'touchables' towards the 'untouchables'. Thus the novel is depiction of powerful indictment of those ugly social forces which crush an innocent young man Velutha, who belongs to an untouchable class Paravan. The in-depth study of the novel shows that Velutha is a victim of many ugly social forces. It is also a comprehensive protest novel, which describes atrocities against the powerless, children, women and untouchables.

After 20 years, she has finally returned to fiction with a new novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, hulking, sprawling story that it is, has two main strands. One follows Anjum, a *hijra*, or trans woman, struggling to make a life for herself in Delhi. The other follows Tilo, a thorny and irresistible architect turned activist (who seems to be modeled on Roy herself), and the three men who fall in love with her.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness takes us on a journey of many years – the story spooling outwards from the cramped neighborhoods of Old Delhi into the burgeoning new metropolis and beyond, to the Valley of Kashmir and the forests of Central India, where war is peace and peace is war, and where, from time to time, 'normalcy' is declared. Anjum, who used to be After, unrolls a threadbare carpet in a city graveyard that she calls home. A baby appears quite suddenly on a pavement, a little after midnight, in a crib of litter. The enigmatic S. Tilottama is as much of a presence as she is an absence in the lives of the three men who love her. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is at once an aching love story and a decisive remonstrance. It is told in a whisper, in a shout, through tears and sometimes with a laugh. Its heroes are people who have been broken by the world they live in and then rescued, mended by love – and by hope. For this reason, they are as steely as they are fragile, and they never surrender. This ravishing, magnificent book reinvents what a novel can do and can be. And it demonstrates on every page the miracle of Arundhati Roy's storytelling gifts.

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary Indian Literary scenario, Indian women writers in English reflect the truth of Indian reality. They bear numerous responsibilities in the world of literature. All their major works have enjoyed immense academic attention across the globe and which have invited and produced a great amount of literary criticism especially on *feminism*. They have created a wide readership and a strong critical endorsement that reflect the attention of serious academicians and scholars. All the post-colonial and postmodern predicaments are wrestled to demonstrate a high level of self-consciousness, which continue, interrogate the social, philosophical, cultural issues of rape and sexual harassment of innocent women in the contemporary Indian society. Their works have initiated the emergence of critique of *feminism* with nationalism. Their intellectual insights, conceptual, theoretical and textual experiments have engaged and interpreted the complex colonial and postcolonial situations. They have also established a peculiar paradox of reading and appreciation eloquently responding to the issues of sexually harassed women both in post-colonial and postmodern issues of rape and exploitation on the Indian women in the contemporary society. As the civilization changes, the societies go through transformation, Indian women too are on a crossroad not to prove themselves but to get out of the shadows of men. Today, women dare to walk shoulder to shoulder with men. They are ready to expose the splendor and beauty of the world in which they live have a better role to play than remaining mere spectators within the four walls of the house. The men who thought they were superior to women have now recognized the potentialities of women; women are not just spectators but partners and coworkers. Women are not inferior to man in rank or performance in anyway. This is true in the field of literature too.

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