



## The changing image of women in Indian English fiction

Janet Paul, V.Vijayanand

Research Scholars Dept. of English Andhra University Visakhapatnam

### Narration

The history and culture of Indian women comes out of the institution of curtailment and bondage. Women were both valued and devalued for their capacity to be mothers, for their sexuality, for their physical and psychological strength in a society where strength was a masculine word. Women were forced to deny their essential aspects of self not only as a woman, but also as a human. All definitions and explanations were by male dominant culture. Far from being regarded as an individual in her own right, a woman was 'dictated' to by man. The traditional role assigned to her was that of dutiful wife and mother. Men laid down the whole code of morality for a woman and one of them being total subordination of her interests to those of her husband's. Marriage and the ideal of family life were reinforced as a moral and social institution. Kate Millet points out that patriarchy "subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male" (Selden, 131-132).

In a patriarchal set up, the role of women is confined to be passive and as sexual objects in order to please men's minds or bodies. Toril Moi believes that "the patriarchal traditions imposed certain social ideals and standards on women" (Moi, 209). Those who conformed were termed 'feminine' but those who

failed to do so began to be called 'unfeminine' and 'unnatural.' In Indian society, a woman is a non-person, an appendage, a slave to the master man. In Indian culture, she is not an individual in her own right but a medium through which man aspires for self-affirmation and self-realization. The culture that created Sita and Savitri has denied the rights of existence to woman save as daughter, sister, wife, mother etc. She is yet to achieve individuation and an authentic self-identity. Vern Bullough observes:

The very word Woman . . . emphasized a passive anonymous position. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wifman* literally 'wife-man', and the implication seems to be that there is no such thing as woman separate from wifehood. As individuals, with few exceptions, women did not count. They were mothers, wives, daughters, sisters (3).

To know, discuss and evaluate the role and status of women in literature, one must probe into the real status of women in different societies at various times of history. As Mary Ann Ferguson claims, a keen perception of history is inevitable to identify women's images in literature. She writes, "We must know something about women in history, about the psychological and sociological viewpoint that have existed and . . . Literature both reflects and helps to create reality" (10). Exposure to



reformist movements, economic independence and influence of Western feminist movements played significant role in bringing a change in the attitude and position of women in India. Impelled by an urge to seek a new and just way of life, women began to voice freely their feelings and experiences. However, such women were very few in number, while a majority of women still conformed to the tradition-bound concept of womanhood

To the production of fiction – a large audience, an Educated class, a new questioning of age old socio religious Dogma and a consuming urge for knowledge and interpretation of society . . .” (214).

Born in the latter half of the nineteenth century, fiction has become a powerful form of literary expression and has acquired a prestigious position in the Indian English literature. Rightly called as social document, “the advent of the Indo-Anglian fiction coincided with a wave of patriotism and social reform including the amelioration of the status of women” (Meena, 2). To K. S. Ramamoorthy the emergence of women writers during this period is of great significance and he remarks that “it marks the birth of an era which promises a new deal for the Indian women” (66). Further, he also recognizes the fact that the lot of the average Indian women remained relatively unchanged, shackled by the dogmas that are perpetuated in the name of tradition.

It is found that women write differently from men. While men write about affairs of state, war, business, espionage, and sexual encounters, women write about themselves. The main contention is that there is such a thing as a distinctive woman’s sensibility, and

mainly for the fear of ostracism. T. D. Brunton describes the Indian scene thus:

India had many of the cultural conditions favourable to the novel before she came into contact with the Europe. But now she has social forces actively favourable.

that it reflects itself in the literature of our times. Indian writing in English mirrors these concerns. The pioneers of the novel in English made their appearance in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the pre-independence India, the picture of Indian womanhood was stale and perverted. It was either exaggerated or neglected. It was unrealistic and imitative.

The thematic concerns of the early women writers led to the emergence of the Indian woman in the fast changing social milieu. Women in most of the early novels were essentially Indian in sensibility, endowed with the traditional feminine qualities of sincerity, love and resignation. The autobiographical element in these novels, the transition from a concern with objective social reality to an exploration of the feminine sensibility find their echoes in the works of later women writers and such they established their position as the forerunners of the Indian literary tradition in Indian English literature.

The Indo-Anglican novels of the colonial period present woman as romantic, charming cultured, graceful, wise, courageous etc. The novelists of this period treated women’s lives, experiences and values as marginal. They thought literature by and about women was inferior to literature by and about



men. For men, woman was either a goddess or a doormat.

The woman of the early Indian English novels had no identity. Their ideal was to obey the elders and follow the traditions. They suffered mostly owing to the infidelity of her husband or the stigma of childlessness. Meena Shirwadkar observes that early works of Anand and Narayan are dominated by the male point of view. They have both shown girls as subordinate creatures, as pictures of pity and suffering (47). Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya and Manjeri Isvaran present woman in the traditional image of the *Pativrata*. She is an object of pity and has no will of her own. To suffer in silence is her only life.

It was the Gandhian non-cooperation, which brought the Indian woman to the surface in family and society. The awakening of the women was one of the byproducts of the freedom struggle. K. M. Panikkar in *The Foundation of New India* writes:

It would be wrong historically to consider that the great part the women of India played in the non-cooperation movement and the position they have achieved for themselves in modern Indian life was the result of sudden transformation. For over a century the process had been at work .... The Brahma Samaj led the movement of emancipation. The ancient rules of Purdah were broken and Brahma women moved freely in society but this was a false dawn as it was far in advance of popular opinion.... It was, however, only with Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement that women were encouraged to come forward and participate in the life of the nation (Panikkar, 235).

With the spread of education,

there was a gradual erosion of faith in the traditional customs and values but it took some time for the modern ideas and western culture to fill in the vacuum so created. The gulf between Indian and Western cultures created a transitional society neither fully modern nor fully traditional. In the words of Bhabani Bhattacharya: "I think that women of India have more depth, more richness than the men. The transition from the old to the new, the crisis of value adaptation strikes deeper into the lives of our women than of our men folk" (2).

The Indian novelist, particularly since the 1930s, had begun writing novels that reflected the changing needs, realities and aspirations of Indian society. The Indian novel has largely concentrated on the problems of the individual (male and female) namely, the family, community and even the entire society. In Indian literature, the absence of the theme of love and personal relationships has been marked upon. Always extremely responsive to social, political, economic changes in Indian society, the Indian novelists (male and female) have taken up the oppression and suppression not only of women but also of untouchables, factory workers, poor farmers, landless labourers, as themes.

Today novelists depict a large number of women characters. Women now occupy the centre stage in the novels not only by women but also by men. These women characters show courage enough to fight with social evils and male superiority. To quote:

The women novelists have contributed to the Indo-Anglican fiction some intimate pictures of girls in isolated circles like the women in Brahmin or purdah-clad families . . . The girls are at the centre of



most of the novels by women writers and some are first person narrations by the central woman character. This has given scope to the feminine point of view to enter into the sphere of Indo-Anglican fiction (Shirwadkar, 48).

Though earlier Indian woman's portrayal in the fiction has been of a submissive, devoted, faithful, loyal, self-sacrificing woman, later a change is presented, of a radical woman, a revolutionary, a real-full individual with a personality of her own. The rise of the new woman out of the old is an event of immense historical significance. "The new woman, the feminine novelist of the twentieth century has, abandoned the old realism. She does not accept observed revelation. She is seeking with passionate determination for that Reality which is behind the material, the things that matter, spiritual things, Ultimate Truth" (Brimley, xiv). Shantha Krishnaswamy observes: "It is through the confines of a novel that we see what it means to be an Indian woman today" (33). Though quiet different from her western counterpart the Indian woman exposed to cross-cultural patterns and conflicts, is in her own right a supreme force in the novel.

There has been a spurt of new Indian women novelists from early twentieth century to early twenty-first century like Amrita Pritam, Attia Hosain, Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Santha Rama Rao, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Ruth Praver Jabavala, Raji Narasimhan, Jai Nimbkar, Namita Gokhle, Gita Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Anita Nair, Shakuntala Shrinagesh, Rama Mehta, Manju Kapoor, Bharathi Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni Banarjee, Kavary Nambisan, Arundhati Roy, Jaishree Misra, Meena Mehrotra and

Vimala Raina and many others who have worked towards the same end. They have been preoccupied with the problem of adjustment. They have tried to explore the feelings of women who fall a victim to the conflict between the traditional and the newly acquired values. Meena Belliappa discovers in Anita Desai's writings the "new direction that Indian fiction is taking in the hands of the third generation of urban writers . . . a deliberate growing away from debased tradition of fiction as romance and to a more meaningful wrestle with reality" (Belliappa 10). The conflict of tradition and modernity is a favourite theme of Kamala Markandaya and Jabavala. In most of their writings, women novelists have tried their best to free the female mentality from age-old control of male dominion and heralded a new consciousness in the realm of traditional thinking.

Viola Klein opines that, "The attitudes of scholars towards women reflected the status of women in a given society, the prevailing ideologies concerning women in a certain historical period and the author's personal attitude towards women" (3-4). Feminism in Indian English Fiction has been a series of counters and ordeals on the part of woman to strike roots, to belong and assert her identity in a transitional society. Woman, like man, is born free, but she has become the 'subordinate sex' 'the other'. This is changing as women now do not conform but rebel.

A plethora of women writers have constantly endeavored to capture the essence of the feminine consciousness through their works and provide glimpses of the "New Woman" who breaks through revered archetypes. Empowerment is only possible when it is



coupled with an awareness of the present situation. Indian women novelists present a new woman not an archetypal one in their works. Their vision reminds women that they too are capable of moving mountains and bringing about change, they being the change themselves. The New Woman's image of the woman is that of an emancipated one who can live life on her own terms. The New Woman portrayed in some novels depicts the woman's journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self. This awareness is the assertion of her individuality, her willingness to confront reality and not to run away from it. The new emancipated women are non-conformists who are discontented with the rhetoric of equality between man and women. They want to liberate themselves from the shackles of tradition and exercise their rights for the manifestation of their individual capabilities and the realization of their feminine selves through identity assertion and self-affirmation.

In thinking beyond femininity in its past and present representations, Indian women novelists have created narratives in which they alleviate the restrictions of gender, celebrate a changing femininity in which a woman becomes more like a man, psychologically and socially. In this context, they are challenging the very ground on which ethics are based through the deformations of gender. The new femininities invented and narrated by Indian women writers symbolize the pursuit of dreamed but true-to-life female identity including inappropriate unfeminine features such as intelligence, ambition, coldness and violence. The

troupe of femininity gives Indian women writers a flexible weapon with which to attack cultural misogyny. The male evocation of femininity as negative associations of inferiority and evil has probably been a fundamental feminist *raison d'être*.

Thus, fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment in Indian English literature. The struggle to establish one's identity and to assert one's individuality has led the women to wage a desperate fight against the existing social order of the day. It is therefore, imperative for women to determine their new role and to redefine its parameters. The portrayal of women in literature helps them to do so as it provides them with role models drawn from the sufferings of the women characters, harassed under the chauvinistic male domination. Their thematic concerns and ideological preoccupations paved way to establish the synchronic and diachronic developments and continuity in the construction of the subjectivity of women. The similarities and dissimilarities in the writer's perceptions of the selfhood of women, given their different socio-cultural milieu, suggest a continuum of different possible responses.

Literature in general and fiction in particular reflects the contemporary culture and social interactions of any country. As such, it gives insight into the set-up of society, traditions, norms and the social position or status of women and men, which regulate human relationships. Literature depicts the human drama in the backdrop of society where the lives, values and attitudes of men and women are undergoing major social changes. Therefore, study of fiction, especially by women, is worth attempting as it presents the women's



perspective, which is vital today to understand (the whole of humanity) the ignored and neglected class of human race.

### Works Cited

Belliappa, Meena. *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1972. Print.

Bhattacharya, Bhabani. "Women in my Stories." *Journal of Indian Writing in English*. Ed. G. S. Balarama Gupta. Gulbarga, India. Vol. 3. 2 (July 1975): 2. Print.

Brimley, Johnson R. *Some Contemporary Novelists*. London: Routledge, 1920. Print.

Brunton, T. D. *Indian Fiction-The Heritage of Indianess in Critical Essays On Indian Writing in English*. Eds. M. K. Naik, S.K. Desai and G.S. Amur. Madras: Macmillan, 1971. Print.

Ferguson, Mary Ann. *Images of Women in Literature*. Houghton: Mifflin Co. Boston, 1977. Print.

Klein, Viola. *The Feminine Character: History of an Ideology*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972. Print.

Krishnaswamy, Shantha. *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Ashish Pub House, 1984. Print.

Moi, Toril. "Feminist Literary Criticism." *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. Eds. Ann Jefferson and David Robey; London: Batsford, 1986. Print.

Panikkar, K. M. *The Foundation of New India*, New Delhi: Asia Pub

House, 1961. Print.

Ramamoorthy, K. S. *Rise of the Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publications, 1987. Print.

Selden, Raman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1985. Print.

Shirwadkar, Meena, *Image of Women in the Indo-Anglican Novel*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1979. Print.

Vern Bullough. *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes Towards Women*. New York: Penguin, 1973. Print.