



Journey of Women in the World of Indian Women Novelists in English

Dr. Rupal S. Patel
(H.O.D., English)

Shree M.P. & B.A. Patel (Detrojwala) Umiya Arts & Commerce College for Girls,
Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India)

It is said that those who name the objects, own them and those who rule the word, rule the world. Not only in the text but also everywhere one can see a deep rooted gender bias; but the bias has become part of the textual tradition. In all traditions, women have always been considered inferior and incapable of any serious thinking. The period in which they live, more or less the same perception and sex – stereotyping is seen in language and literature.

The introduction of English education in India not only brought significant changes in the middle class life style but also raised a consciousness of freedom in the minds of women. In India a few women writers in English have attempted to challenge the age old myths surrounding the woman. Some have succeeded in creating an awareness of the existing inequalities in society. The women writers have used the conflict between tradition and modernity. These women writers portray women facing the conflicts and problems issuing from the fusion of the traditional and modern values. They face the conflict between a personal fulfillment of desires and their duties towards family and children. Thus, most of the women writers have taken up the theme of the problem of adjustment and they have shown adjusting themselves to the ground reality. With their increasing consciousness as an individual, they have begun to assert themselves within the family and outside it as well. Sushila Singh rightly observes:

Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concern man either in his real life or his fantasy life (Singh : 1991 , 7).

In modern India, the novel has become one of the most prolific, comprehensive, lucid and sensitive registers to represent this complex social and cultural life.

The novel is the most important of all the literary genres of India today and women writers themselves have made tremendous contribution in the development of novel. Their writing has expanded its social range. They have eloquently voiced women's side of life – the experiences of man's 'other', society's marginalized and silenced half. They have brought to center – stage the ignored and unexpressed lives that have been on the periphery from ages.

They have accepted their responsibility to decode women's silences and bring women out of their invisibility. They have begun to deal with the theme of suppression and oppression of women. But all the women writers are not the carbon copy of one another in presenting the hidden voices of oppressed and silenced. There is a great variety of degree and shade in their respective approaches.

The first generation women writers before India's independence depicted women who were traditional in outlook. These women writers wrote mainly to voice their concern for the suffering souls – women of India. There was no anger, irritation or tension in their writing because they did not oppose the position of women decided by age old traditions and taboos.

But the post – independence women writers (the second generation women writers) are more realistic in their approach than those of the first generation women writers. They search for possibilities of social situations where women can attain distinctive identity and fulfillment without disrupting or demolishing the family and community. The woman's writing questions the patriarchal hegemony and the predominance of stereotyped, traditional gender role given to women. Most women writers have deconstructed the popular myths of masculine roles and ideals. Through their focus on women's side of the life story, these women writers have created a deep response and emotional richness in the Indian novel. K. Sachidanandan in his article "Women's Writing: Contemporary Trends" writes:

The novels by women present the awareness of the micro political in the society, analyze and expose the tactics used by patriarchy to alienate, control and marginalize women (Sachidanandan : 2000 , 6-7).



Thus, the search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self have become the prime feature of women writers in literature in the second generation women writers. Their contribution to English literature in general and fiction in particular is worth noticing and praiseworthy. Leading women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Santha Rama Rau, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Geeta Mehta, Rama Mehta, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Bharati Mukharjee, Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapoor, Dina Mehta, Namita Gokhale and many more have left their remarkable imprint on the readers of Indian English novel. The Indian women novelists articulate woman's aspirations, her professional endeavours, her newly formed relationship presented in various modes of resistance of patriarchal norms. To a varying degree and depending upon the individual writer's position, these novelists thematized the expediency of self - representation, protested against the limitations of women's lives and emphasized on resistance.

The major themes explored by these women novelists include the gender issues, female exploitation and oppression, the concept of being 'other' in a patriarchal society, the theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood, liberation through self quest, marital rape, sexual autonomy, human relationships, realism, magic realism, fantasy, the image of 'new-women', Indian culture, urbanization, indianness, migration, east-west confrontation, clash between tradition and modernity, struggle for independence and partition. Indian women novelists in English have created a position for themselves which becomes clear from the distinguished critical awards they have received in recent times. They were conferred with the prestigious awards like Booker Prize, Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Eurasian section) and the esteemed Sahitya Akademy Award which unquestionably establishes that women novelists are no longer 'others' in Indian English literary scenario. Although the recognition and acclaim that the Indian English fiction has received in recent years has suddenly attracted a lot of attention from the critics and readers in India and abroad. But what remains evident is that the early writers of Indian English Fiction have been read and analyzed from various points of view.

In Indian context the first woman novelist of this genre was Toru Dutt who wrote both in English and French. Some of the early women novelists include Raj Lakshmi Debi (*The Hindu Wife*), Krupabai Sattianadhan (*Kamala, A Story of Hindu Wife*). Their contribution in the development of Indian English literature is unique. They started a new era in the field of Indian English literature.

Kamala Markandaya, undoubtedly the most outstanding among the second generation women novelists, presents a cross section of the Indian society wherein her women characters go in quest for autonomy. Her women protagonists are the repertoire of transitional Indian society. The irregularities in the social system confine her women characters to the taboo ridden path. Her women are conservative and traditional in outlook. But most of her women manage to be independent in thinking while performing their traditional roles. Her works are a realistic delineation of the double pulls that the Indian women are subjected to between their desire to assert themselves as individuals and their duty in the capacity of daughter, wife and mother. She also points out how the socio – economic conditions affect the women most.

Ruth Praver Jhabwala, one of the leading Indian English novelists, finds life in India to be an overwhelming burden to European women. In fact, her novels are articulation of her own bitter experiences in an alien land. Preoccupied with the travails of the white woman in India, her delineation of the Indian women becomes limited and narrow which only leaves the impression of being pathetic. She is well aware of the changing values of Indian society and so portrays the predicament of the modern urban life which is twisting between the traditional Indian way of life and the western modernism. Though a majority of her women characters begin their married lives as non – conformists, very soon they learn to conform to traditions. She emphasizes on Hindu religion although Christianity is reflected here and there.

Santha Rama Rau believes in the strength of the traditional Indian culture even when it comes in contact with the western culture. Her characters have mostly international background. Her women characters are always in search of fulfillment. Most of her women are aware of injustice done to them. They are mostly depicted as victims of political incidents and they are declared as war criminals. They aspire to have the experience of 'living' and so they go in pursuit of artistic careers. Like Jane Austen, she is quite at home in portraying women characters. She also attempts to probe into the feminine psychology.

Born in a family of freedom fighters, which had politics in blood and with knowledge of politics and political figures in India, Nayantara Sahgal is indeed capable to write political novels of high quality. Her novels portray contemporary political realities.

Besides politics, the characters of Mrs. Sahgal reflect the changing facets of man – woman relationship in India. Her women characters are solitary individuals striving for self – assertion. Her fiction focuses on Indian women's search for sexual freedom and self realization. She presents the problems and suffering of women in marriage who feel entrapped, oppressed and doomed to the care of husband and home. Her women continue their fight against the hostile environment. They are positive in their attitude and refuse to accept defeat. Most of her women are aware of the injustice done to them in marriage. Some of them accept their fate voluntarily or involuntarily while most of them crave for freedom. In the views of Jasbir Jain:

[Nayantara Sahgal seeks to] interpret the rigid concept of virtue and chastity through her women characters who have a kind of untouched innocence and integrity (Jain : 1999 , 67).



In fact, Nayantara Sehgal shows the need for a new morality in which a woman is treated as man's equal. According to her, true marriage is a relation based on mutual trust between two human beings. If the partners of the marriage do not enjoy mutual love, trust and understanding, there is no point in their staying together as husband and wife. So, Nayantara Sehgal stresses living relationship between a man and a woman. In a way, she is a champion of individual freedom in women protagonists.

Kamala Das finds the traditional definition of women in relation to the social, cultural set rules and norms already prescribed by patriarchy. What is important in her representation of woman is that she at times places woman in a highly polarized world and at others redefines woman afresh once more from the feminine point of view; not on the basis of traditional assumptions about woman. In this way, she dismisses the stereotypes of woman in a culture and literature, but rather is bent on exploring the world of women. Female identity is redefined in an entirely new context and the old cultural definition of woman is ignored. She honours the individuality and dignity of woman as woman on an equal footing with man. The female characters in her novel are in quest for identity in a male – dominated society. The protagonists let themselves exploited sexually in their assertion for emancipation and search for identity. Even her autobiography *My Story* (1976) reveals her struggle for emancipation and search for identity.

Anita Desai is considered to be one of the most accomplished novelists. Her novels are peopled with women who are in perpetual quest for meaning and value of life. Her female characters refuse to surrender their individual selves. She is primarily interested in the portrayal of female protagonists as living in separate world full of existential problems and passions. Being hypersensitive, solitary and introspective, each individual is portrayed as an unsolved mystery. Their inability to compromise and surrender inevitably result in isolation and loneliness. In their existential struggle, they suffer intensely and tremendously but refuse to be crushed. Anita Desai has graphically presented the turbulent psyche of the modern Indian women. Her protagonists are intelligent, sensible and sensitive, but in an attempt to manage home and children and attain emotional fulfillment, they reach on the verge of mental crisis. She has represented the predicament of sensitive women characters trapped between tradition and modernity. Thus, Anita Desai differs from other women novelists through her method of the psychological exploration of her women protagonists who are essentially lonely.

During the seventies, Bharati Mukharjee alone deserves a remarkable place among women novelists. She is an Indian – American immigrant writer who liberates her women characters for a “New World Order”. The portrayal of her women characters is in fact her own inspirations and experiences in India as well as abroad. Her women characters are sensitive but lack the stable sense of personal and cultural identity. Most of them are victimized by racism, sexism and other forms of social oppression. She represents the struggle for the articulation of their repressed and silenced voice. Her women characters are an embodiment of the old – world dutifulness. Pushed from one disaster to another, they emerge as determined to change their destiny and explore the infinite possibilities of life.

Gita Hariharan, the recipient of the prestigious award *The Commonwealth Writers Prize* for the Best First Novel in the European region for her *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) represents women in the relationship with men and society. Her female protagonists pass through identity crisis. Her women are the representatives of the present day intellectual women and do not confront them with problems like loneliness and alienation. Her women characters are always thought provoking.

Shobha De is one of the most popular novelists of the modern time. She is a realist who represents women as sex – idols and playthings. Her popularity as a writer is her intimate understanding of the psyche of women and their problems. As quoted by the famous critic M. K. Naik in his book *Indian English Fiction: A Critical Study*, “she is more focused on writing, “‘entertainments’ rather than novels proper”. She is the producer of best sellers like *Starry Nights* (1991), *Sisters* (1992), *Sultry Days* (1994), *Small Betrayals* (1995), *Second Thoughts* (1996), *Surviving Men* (1998), *Spouse: The Truth about Marriage and Strange Obsession* which are sagas of high society, its cocktail circles with low ethics. She has tried to expose the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern society in which a woman wants to fly freely in the sky of freedom. She also talks about lesbianism. In her novels, she deals with the life of the upper class of society and examines the institutions of family and marriage. She describes the hollow, empty lives of the ladies of the wealthy classes of the Indian society and shows how the institution of marriage has been breaking up in the rich stratum of the Indian society.

Arundhati Roy talks about both women and untouchables. She shows how women and the untouchables are treated as impersonal objects in this social structure, how all things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology. She goes to the extent of dealing with incest, masturbation and genital organs. Arundhati Roy adopts a narrative which is satiric in tone and lashes her anger on the rigid age old caste system which dominates our society.

Shashi Deshpande's approach is different from that of other feminists. She has emerged as a prominent woman writer of the nineties. She occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male – dominated and tradition bound society. She has honestly portrayed their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations. She also deals with the excesses committed upon the female fold for centuries leading to their passive resignation. She reveals how the women revolt against it and try to search their own identity in the hostile world of male chauvinism.



But she has also consideration for a home – a home of peace and love that can provide security to the woman. She feels that security is also an important requirement of woman. So, if a home is there in a position to provide her safety and individual identity, she may not revolt against the home in that case.

Indira Goswami's contribution in this field is unique as she herself has suffered a lot in her life. From childhood to death, she has seen many ups and downs in her life and her pain is reflected into poetry. In this way, her writing is different from other women novelists of India. Her autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography* is a perfect proof for the reflection of her painful life.

Manju Kapur lives in New Delhi and is currently enjoying her retirement from Miranda House Women's College, New Delhi. She is the winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Eurasian section). She has earned critical acclaim as well as commercial success both in India and abroad. She has five published novels to her credit which emphasizes her consistent effort. The Commonwealth Award establishes her capabilities of being a quality writer. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) with the partition issue in the background, narrates the story of Virmati, her inter personal relationships, her search for control over her own life, her yearning for freedom to live her life according to her understanding and faces the consequences. Manju Kapur in her later novels, *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011) projects strong assertive female protagonists who raise female concerns and show courage to apprehend their destiny. The crux of Manju Kapur's work rests on addressing issues like female emancipation, their physical aspiration and their efforts in repositioning themselves in the present social environment.

Anita Nair, another name amongst the emerging contemporary women novelists, has proved her potential by her consistent work. She has published five novels and the oeuvre of her work consists of understanding of men and women psyche as well as her strong and indepth knowledge of mythology which she uses in her novels with expertise. Her novel, *Mistress* (2005) probes deep into the closed realm of Kathakali Dancers and gives a sensitive portrayal of their lives both from outside as well as inside. Her novel, *Ladies Coupe* (2001) is a strong advocacy of feministic concerns where she presents Ahkila, the protagonist in search of her identity. Her latest novel, *Lessons In Forgetting* (2010) is a novel of hope and forgiveness, of a new life after calamities, thereby giving a second chance to restore life and move ahead. With her knowledge of South Indian culture Anita Nair depicts realistic social settings to give authenticity to her background. Her ability to delve deep into human mind helps her create the intensity which keeps the readers spellbound.

Kaveri Nambisan is a surgeon by profession and we find her novels enriched by her medical experience. She has published six novels, in which her medical experience is prominently visible. Her novel, *The Hills of Angheri* is said to have an autobiographical touch. Nalli, the protagonist, aspires to become a doctor and dreams of building a hospital in her village. But as the story develops Nalli's emotional dream remains a dream and her life becomes a tale of few satisfactions as against much dissatisfaction. Her other important novels comprise *The Story That Must Not be Told*, *The Truth About Bharat*, *Almost*, *The Scent of Pepper*, *Mango-coloured Fish* and *On Wings of Butterflies*.

Namita Gokhale is also a well known name in Indian English Fiction. She has attracted reader as well as critic's interest through her novels like, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994), *The Book of Shadows* and *The Mahabharata* (2009) in which she has explored myriad themes from status of women to their interpretation of age old mythology. In her first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* she projects and gives voice to woman's vision and her idea of independence. Her novel, *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* exposes hypocrisy that is practiced in our society in the name of morality, where women are forced to follow immoral ways and are cheated by their male counterparts. *The Book of Shadows* is based on the theme of supernatural and in *The Mahabharata* she has interwoven real life characters with age old mythological characters to create new meaning.

Nina Sibal is a civil servant and married to India's top lawyer and cabinet minister Kapil Sibal. She has explored her writing capabilities through her three published novels. Her first novel, *Yatra* (1987) narrates the emotional account of a woman's journey towards self-realization. Her other novels, *The Secret of Gujjar Mall* and *The Dogs of Justice* (1998) are based on the traumas of gender and identity, faced by the Kashmir Valley during its political upheaval.

Thus, the Indian women novelists writing in English clearly show that women writers have made their permanent mark in the field of English fiction. In most of their writings, they have tried their best to free the female mentality from the age long control of male domination. In short, in their novels, the protagonists are mostly women characters isolated by the hypocritical and insensitive male domination. The women novelists have made tremendous change in the social, political and cultural fields and heralded a new consciousness in the realm of traditional thinking. If this tireless efforts on the part of women for women's sake go on, the days are not far when they will establish their own identity in the society.

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