

PRESENCE OF WOMEN VOICES IN INDIAN WOMEN'S FICTION

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Abstract: Over the past few decades women have contributed significantly to life and literature by interrogating and exploring their own lives and that of other women. Today Indian women's fiction is dealing with multiple issues concerning self and society. Women had denied for a long time access to education, equal rights, right to work and the freedom to choose. And much of women's writing is primarily a critique of social justice and equality in a patriarchal society.

Increasing numbers of women are today looking for literature which allows a certain degree of respect and dignity to the woman who fights and survives. Today it is not fashionable to talk of a character who suffered endlessly and could do little to alleviate her lot. Nor does one get carried away with the upper middle class sexual fantasies. Although much is being written and published in the form of books what one is looking for is convincing themes and inspiring subjects. A book that provides one with energy and lingers long after it has been put aside is always welcome.

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Introduction: Over the past few decades women have contributed significantly to life and literature by interrogating and exploring their own lives and that of other women. Today Indian women's fiction is dealing with multiple issues concerning self and society. Women had denied for a long time access to education, equal rights, right to work and the freedom to choose. And much of women's writing is primarily a critique of social justice and equality in a patriarchal society.

A common belief is that woman is incapable of making decisions. Her inferior state is the result of her distance from culture. I wish to argue that much of Indian women's fiction probes the ideology of gender, by placing it within a historical social reality and links it up with the issue of writing and sexual difference.

Women in a socio-cultural milieu suffer inwardly in the novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur. Marriages fail due to lack of understanding between man and woman. Communication is the basic drawback and speech is what they are wary of. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is one such woman who finds the life in Bombay full of ugliness and indifference. Her inner self resists the violence outside and she comes back to Manori island where she had spent her childhood. She is pregnant with her fifth child and wants to halt the processes of time so that she can avoid giving birth. She does not want her unborn child to face the harsh brutality of life. She is conscious of the "break" between the mother child dyad, conscious that once the child is born she would not be able to hold him for long. He too would grow and follow his own way like her other children. The maternal instinct is both jealous and protective. Desai brings out the essential dilemma and also recapitulates Sita's inward journey. Her reconciliation with her past and an acceptance of her future responsibilities. As we draw parallels between her and the legendary namesake in the Ramayana. We notice that Sita in Desai's novel is pregnant at the time of her leaving Bombay. Unlike her, the pregnant Sita was banished from the kingdom and could get back to Rama's kingdom after a long exile. The modern Sita is a suggestive transversion of the mythical figure. She chooses exile in an attempt to restore her self. For women with a heightened sensibility, solitude becomes dangerous and we have several examples of it in Desai's novels. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is a case in point. Her solipsism ends in the brutal killing of her husband whom she finds incapable of living. Monisha of *Voices in the City* burns herself to death. Mira

Masi in *Clear Light of Day* drowns in the well. The prospect of loneliness is as disturbing as that of being trapped in a loveless marriage. And Desai's women are constantly battling with boredom, inertia and ennui in her novels. Anita Desai is exploring the male-female dichotomy by feminising the male Arun in *Fastmg, Feasting*. Each of these men is trapped in their consciousness and is looking for fulfilment. Incapable of adjusting in their social milieu, they are as constrained and restricted as some of her women. Having said so, I wish to present that Desai aspires for "a literary ideal" *ardhnarishwara* "that combines the male and female attributes." And much of her writing is now focusing on a landscape which would recognise and receive the anguish and the aspirations of the individual, not confined solely to the differences imposed by gender. As we examine the entire body of her novels ranging from *Cry, the Peacock to Fasting, Feasting*, we notice a definite pattern. Most of her women are upper middle class unhappy women. It is the house that ensures them with a destiny. The search for self-identity begins in the house. In *Cry, the Pea-cock*, Desai's central protagonist reveals how "writing her self" is a basic necessity and yet it can neither save her nor protect her from self-destruction. Although the family is the chief matrix and the woman's life revolves around it yet none of the women in Desai seem to be able to reconcile to it. The metaphor of the house exists as a restricting force which can give neither peace nor joy. It muffles one's dreams and one is constantly hoping to escape its confines, inside the busy house where life is bound to duty and care for the others, women like Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* or Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* are looking for warmth and affection. Conventional lives have no appeal and it they crave for freedom, for change. Happiness eludes them. Desai challenges the prevalent stereotype of a woman whose aim in life is to find security through a husband and satisfaction through child-rearing. Marriage and motherhood prove least satisfying. As suggested by Desai, Indian mythology deifies woman:

Her ample bosom and loins, her enticing curves and buxom proportions make her not merely the ideal mother but the ideal woman—consort, lover, plaything. . . . Around her exists a huge body of mythology. She is called by several names—Sita, Draupadi, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi and so on. In each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife. Unswerving in her devotion to her lord. . . . The myth keeps her bemused, bound hand and foot. To rebel against it—either in speech or action—would mean that she is questioning the myth attacking the legend, and that cannot be permitted: it is the cornerstone on which the Indian family and therefore Indian society are built. (Desai 1999: p.972).

As a post-1947 Indian woman writer in English, Desai is focusing on the shift in perspective. The "voyage out" of her novels depicts something of the transitional world in which Indian women have found themselves. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* is an example of a woman whose education enables her to go against the conventional marriage plot. Although she says no to marriage, she does not reject her responsibility towards her brother Baba to whom she is a surrogate mother. She takes pride in her vocation as a teacher. The journey outwards thereby illustrates her ability to renegotiate the movement from the house to the city on equal terms. She may be seen as the "new" Indian woman and Desai as the Indian writer who has moved away from the love and marriage plot to the open-ended to affirmation of the possibilities of a woman's life.

Culture is primarily determined by male hegemony in Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur. And a brilliant example of it is Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*. Women emerge as victims of a deep malaise. If on one hand we have the unpublished writings of Mira, Urmi's mother-in-law as a site of inner struggle one also sees in Kalpana's comatose state a disturbing history of violence against women. Rape both in and outside marriage is a painful tragedy in Deshpande. And women can do little or nothing against it. Not only is Deshpande giving us a critique of society steeped in tradition but is also looking at some restrictive cultural norms that accord an inferior status to women. Married against her wish's young Mira is an aspiring poet whose life is cut short in childbirth. It is through her diary and a collection of 'unpublished poems that we are able to get a glimpse of her inward life. It is a life seeking to reconstruct its destiny through words, through imagination and vibrant ideas. And in its refusal to accept her mother's destiny is a strong disaffection and a tone of disapproval. Mira's voice is full of anguish when she says:

To make myself in your image
was never the goal I sought (124)

Mothers in Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are rarely a role model for their daughters. The daughter is never inspired to live or be like her mother. It is a history she would always resist. Years later:

Whose face is this I see in the mirror,
unsmiling, grave, bedewed with fear?
The daughter? No, mother, I am now your shadow. (126)

The women ensemble demonstrates how among other points of view, desire and fulfilment in woman are located in biological processes. Seemingly a desire for recognition, a poet's identity, an imaginative instinct, a passion for writing are all subversive strains in woman. Moving constantly requires a force that is both urgent and inevitable. As we move on to some of the recent novels in Hindi we notice that the struggle for personhood acquires new meaning in writers like Prabha Khaitan, Mridula Garg, Usha Priyamvada and Rajni Gupta.

Contemporary women's fiction is a challenge to master narratives. At a manifest level, it is an attempt to read life and rewrite the notion of subjectivity within the parameters of "difference" it focuses on "differences that make a difference" to women in a dominant masculine culture. As suggested by Barbara Christian, diversity is an attempt to "define and express our totality rather than being defined by others" (Christian 159).

In Shashi Deshpande's novels, society is sharply structured with a gender bias. In that world, no real social change is possible unless men are willing to change. Loss of a child and an extended period of mourning is a recurring feature in the lives of her women. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *The Binding Vine* both bring out the unbearable poignancy of grief. Death of the son shatters Saru's mother forever and she continues to live with that loss. She refuses to forgive her daughter. The daughter receives neither love nor affection and is unable to quell that resentment. Human attachments fail to bring succour and satisfaction in their lives. Be it Jaya of *That Long Silence* or Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, or Meera, Kalpana and Urmi in *The Binding Vine* or the narrator and the singer coping with their past in *The Small Remedies* each of these women is struggling with loss, grief and betrayal at one point or the other. They seek to become a subject in their own right. A life of intrinsic worth is what they are looking for. And in the process of acquiring personhood, they not only cope with unjust and unequal social structures but also acknowledge the presence of individual needs and aspirations.

The postcolonial literature has challenged this assumption and today we not only have a growing body of Literature in Translation, but the interest is being directed inward towards indigenous literatures and cultures. The shift is from eurocentrism to increasingly powerful indocentric modes of existence.

It can also be argued that "Domesticity and personal relations have long been a key theme in [Indian] women's fiction the concern is more often with sexual and family relationships than with areas which are thought to constitute public life." (Weedon 153).

It is significant that women writers in English have not simply been confined to the private realm but have moved beyond. Knowledge and speech are viewed as undesirable and dangerous in relation to women. A very compulsive and a creative conviction is found in Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters*. Once again we see a conflicting situation in which a woman fails to relate to her mother's life. She also does not sympathize with her mother's past. In *Virmati*, Ida finds a woman she would never like to be. *Virmati's* thirst for knowledge is stifled by her foolish decision to love. She too is trapped in the bogey of sexual immaturity and subservience. As a mother to her siblings, she comes across as extremely caring and dutiful. Torn between duty and desire, loving and knowing, responsibility and restraint her intrinsic vitality and enthusiasm can do little to make her happy. In Manju Kapoor and Ruchira Mukherjee's first novels, woman sexuality is a "domain of restriction, repression and danger" and for a man it is "a domain

of exploration pleasure and agency.” (Vance 1). Denial and freedom are seen as contradictory to each other. And freedom for women is never a question of choice. It is to be fought for. Either you give it up and continue living like a stifled toad or you rebel and snatch it. Even if you do so, be ready to live with a permanent sulk, anger and guilt.

Increasing numbers of women are today looking for literature which allows a certain degree of respect and dignity to the woman who fights and survives. Today it is not fashionable to talk of a character as in Premchand’s *Nirmala* who suffered endlessly and could do little to alleviate her lot. Nor does one get carried away with the upper middle class sexual fantasies as presented in the novels of Shobha De. Although much is being written and published in the form of books what one is looking for is convincing themes and inspiring subjects. A book that provides one with energy and lingers long after it has been put aside is always welcome.

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