

Reconstructing Female Identity in the writings of Some of the Prominent Indian Women Novelists

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Abstract: *Indian English Literature has a relatively recent history which came into being in late 18th century and early 19th century. It is known for its great vibrancy and resilience and occupies a prominent place in world literature. The writers of Indian English Literature have contributed significantly and abundantly to Modern World Literature. They portray in their works the ancient and glorious, cultural, social, political, religious and age-old philosophical traditions and the enduring values of Indian society. So for Indian Women Novelists are concerned they have unveiled the hidden secrets and unfolded the intended denials that are controversial in today's context. They have written about women's frustrations, retaliations, and their breach of conventional expectations. In their writings, they have delineated the inner complexities of women within the cultural ethos of India.*

Key words: *liberations, retaliations, feminism, patriarchal, complexities, etc.*

The contribution made by Indian women writers in India, especially the role of Indian women novelists is quite notable in many respects. Since the beginning of Indian English Literature, so many literary figures have shown their intellect and creativity and made famous place. Their importance has been realized in every sphere. In the field of novel writing, there are many women writers whose contribution is so marvelous, eye-catching and full of authority that they pronounce the beginning of a new era in Indian English Literature. These women novelists have shown a new kind of woman in their writings. Being women these women novelists have brought before the society the new women's image who are assertive and confident. The novels of these women writers reflect that these new women have realized their present status and are not helpless and are also not dependent upon others for their survival. These women novelists have given a new dimension to Indian English Literature. The Post-Independence era in India is marked with increasing number of women writers who disapprove the hegemonic myth that considers literary creation a male domain. Women's writing of this era incorporates a literary voice of a group of people who were oppressed, ignored and rejected for centuries due to an overbearing nature of patriarchal social system. The Indian Women writers of post-Independence era were more realistic in their approach than those of the first generation and were able to project a vision of their own. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra writes in this regard, "The dominant concern of the literature of this period is with the character development and psychological depth, often combined with a sense of the alienated individual, dissatisfied with modern life...The theme of alienation takes on a special edge in the numerous novels published by women in the period." (Mehrotra 247-248) These Women novelists have positively responded to the changed psychological realities of Indian life. To this group belongs writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Shoba De, Bharati Mukherjee, Namita Gokhle etc. Their high educational and intellectual standards have sharpened their observation of life and have imparted a psychological depth of their writings. Consequently, these women novelist have been able to create interesting personages who successfully expose the oppression inflicted on women in society. In this paper I have tried to show some of the important novels by prominent Indian women novelists which explore the women's quest for identity in a 'He' dominated society. Through their writings these women novelists examine the psychological situations of their characters (women).

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) is undoubtedly the most outstanding among Post-Independence Indian novelists. She is an Indian born British novelist. Her works are realistic delineation of binaries that an Indian woman is subjected to, between tradition and modernity, the desire for autonomy and emancipation and her need for nurturance. She is much familiar with the southern field and that is why in most of her novels, she takes us to the heart of a south-Indian. As a woman novelist Markandaya represents, "the creative release of the feminine sensibility." (Goyal 140) In her novels Markandaya has given more importance to women characters than men. Markandaya has a thorough understanding of women's position in Indian Society and has realized how social and economic factors affect women more than men. Her women characters are strongly rooted in traditions and they are at much extent traditionalists. As K. Meera Bai comments on the women characters of Markandaya, "Markandaya's women's are well drilled in the tenets of Indian ethos. They possess an admirable

strength to face the calamities of life and are adept at the wisdom of compromise and adjustment.” (K. Meera Bai 37) Markandaya’s first novel *Nector in a Sieve* is a agonizing tale that depicts the hardships and joys of a woman’s life in rural India. It deals with the life and tribulation of a peasant woman Rukmani, the protagonist and narrator and illustrates how a peasant woman like Rukmani struggles for survival with undismayed determination, bravery and an invincible spirit of strength. She wins our sympathy by dint of her sheer will power that endures a life without hope like *Nector in a Sieve*. Rukmani is closely associated with the earth and draws spiritual strength from its fertility and beauty. She learns to help other women in childbirth, to adapt to and accept the unpleasant changes the tannery brings to the village, and to withstand seasons of want and hunger. She is a strong voice for the world’s poor because she speaks with clarity and truth.

Markandaya, gives a vivid description of the social customs and traditions and shows how these are responsible for the sufferings of women. In her other novels such as *A Silence of Desire*, she addresses the issues of social class of India and the controversies surrounding the social hierarchy. In *Two Virgins*, Lalitha, the more adventurous and extrovert of the two sisters, is resentful of her backward family and the constricting village ethos. Thus her women, by and large, are conservative and traditional in outlook. But most of her women manage to be independent in thinking while performing their traditional roles.

Markandey has chosen first- person-narration in most of her novels. In *Nectar in a Sieve* Rukmani, who is both an observer and participant, recollects her tale in a reminiscent mood and looks at herself as a young girl of 12. In the words of S. John Peter Joseph, “The novel portrays travails of Rukmani who faces crises in life with exceptional courage and extraordinary confidence. As a typical Indian woman she is a loving wife to Nathan, an admirable mother to her children and a helping woman to her neighbours. With an uncommon spiritual and mental strength she absorbs all miseries and misfortunes that come her way. As an embodiment of invincible optimism and hope she resolutely fights against the social and the economic forces which crush her and her family malignantly.” (Joseph 66)

The woman characters in the novels of Kamala Markandaya are extracted from different strata of society for example peasants, middle class educated women as well as from the royal families. She has portrayed women from varied age groups and social backgrounds in her novels. Markandey has dealt with some of the problems like poverty, marriage, illiteracy etc. in detail in her novels.

Anita Desai (1937--) has acquired her illustrious and most prestigious position as brilliant fictionist with social consciousness and female sufferings whose novel *Cry the Peacock* is considered as the turning point in Indian English fiction. In this novel she has penetrated deep into the female psychology with her consciousness of the problems of women, their depression and their neglect in male oriented society. She is more interested in the interior landscapes of the mind than in political and social realities. Most of her novels’ protagonists are alienated from the world, from society, from families, from parents and even from their own selves. The uniqueness of Anita Desai’s fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. The novels of Anita Desai are basically female oriented. She has portrayed both kinds of women – those who are symbols of growth and change and those who are powerful means of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and destruction. She has given a realistic concept of feminine sensibility. She has presented her women characters as conscious and aware of her inferior or low position. Her novels mainly deal with man-woman relationship and feminine consciousness. Her female protagonists are sensitive and intelligent who know it very well that how they are being exploited. The woman in her novels trying to define themselves, struggle for self realization and, are engaged in pursuit of freedom and equality.

Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of The Day* is the story of Bimla who is not ready to surrender and goes against the traditional society even after knowing the consequences. She wants to be independent and behaves like a man. She grows up as a confident and ambitious lady and wants to be independent in every field and we see her how she becomes a history teacher and pursues her ambition of life. We also find how after the death of her father she takes care of her brothers and sisters and later get them married. This shows that she is not less than a man as she does everything as we expect from a man especially in India. M. K. Naik writes, “Bim is a completely new heroine in Anita Desai’s fiction, hard-headed and facing life’s challenges bravely.” (Naik 79) Desai has skillfully portrayed Bimla as a simple, confident, independent and a self assertive woman. She in an interview with Atma Ram said,

“I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or have been driven into despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose hearts cry out ‘the great No’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them.”

Shashi Deshpande (1938--), an award winning novelist, occupies a unique place in the history of Indian English Fiction. “Her writing is clearly part of Indian Literature and emerges from her rootedness in middle class Indian society.” (Naik 85) The dilemma of professional life and familial relationship, crisis of motherhood, negation of female identity and ultimately the reconciliation and reconstruction of self identity are the major issues taken by Shashi Deshpande. She, in her works, defines freedom for the Indian woman within the Indian

Socio-Cultural value system and institutions. Deshpande bares the subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operative within the institution of the family and the male centered Indian Society. The strong point about Deshpande's fiction is her delineation of the women's inner world. Her protagonists are woman struggling to find their own voice and are engaged in search to define herself. In all her novels like *Dark Holds No Terror*, *That Long Silence*, *Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies* and *Moving On*, the major concern is the urge to find oneself, to create space for oneself, to grow on one's own.

Sarita, the protagonist of her first novel *Dark Holds No Terrors* is a doctor by profession who lives a comfortable life with her husband and two children. After hearing about the death of her mother she decides to visit her parental home where she recalls the traumatic childhood memories received from her mother, her younger brother's death and the memories of her leaving behind her parents in order to marry of the man (Manohar) of her own choice. M. K. Naik writes, "Sarita defies her mother by joining medical college, and flouts caste restrictions by marrying the man she loves. She becomes a successful doctor, but her success in her profession contributes to the disintegration of her marriage, because her husband resents the fact that she is the breadwinner." (Naik 86) Now her dreams of having a beautiful married life seems far distant to her. Saru undergoes a complete change when she goes to console her father after her mother's death. The wounds in her heart are healed here and she decides to face her problems with fresh vigour. As the book is a kind of self discovery and portrays it is never too late to realize one's choices.

Deshpande's other important novel *That Long Silence* opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan shifting from their well-settled, comfortable house to their old house in Dadar, Bombay where they used to live after their marriage. This is a far cry from her tastefully furnished, elegant church gate home. Yet she seems completely at ease here. Now she adjusts easily to her neighbours and servants, though her choosy husband cannot adjust to the filthy surroundings. Jaya is an ideal example of typical middle class woman who is confined between her realization and restrictions. Throughout the novel, Jaya ponders over her role, she keeps on searching her identity and questioning situations where she was not able to take charge of a situation and turned submissive. Deshpande's portrayal of Jaya is very powerful as we see glimpses of so many women around us in Jaya. Jaya has lived her life for others, for her husband, for her children and for her relatives. She had given up her writing career for her husband, by performing the duties of a good wife, mother, sister and a daughter. As it is the normal life of any woman. But these normal lives we are living with are soaked in oppression and patriarchy. The novelist honestly lays bare the structures and workings of middle class families. Deshpande's novels abound in female quest for identity who strives to find out their own selves throughout her life. Through the character of Jaya the novelist presents the inner conflict suffered by a woman.

Namita Gokhale (1956--) is an Indian writer, editor, publisher and festival director who came to light after the publication of her debut novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* in 1984. She has written novels, collection of short stories, and several works of non-fiction, all in English. Her other novels include *Gods*, *Groves and Grandmother* (1994), *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), *Shakuntala: The play of Memory* (2005), *Priya: In Incredible Inyaa* (2011). *Paro: Dreams of Passion* tells the story of a young woman named Paro, who is determined to live life on her own terms and pursue her passions, despite the constraints of her traditional Indian society. The novel is set in Delhi in the 1970s. Paro is a strong and independent character who dreams of becoming a writer and pursuing a life of intellectual and creative freedom. The main theme of the novel is a clash between tradition and modernity. The novel challenges the traditional expectations placed on women in the society and highlights the ways in which women are often denied agency and autonomy in Indian culture. The novel also examines the quest for self awareness and deconstructing femininity, particularly through the characters of Paro and Priya.

Gokhale in her novels, has tried to show how a woman can use her power to create a space for her existence. The heroines of her novels are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. She speaks passionately about the empowerment of women, of the return of female power, thereby empowering the individual.

Shobha De (1948--) is an Indian novelist and columnist who is a prolific writer. She is known as the Jackie Collins of India for her depiction of socialites and sex in her works of fiction. Her important works include- *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Shooting from the Hip*, *Small Betrayals*, *Second Thoughts*, *Speedpost*, *Spouse- The Truth About Marriage*, *Sandhya's Secret*, etc. *Socialite Evenings* is De's first novel which is autobiographical and deals with the fortunes of a young girl Karuna who moves from the provinces to the big bad world of Bombay. She and her friends Anjali and Ritu move between marriages and affairs, picking up successful business, ventures here and there. Her novel *Starry Nights*, which is based on the real life love-affairs of Amitabh Bachchan with Rekha and Dharmendra Singh Deol with Hema Malini deals with Aasha Rani, a dark chubby girl from Madras who has striven for seven years to become a famous Bollywood starlet. Shobha De is a keen observer and effective presenter of the issues which are prevalent in society. Her fiction deals with the lives of urban aristocratic women. Marriage to them is a convenience for money, social status and physical gratification, rather than having an emotional and psychological attachment. Her female characters are modern,

educated, glamorous, ambitious, money-minded and have thirst for physical gratification. Most of her novels reflect common themes. They cover love, sex, state of innocence, and self-identity. She confesses that her novels are not pre-planned but the result of her social connection with social issues. She gives special importance to the word 'S', which is observed in the titles of all her novels beginning with the word 'S'. Ankita Shukla wrote for 'The Times of India' in 2016, that "unignorable has been Shobha De's unabashed description of the womenfolk in her novels. De's women range from traditional, subjugated and marginalized to the extremely modern and liberated women. De's novels take a leaf the urban life and represent realistically an intimate side of urban woman's life, also revealing her plight in the present day society." (Shukla, Ankita)

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