

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INDIAN WOMEN WRITING IN 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY- A MOVE TOWARDS MODERNISM

Sudershan Earla

(Lecturer in English, Hindu College, Guntur-AP)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9216>

ABSTRACT



Women writing in 20<sup>th</sup> century moved towards a medium of modernism in which womanish and feminist statements are combined with political messages. The writings of women such as Hamsa Wadekar conveyed an honest impression of a world of professional women whose careers in television and stage segregated them as a class apart, yet subjected to the same brutality and force of patriarchy. Women writers such as Mahashweta Devi combined women causes with political movements. In 'Draupadi', Mahashweta Devi creates a world of tribal rebels whose fight against a political system of enforced capitalism has given them to become naxalites. Others such as Sashi Deshpande build a platform of universal female experience. 'In Binding Vines' she examines the experiences of women coming from different echelons in the society. Themes of almost all the novels of the earliest women writers of Indian fiction in English was The Indian women, the new women as the writers emerge in the fast changing social milieu. A careful glance at the novels of the earliest women writers of Indian fiction in English as well as Post-Independence era helps us see a distinct continuity of trends and tendencies. The major motivation of the novel from its birth had always been a projection of the social situation and social consciousness. The novel has always been a social comment or social criticism. Women writers particularly shared the experiences of Indian women in general and transmuted them into fictional form. The early fiction by Indian women writers in all Indian languages was an effort to give expression to their agonies and sufferings of which they never had any dearth. The ability to write in English opened new vistas for young Indian women in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The precocious and sensitive Bengali girl, Toru Dutt, wrote Benaca or the young Spanish Maiden pub posthumously in 1878. Binaca moves from innocent girlhood to romantic love. The women novelists seem to be increasingly concerned mainly with women wallowing in the mire of lust with the rich, the powerful and corrupt. The novels tend to reflect the contingent reality in an artistic way.

**Keywords:** *Women experiences, Trends and Tendencies in 20<sup>th</sup> century, Contingent Reality*

*Author(s) retain the copyright of this article*

Copyright© 2022 VEDAPublications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

Fiction, being the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression today has acquired a prestigious position in the Indo English Literature. As a distinct literary form, the novel is undoubtedly a recent birth. It is in fact, the latest of literacy form to be evolved and the most dominant and commonly agreed that the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of our times. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. It provides insights, a wealth of understanding a reservoir of meanings and a basis of discussion. Through women writers eyes we can realize the potential of human achievement.

Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women's issues. They have a women's perspective on the world. It involves the writing of the materials and literature that deal, in a direct or implied fashion, women's improvements and their general enlightenment. Similarly, so many women have taken to reading women's writings because it allows them to a safe place from which they can explore a wide range of experience of the world from which they can identify existences. Indians have been writing in English for more than a century now. Contrary to the western notion of retiring, veiled, tradition encrusted, dumb race, some Indian women have proved to be quite vocal. Seen in its totality, literature has several thought provoking facets and most visual of them is of course 'Feminism'.

It is necessary to arrive at a meaningful definition of the term feminism before how the women writers respond to the movement of feminism which has so far been variously defined.

Feminism as many people view, does not mean femalism or femaleness. The qualities which all women possess. It includes personal courage. Feminism is not 'anti-Sitaism' in Indian context as some are fond of saying because Sita is often portrayed as symbol of submission. Sita, indeed must have been very courageous to resist and fight Ravana for full one year. As to the question of individuality and self-respect, by no means is she lacking them. After uniting her sons with Rama, it is to her mother the earth Goddess that she goes. Feminism at the same time is not living outside the marriage. Many women fail to understand the real spirit of feminism. The movement of feminism has many facets. It doesn't mean getting of equal rights which men or women for the recognition of their creative talents. In fact, it is more than that: No doubt women raising their voice against the injustice, after having gone through the agony for centuries, it led to feminism. According to the French models of feminism, as has been expressed in Beauvoirs 'The Second Sex' and other works, feminism implies greater sexual expression. If we take into account the British models slowly become respectable or reclaimed into male world order. The American models are outspoken in which we find an assertion of self-expression.

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society in India. Knowing the reality, feminism is not definitely some kind of chauvinistic or aggressive way of living, dressed up like man. A definition like feminism is therefore, 'mode of existence in which the woman is free of the

dependence syndrome'. Women's writing has relevance and validity for reasons more than one. Not only does it project the observations, situations, responses and struggles of half of humanity it also reflects a consciousness constructed by genders the being which is defined traditionally by frameworks of kinship, marriage and procreation. At another level it questions values and structures hitherto considered axiomatic women writing throws up all kinds of queries related to oppression and colonization. It has helped both to build and express the idea of female 'self' and dismantle the concept of all inclusive male 'I'.

The Hindu moral code known as The Laws of Manu denies woman an existence apart from that of her husband or her family, and since the publication of Bakim Chandra Chatterjee's 'Rajmohan's Wife' in 1864, a significant number of authors have portrayed Indian women as long suffering wives and mothers silenced by patriarchy. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from the traditional portrayal enduring, self-scarifying women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity. In contrast to earlier novels female characters from 1980 onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood.

Traditionally, the work of Indian women writes has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. One factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women's perceptions of them experience within it.

Consequently it is assumed that their work will automatically rank below the works of male writers

who deal with weightier themes. Additionally, Indian women writers in English are victims of a second prejudice that is their regional counterparts. Since proficiency in English is available only to the writers of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes, a frequent judgment is made that writers and their works belong to high social strata and are cut off from the reality of Indian life. The majority of these novels depict the psychological sufferings of frustrated housewives, this subject matter often being considered superficial compared to depiction of them depressed and the oppressed lives of women of lower classes that we find in regional authors writing in Hindu, Bengali, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu and other native languages. Indian writing in English is now gaining ground rapidly. In the realm of fiction, it has heralded a new era and has earned many laurels both at home and abroad. Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. They have both shown their worth in the field of literature qualitatively and quantitatively.

The efforts of several generations of Indian authors writing in English have resulted in international success, particularly since the publication of 'Midnight's Children' (1981) by Salman Rushdie and the Indian novel in English has finally been accepted as an important literary endeavour. Indian women writers have begun to gain recognition, greatly thankful to Arundati roy winning the Booker prize for 'The God of Small Things' in 1997. We should also be thankful to Jhumpa lahiri, an Indian American author, who won 2000 Pulitzer Prize for her fiction 'Interpreter of Maladies'.

A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centred approach, that seeks project and interpret experience, from the point of feminine consciousness and sensibility. As Patrica Meyer remarks "There seems to be something that we call a women's point of view on outlook sufficiently, distinct to be recognizable through the countries"(Trends in Modern Fiction: Prestigious Publication:1991).

The work of Indian women writings is significant in making society aware of women's demands and in providing a medium of self expression and thus re-writing the history of India. Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by the patriarchal society. The society theme is from childhood to womanhood developed society respecting women in general. Santha Rama's Rau's 'Remember the House' (1956), Ruth Pavar Jhabvala's first novel 'To Whom She Will' (1955) and her later 'Heat and Dust' (1975) which was awarded the Booker Prize, Kamala Markandeya's 'Two Virgins' (1994), Rama Mehta's 'Inside Night' (1992) are some of the leading women writers writing in Indian English literature.

The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. 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. In a cultural society where

individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is the central focus. It is interesting to note the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Women's presentation is more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past is.

#### PROMINENT FEMINIST WOMEN WRITERS IN INDIA

The last three decades has seen the emergence of prominent Feminist in Indian Literature to begin with Shashi Deshpande. Shashi Deshpande is the second daughter of the famous Kannada dramatist in Karnataka and Sanskrit scholar Shriranga. She did a graduation in Journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine 'On Looker'. Her first novel, 'The Dark Holds No Terror' was published in June 1999. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi award, for her novel 'That Long Silence'. Her third famous novel is 'Roots and Shadows'. She has projected objectively a new female face with subjective experiences with a geocentric vision. She reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. Her writings are rooted in the culture in which she lives. Her remarks are sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences and given an artistic expression to something that is simple and mundane. Her feminism is particularly Indian in the sense that it is borne out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities. The women characters are with traditional approaches trying to tie family and profession to maintain the virtues of Indian culture.

Shashi Deshpande's novel 'A Matter of Time' is a continuation of her exploration into the many facts of the feminine experience in writing. In this novel, she has displayed the themes of silence, gender differences, passive sufferings and familiar relationships into much deeper realms. It is a story encompassing three generations of women coming to terms with their life in and all female worlds. The relation women characters share with their men is homered with silence, absence or indifference. The pain of disintegration of the family troubles Aru, who consider herself for her father's action and sets out to undo it. It is in this stifling atmosphere the characters evolve and come to a newer understanding of their lives.

The role of fury and destiny are playing as main themes around which Deshpande weaves her tale. Deshpande explains role of fury in her words

"I thought of Puradar's line, the hour strikes and I was terrified. I stopped believing in the life I was leading suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I know I could not go on"(Shashi Deshpande: Contribution as English Novelist: EPH Publication-33).

Deshpande's simple yet powerful prose reads like a grandmother's tale that pierces the deep into heart and settles. At one point, the use of omniscient narration teases the reader as the speaker forces events but is not to share until time and plot unfolds it. Deshpande's 'A Matter of Time' and Salman Rushdie's novel 'Fury' both novels spun around theme of existential fury. Deshpande brings Rushdie's novel out from howling New York City to a calm and mediating Karnataka and his hills in the gaps a reader might have had left craves for. The

underlying theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels is human relationships especially the ones that exist between father and daughter. In all relationships, the women occupy the central stage and significantly, the narration shifts through her feminine consciousness. In her novels, three types of suffering women characters reoccur with subtle changes. The first type belongs to the protagonist's mother or the mother figure, the traditional woman, who believes that her place is with her husband and family. The second type of woman is bolder more self-reliant and rebellious. She cannot confirm to mythological, submissive and surrender vision of womanhood. As radical feminist, ideology expressed, for example, Sarah's friend Nathan in the 'Dark Holds No Terror'. The third type of women characters, are the women between neither traditional nor radical in their ideas and practice. For example, Indu in "Roots and Shadows", leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home. Being a woman herself, she sympathises women. As Shashi Deshpande clarifies in one of the interviews about feminist approach in her writing,

"If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world"(A Study of Feminism in the Novels of Feminism: Presitige Publications:144)

### ARUNDATHI ROY'S WRITINGS

The other famous and renowned novelist under the study is Arundhati Roy, born in 1961 in Bengal. Arunadathi grew up in Kerala; she trained herself as an architect at the Delhi school of

Architecture but abandoned it in between. She believes that, 'A Feminist is a woman who negotiates herself into a position where she has choices.' The International community knows Arundhati Roy as an artist with her debut novel 'The God of Small Things.' It won Britain's premier Booker prize, the Booker McConnell in 1997. Roy is the first non-expatriate Indian author and the first Indian woman to have won this prize. Roy's major essays 'The End of Imagination' and 'The Greater Common Good' are available online. She is between the two Indian writers writing in English who has won the Booker Prize (the other one being Salman Rushdie for his 'Midnight Children'). Arundhati has never admitted that she is a feminist but 'The God of Small Things', reveals at many places her feminist stance and her protagonist represent feminine sensibility. Arundhati Roy's mother says, "Arundhati is a born talker and a born writer. While, she was studying in school, it was a problem to find a teacher, who could cope with her voracious appetite for reading and writing. Most of the time, she educated herself on her own. I can remember our vice-principal Sneha Zaharias resorting to Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' as a text for the little fourth grade'

Roy seems to be iconoclast in 'The God of Small Things'. The stylistic innovations make the novel unique and bring vitality and exuberance to the novel. The novel is unique in every aspect and it is a linguistic experiment with the English language. The stylistic writings include the use of words, phrases and even sentences from vernacular language, use of italics, subject less sentences, faulty spellings, topicalisation, deviation from normal word order, single word 'sentences', change of word classes,

clustering of word classes and a variety of other techniques. She has given prominence to ecology and subalternity as the major themes in the novels.

Roy's close observations and the minute aspects in the creation of her literary skills are observed in her other works. Her two important articles on the net are 'The end of Imagination' and 'The Greater Common Good. 'In the End of Imagination', Roy criticizes nuclear policies of the government of India. Arundhati Roy foretells the harmful consequences of nuclear weapons on human beings and ecology in the former novel. "Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames when everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. There will be one day and only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminated groundwater. Most living things, animals and vegetables, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed, multiply, and compete with forging, relic humane for what little food there is" (A Study of Feminism in the Novels of Feminism: Presitige Publications:149)

#### ANITA DESAI'S WRITINGS

Anita Desai, the other great novelist of the Indian English fiction was born in 1937. Anita Desai is unquestionably one of the celebrated Indian-English fiction writers. She holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelists of India. She has to her credit a large number of creative works and a coherently growing readership throughout the world.



She has published ten novels and other literary works of immense value. Anita Desai's women characters in her novels rebel against patriarchal community in order to explore their own potential or to live on their own terms, regardless of the consequences that such a rebellion may have on their lives. They take the position of outsiders to fight and criticize those cultural ideologies that come in their way of becoming free individuals, self-chosen withdrawal, for these women, takes on the form a weapon for survival in a patriarchal community. Desai's women, thus want freedom within the community of men and women, as it is the only way that will succeed in fulfilling them. In fact, Desai's model of an emancipated woman, Bimala in the novel 'Clear Light of Day' is an unmarried woman. Her married women characters like Maya in 'Cry, the Peacock', Monisha in 'The City', Nanda in 'Fire in the Mountain', and Sita in 'Where Shall We Go This Summer' become depressed, violent or self-destructive.

They either lose their sanity or kill others, or they kill or destroy themselves. The nemesis of these women is not a private one but an growth of the complex social context, immediate family environments and the relationships with their men. Many of Desai's protagonists are portrayed as single women. Desai does not neglect the institution of marriage or support alienation from society. Some of her women characters, like Tara in 'Clear Light of Day', do achieve fulfillment in their marriages. Instead, through Bimala, Desai points to a kind of feminist emancipation that lies in not limiting women to their traditional roles but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities. Their kind of life, apart from being invigorating, also frees

them from dependence on men. Bimala, through her individual freedom, exemplifies Simon De Beauvoir's description of an independent woman in her book. The 'Second Sex', where she asserts that "Ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumble; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator"(Simone de Beauvoir: Why I am a Feminist. Dangerous Minds. 7 Dec. 2013. 7 Jun. 2014).

As Anita Desai says, "I don't think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging(Simone de Beauvoir: Why I am a Feminist. (Dangerous Minds. 7 Dec. 2013. 7 Jun. 2014).

Anita Desai's first novel 'Cry, The Peacock' is concerned with its chief protagonist Maya's psychological problems. As a young sensitive woman, Maya wish to love and to live. She makes up the mind of her father, Gautama who is much older than she is. Maya is haunted constantly by the rationalistic approach of her husband to the affairs of life. Maya loves Gautama passionately and desires to be loved in return; but Gautama's coldness disappoints her. The root of the entire novel lies in the prophecy of albino astrologer, who creates a fear psychosis in Maya's mind," ( C.V.Venugopal, The Indian Short Story in English, Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1976-32).

This prophecy becomes troublesome to her unconscious mind. Anita Desai works on revealing the varying mental states, psychic observations, inner motives and existential pursuits of man. She succeeds fully in breaking non-grounds for her fictional art

among her contemporary while dealing with the predicament of man and his social and moral dilemmas. Desai like Kafka unfolds the existential traits of man in society. She analyses a man in action in order to reveal his hidden motives behind the facial reality of conscious mind.

### ASHAPURNA DEVI'S WRITINGS

Now, let us discuss another popular women writer, Ashapura Devi. She has focus on the revival of a reformed traditional womanhood that would accommodate women's need for self-expression. Like Desai and Bhandari, she considers education of women to be of utmost importance. She does so because she sees women, and not just men, as agents of female oppression. Therefore, she is more critical of women than she is of men, who she feels are able to dominate women because dependent and insecure older women like mothers and mothers-in-law help them to do so. In her trilogy, 'Pratham Pratishruti', Subarnalata and Bakul Katha. Ashapura Devi traces the progression of the feminist movement from colonial to post-colonial periods in India. She finds that the contemporary, educated and economically independent women, like Bakul in Bakul Katha, the last part of her trilogy, have become more self-centred than, the women of earlier generations, like Satyavati and Subarnalata in Pratham Pratishruti and Subarnalatha respectively. More importantly and ironically, Ashapura Devi finds that their freedom has not brought them closer to other women. Ashapura Devi finds that their freedom has not brought them closer to other women. Ashapura Devi advocates a re-vision of traditional community where the relations between men and women and between older and younger women are not based on

the subservience of one to the other, but where women enjoy the same rights and privileges as men in an affirmation of human values. To get peace at home Ashapura Devi wants women to break the walls of psychological imprisonment located inside them. The community, for Ashapura Devi, should become the foundation that would free women by providing them the solid ground to stand firmly. She shows how the individual or smaller self finds liberation from pain and isolation.

### REFERENCES

- Bar On, Bat-Ami (1994) *Engendering origins: Critical Feminist readings in Plato and Aristotle*. Sunny Press ISBN 978-0-7914-1643-3)
- Castro, Ginette (1990). *American Feminism: A Contemporary History*. NYU Press. Pg.no.31.
- Dhawan .R.K.: *Feminism and Recent Indian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Prestige Books
- Dhawan.R.K: *50 Years of Indian Writing: Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters: An Absorbing Tale of fact and Fiction*, Suman Bala and Subash Chandra, The Indian Association for English Studies. Adele King (1990).
- "Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman, "The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s, ed. Viney Kirpal, New Delhi: Allied, p. 164.
- Adhikari, Madhumalati: "The Female Protagonist's Journey from Periphery to Center: Shashi Deshpande's The Intrusion and Other Stories," Indian Women
- Deshpande, Shashi (1988). "Why I am a Feminist." *Writing from the Margin*. New Delhi: Penguin, p.85.