CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

For a long period the contribution in the field of Indian English Fiction by the Women novelists remained scanty. The deeper emotions and the study of the thought processes going inside a woman in our society demanded immediate attention. With the emergence of a whole new group of contemporary women writers the long awaited drought was satiated and various unknown aspects of women’s personality were discovered. Apart from dwelling on the issues related to women and society these writers projected altogether a different point of view about life and successfully established their capability in the world literary canvas with full conviction.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary, Indian Women Novelists, Themes, Awards, Contribution

INTRODUCTION

In recent times Indian English literature has attracted worldwide interest, both in India and abroad. It has now been unanimously accepted as part of world literature in English. Fiction, being the most powerful form of expression today, has not only acquired a prestigious position in Indian literature but it is independently recognised as Indian English Fiction. Indian literature in regional language acclaims an unparallel standard since ancient times. But, the genre of Indian English fiction made its diffident appearance in 1864 with the publication of Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s Rajmohan’s Wife. The period from 1864 to 1920 witnessed sparse publications like Krupabai Satthinandhan’s Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life in 1894, Sarath Kumar Ghosh’s The Prince of Destiny in 1909, S.N. Mitra’s Hindupore, A Peep behind the Indian Unrest: An Anglo-Indian Romance in 1909, Bal Krishna’s The Love of Kusuma, An Eastern Love Story in 1910, and T. Ramakrishnan’s The Dive for Death: an Indian Romance in 1911. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, “Indo-Anglian fiction, the last to be born and to grow up among various branches of Indian fiction” (p.30-31 TBF) and gained momentum after nineteen-sixties. The path to establish the genre as an independent body saw two major impediments- “first, it endeavors to create literature in a language which in most cases has been acquired rather than spoken from birth: second, it seeks to establish a distinct literature in a language in which great literature already exists.” (p.33 Twice Born Fiction)

However, the rich literary harvest produced by the Big Three (Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and M.R. Anand) elevated Indian English Fiction to a new height. The contributions ascertained by some other highly acclaimed novelists along with these three masters firmly grounded the genre in world literature.

Apart from the contributions made by the male novelists, women’s writing too occupies a distinctive place in enriching this genre. 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). In recent years we have a series of novelists who made their mark in this field; they include Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Rama Mehta, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Dina Mehta, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale, to name a few. 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, sexual autonomy, human relationships, realism, magic realism, fantasy, the image of ‘new-women’, Indian culture, urbanization, Indianassness, 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 analysed from various points of view, however, the present day novelists and especially Indian Women Novelists inspite of the onus of the work produced by them have yet to be analysed. A few of them like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya are exceptions, whose works have been analysed and explored from various aspects but a number of recent novelists have produced works which still remain deprived from thorough analysis. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* the word contemporary means- “belonging to the same age, living or occurring in the same period of time. Existing or occurring at the present time, conforming to modern or current ideas in style, fashion, design etcetera. Having approximately the same age as one another”. In the context of this paper the word contemporary is used to imply writers who are writing from 1980- till date.

The present study concentrates on the contemporary Indian Women Novelists in order to focus on the novelists who have written after 1980. This paper is an attempt to highlight the contributions made by women novelists to the genre of Indian English fiction. However, due to certain degree of alienation in emotion, place and culture the literature produced by the Diaspora novelists is not included for this study. Therefore, the paper is focused on understanding and analysing the contributions made by the contemporary Indian Women Novelists.

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most accomplished first generation women novelists of India. Her achievement lies both in respect of her sensible handling of cross-cultural issues and her authentic portrayal of the Indian cultural background. Her works revolve around themes like east-west encounter, confrontation between tradition and modernity as well as clash of values. Her only novel to have been published after 1980 is *Pleasure City* (1982) which is also very much akin to some of her earlier works. She focusses on issues like east-west contact through the characters of Tully and Rikki. Her concerns about the disturbing impact of the western influence on the economic, social and cultural life of India are evident in this novel. Her strong commitment towards upholding the human values and moral strength is also achieved by her in the novel, *Pleasure City*. Nayantara Sahgal’s achievement as a novelist is quite impressive. She has published four novels after 1980, *Rich Like Us* (1985), *Plans for Departure* (1986), *Mistaken Identity* (1988) and *Lesser Breeds* (2003). Her present onus of work along with her earlier novels places her among the top ranking craftsmen like Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. She has become a significant voice in the realm of Indian English Fiction. It was due to her relation with the Nehru Family that she became aware of the social and political situations that prevailed in the country. Her huge corpus of work provides us the insight into her preoccupation with politics along with constant examination of marital problems between men and women. Her novel, *Rich Like Us* which is set against the declaration of emergency, is an ironic and crafted study of India and its people in the aftermath of Independence. Nayantara Sahgal received the Commonwealth Prize (Eurasian) in 1986 for her novel, *Plans for Departure*. In all her novels we observe that along with political flavour she often combines themes like man-woman relationship, their marital problems and emancipation of women.

M.K. Naik, “Jhabvala is seen to have no new insight to offer now, comparable to her acute and sensitive presentation of middle class life in India in her earlier works”. Apart from this statement we find little critical appreciation about her later works.

Anita Desai is undoubtedly one of the major stalwarts among Indian English novelists. Her works like Clear Light of Day (1980), In Custody (1984), Baumgartner’s Bombay (1988), Journey to Ithaca (1995), Fasting Feasting (1999) and The Zig Zag Way (2004), which appeared after 1980, give us a clear understanding of her broadened oeuvre. In her earlier novels, her themes varied from domestic disharmony in traditional Indian families to the image of suffering women in the patriarchal society, where as in her later novels we find a distinct shift in her themes. She is equally successful in writing about male psyche, depiction of the trauma and suffering of Indians settled abroad, self-exile and spirituality, gender discrimination etc. Her novel, Clear Light of Day explains the philosophy of human existence through the protagonist Bim. Bim realises that the meaning of life lies not in isolation but in belongingness. She is different from other female protagonists as she imbibes the qualities of independence, courage and service; she uplifts herself to meet the challenges instead of shrinking and escaping from them. In her novel, In Custody, Anita Desai portrays the character of Deven, a Hindi lecturer who endeavours to take an interview of the great living Urdu poet, Nur, and through this process Desai beautifully explores the male psyche and their disillusionment. Baumgartner’s Bombay, displays a brilliant picture of alienation and personal despair through an elderly German Jew, who fled to India to escape from the Nazis and after staying for 50 years in Bombay he was brutally murdered by a German youth. Journey to Ithaca encapsulates a spiritual journey of the protagonist, where as Fasting Feasting focuses on the issue of east-west encounter and the position of women who are still trapped in traditional family structure. In her latest novel, The Zig Zag Way, Desai again returns to the realm of history, interwoven with past and present which is represented by the zig zag paths of our life.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most distinguished and reputed women novelists of India. She has nine published novels along with the glorious Sahitya Akademy Award to her credit, which establishes her as one of the prolific writers of Indian English Fiction. Her novels are also included in the literary curriculum in foreign universities. Her novels are mainly introspective and individual’s quest for a personal meaning in life becomes the crux of her works. She also explores the anguish and conflicts of modern educated Indian women who are caught between tradition and modernity but constructively try to attain their individualistic desires in life. Almost all her protagonists from Indu in Roots and Shadows, Saru in The Dark Holds No Terror to Jaya and Devyani are initially presented in a state of confusion. However, as the novel unfolds we find them introspecting and self analysing and ultimately reaching self-realisation. They emerge more confident, more in control of themselves and definitely more buoyant. Deshpande received the Sahitya Akademy Award for her novel, That Long Silence which narrates the story of Jaya who is married to Mohan. The problem arises when Mohan is found guilty in some illegal business and Jaya takes a break and introspects her past. She realises how many times she had compromised because of Mohan. She does a detailed analysis of their marital relationship and comes to the conclusion that though, Mohan was domineering but it was her own unquestioning role that was the cause of her present miserable state. Jaya emerges as an individual who after years of selfless submission to her marital life, ultimately awakens and takes a very small but firm step to reposition her life. From Jaya to Devyani we find a gradual delineation of self asserting females who inspite of being brought up in traditional society show the courage to voice their opinion for female emancipation.

Arundhati Roy is the author of the novel, God of Small Things, which received the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997. Arundhati Roy’s maiden novel, God of Small Things claimed immense critical acclaim from readers and critics throughout the world. The novel received praise for various aspects like the shifting of past and present with extraordinary
finesse, her flair for description and its narrative style which includes magic, mystery and sadness. The novel narrates the tragic story of Velutha, the protagonist, whose life is ultimately destroyed by the combined forces of religion, tradition and society. Apart from Velutha’s tragedy the novel focuses on the anguished world of Esther and Rahel, the twins, who become the part of this tragedy. 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.

Esther David belongs to the Jewish community and is settled in Ahmedabad. She is currently working for the development of art in underprivileged areas of Gujarat. She received the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award for her novel, *The Man with Enormous Wings* in the year 2010. Her award winning novel is based on the communal riots which rocked the city of Ahmedabad in 2002. Esther David through her narrative creates the illusion of Mahatma Gandhi, who is shown lamenting over the fierce bloodshed that charred the peaceful city of Ahmedabad. With a number of scenes the author successfully describes the rich heritage and culture of Ahmedabad. It also exposes the sheer terror and bloodshed on the other hand that changed the face of this peaceful city forever. Esther David’s other contributions comprise of novels like, *The Book of Esther* (2003), which is autobiographical in nature, *By the Sabarmati* (2001) and *The Walled City* (1997).

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 emphasises 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 interpersonal relationships, her search for control over her own life. Virmati yearns 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.

Githa Hariharan is one of the internationally acclaimed novelists of India. She received special recognition by winning the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 1992 for the Best First Novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The magnitude of versatility in theme is clearly visible in her immense output. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* is based on the protagonist Devi’s progress towards independence and search for identity through her relations. Devi becomes the victim of traditional customs while trying to adjust herself with her husband but the marriage fails and Devi is left to decide about her life. She elopes with a musician but that too proves futile. She ultimately returns to her mother and nurtures the mother-daughter relationship. Her novel, *When Dreams Travel* is based on the theme of search for identity. Her other novels include *In Times of Siege* (2003), *The Art of Dying* (1993), *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *A Southern Harvest* and *Fugitive Histories*.

K. R. Usha is a writer, and an editor who lives in Bangalore. Her novel, *Monkey Man* was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize for the year 2010. Her corpus of work includes *Monkey Man* (2010), *A Girl and A River* (2007), *The Chosen* (2003) and *Sojourn* (1998). Her novel, *Monkey Man* captures the lives of the fastest growing cosmopolitan IT city, Bangalore. Through her profound understanding of human nature she delves deep into the lives of her characters and brings out their linked destinies with the city. She examines how the lives of the citizens change along with the rapid changes and development of this demure city. The theme of her novel, *A Girl and A River* focuses again on changing relations, moving between past and the present in search of family history through a couple of books and letters. Her novel, *The Chosen* and *Sojourn* are based on the theme of change.
Anita Nair is another name amongst the emerging contemporary women novelists. She has proved her potential by her consistent work. She has five published novels to her credit 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 feminist 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 six published 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 the reinterpretation 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-realisation. 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. Shobha De is one of the most popular women novelists of recent times. 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 then novels proper”. She is the producer of best sellers like Starry Nights (1991), Sisters (1992), Saltry 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.

Anuradha Roy is the author of the novel, An Atlas of Impossible Longings. The novel narrates the story of three generations of an Indian family where an innocent love story between an orphan boy Mukunda and Bakul, the granddaughter of an illustrious family takes its root. But the lovers are separated by the family and after 20 years Mukunda comes back in search of his lost destiny and tries to settle the matter. Roy beautifully narrates innocent feelings as well as handles different aspects of Indian culture. Apart from the above discussed Indian women novelists there are few aspiring new novelists who have contributed towards enriching this genre through their one or two commendable works. There are a number of novelists writing fiction but we do not find much critical evaluation of their works nor have they achieved any
literary awards. Writers like Nisha Da Cunha, with her novels like *Set my Heart in Aspic* (1997), *The Permanence of Grief* (1993), *Old Cypress Stories* (1991) and *No Black No White* (2001) have shown their potential of being the finest story tellers along with their understanding of the fragility of human conditions. Shama Futhally belongs to the older generation of women novelists, who depicts the teething problems of a young nation in her novels like *Tara Lane* (1993) and *Reaching Bombay Central* (2002). Suma Josson, author of the novel *Circumferences* (1995) explores and analyses the conflict of understanding between parents and children. The protagonist Sarla’s ambition to become a painter is not appreciated by her parents. They want her to marry and have children. Rani Dharker teaches English literature at M.S. University, Baroda. In her novel, *The Virgin Syndrome*, Dharker uses myth to help and understand lives of modern women. The novel is an advocacy of her feminist approach where her protagonist asserts sexual freedom without any feeling of guilt and resumes her journey to find actual liberation of herself. Achala Moulik has written novels like *The Conquerors* (1996) and *Earth is But a Star* (1997). Radhika Jha is the author of the novel, *Smell* (1999), and lives in Delhi. She writes on culture, atmosphere and economy for The Hindustan Times and Business World. The protagonist of her novel, *Smell* is obsessed with a feeling that she emits some obnoxious, dark and musty smell which repels those who want to come near her. Sagarika Ghose an author and a journalist has written three novels, *The Gin Drinkers* (1998), *Blind Faith* (2006) and *Face The Nation*. Jai Nimbkar has published only one novel, *Come Rain* (1993) after 1980, which narrates the difficulties faced by an Indian, when the couple returns to India. Novelists like Sohaila Abdulali, Belinder Dhanao have presented the regional diversities in their novels. Advaita Kala has written *Almost Single* in 2007, which is a witty picture of an independent Indian woman working in a metropolitan city.

**CONCLUSIONS**

To conclude, we can say that the burgeoning presence of women novelists in India is immensely significant and exciting for anyone to overlook or ignore them. The cognizant readers of the world are finally forced to acknowledge their presence and applaud their talent. The felicitation of these novelists and their international appreciations in the form of awards and various nominations from the literary world further establishes their credibility in the world literature. The escalating response shown by the media and the publication houses has contributed immensely towards their acceptance. However, the significant attempts made by some of the critics like M.K.Naik, R.K.Dhawan, Shyamala Narayan, Meenakshi Mukherjee and others have equally helped this genre as well as the novelists to get recognised by the world. The critics not only infused their criticism of these novelists with fresh insight, but they also exhibited an exceptional confidence in their abilities.

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