



## An Overview of Indian Women Novelists Writing in English

Rajpal Kaur, Assistant Professor, Guru Nanak College, Budhlada (Mansa), Punjab, India

**Abstract:** Indian writing in English occupies a unique place in the field of world literature in English. The present paper aims to analyse the contribution of Indian women novelists in this sphere. It focuses on the subject-matter of novel written in Indian English by women writers. It points out how the domestic themes were taken up by Indian women novelists in their writings. The women novelists' writings range from the family, domestic experiences to the vast arena of the diaspora studies. Mostly, the women novelists have taken women characters as their protagonists and made them explore the outside world. Gradually, they start writing against the social taboos, oppression and subordination. Thus, as writers, they progressed towards universality.  
**Key Words:** Indian, Novelist, Women-writing.

### Narration

Indian writing in English has occupied a specific status in the sphere of world Literature in English. It has acquired its own vocabulary and its own style of writing. Women writers also have tried their hands in this field. Yet the most flourishing genre is the novel-writing, which has retained its prominence even today. It is, in fact, the most popular genre of modern India.

It is not that the women novelists appeared on the canvas very easily. Prior to independence, the plight of Indian women was miserable. They were not as independent and educated as today. That was the reason why there is lack of women writing in English before independence. Only the women of elite families used to get education and portray their limited experiences in their writings, yet that phenomenon was too limited.

During the first half of twentieth century, the Trio of Mulk Raj Anand,

Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan dominated the literary scene of India, who presented the traditional women characters in their works. No significant women writer appeared on the literary canvas during this time.

With the appearance of Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), the age of realistic portrayal of women characters starts:

Kamala Markandaya's works are a realistic delineation of the double pulls that the Indian woman is subjected to, between her desire to assert herself as an individual and her duty in the capacity of a daughter, wife and mother. She also paints out how the socio-economic conditions affect the women most. (Sharma 8)

Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* depicts the miserable plight of Rukmani and the like. The novelist presents how the social customs and traditions play an important



role in making the lives of women worse. *Some Inner Fury* (1955) and *Possession* (1963) are based on the theme of East-West relationship. *A Silence of Desire* (1960) is also a counterpart of *Possession*. *A Handful of Rice* (1966) depicts the sufferings of the urban, middle-class, Hindu life. Her other novels are *The Coffey Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973) and *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). Markandaya portrays the difficulties and the sufferings of women in traditional society. Her women-protagonists are typical, but strong.

Kamala Das (b. 1934) is a bilingual writer who has written poetry and novels. She has published her three books of verse in English- *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). She is the renowned poetess who treats sex very frankly in her works. She also has written two novels *The Alphabet of Lust* (1980) and *A Doll For Child Prostitute*. All her works are but a struggle of a woman for identity and emancipation. Her autobiography *My Story* is considered as a bold step in a patriarchal society by the feminists.

There are some other women poets like Monika Varma, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Suniti Namjoshi etc., works of whom can be called significant, but not so much as those of Kamala Das. They write about domestic field and none of them is bold enough to be equal to Das.

Among the novelists of post-independence era include Ruth Praver Jhabvala (b. 1927), who stayed in India for about twenty-four years. Born to German parents, Jhabvala got education in England, married an Indian and wrote

about the social life of Indian women, especially urban, Hindu, middle class women. Her four novels *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960) and *Get Ready For Battle* (1962) are about middle class Hindu life. She has also written on the East-West encounter in novels like *Esmond in India* (1958), *A Backward Place* (1965), *A New Dominion* (1973) and *Heat and Dust* (1975). She articulated her own bitter experiences in India in her works. All her works are about domestic life and man-woman relationship.

Nayantara Sahgal (b. 1927) is also one of the prominent women writers who wrote about the issues concerning women. Her novel *A Time To be Happy* (1958) deals with a woman establishing extra-marital relations, feeling herself fettered in the traditions of society. *This Time of Morning* (1968), though a political novel, portrays the life of Rashmi and consequences of wrong marriage. *The Day in Shadow* (1971) deals with disintegration of marriage and humiliation felt by a woman being a divorcee, whereas *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) are political novels. Her best novel *Rich Like Us* deals with the exploitation and maltreatment of women and the struggle for identity and rejection of Indian traditions by its central character, Sonali. Sahgal's world of feminism is limited, though she deals with political situations in her works which is considered a masculine field. Having political background and being a divorcee, her own experiences provide matter for her novels.

Anita Desai (b. 1937), like Virginia Woolf, is interested in the inner psyche of her protagonists, rather their



social or political lives. M. K. Naik aptly remarks:

Anita Desai unravels the tortuous involutions of sensibility with subtlety and finesse. . . If her fiction is able to advance from the vision of 'aloneness' as a psychological state of mind to that of alienation as a metaphysical enigma- as one hopes it will- Anita Desai may one day achieve an amplified pattern of significant exploration of consciousness comparable to Virginia Woolf at her best. (254)

Before Anita Desai, the women writers wrote about their women characters, but their treatment was traditional. It is only through the works of Desai that the realistic inner frustration of Indian women protagonists gets revealed. She has been "labeled as a great feminist writer of international acclaim for having presented the predicament of sensitive women characters trapped between tradition and modernity" (Sharma 10-11). However, her protagonists do not come to terms with themselves and get neurotic, finding no solutions to their problems. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye- Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire On the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) and *The Village by the Sea* (1982) are her major novels. Later novels of Anita Desai have the characteristics of diasporic fiction having immigrant experience.

Attia Hussain (1913-1998)'s *Sunlight On a Broken Column* (1961) is the story of revolt of a Muslim girl Laila against the joint family system and old traditions of Indian society and her emancipation. Namita Gokhale (b.

1956)'s novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* is the story of Paro's emancipation and individuality, defying the cultural taboos by exploiting men sexually.

In her works, Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938) has given voice to disappointments and frustrations faced by women due to their marginal status in the society. Her works include the novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004), *In the Country of Deceit* (2008). In the words of S. Prasanna Sree:

She [Deshpande] portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. They are aware of the social and cultural disabilities to which they are subjected in the male-dominated society. They want to rebel against them in their search for freedom and identity, but they find themselves up against well-entrenched social inertia. (19)

Bharati Mukherjee's (b. 1940) works include novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), *Miss New India* (2011);

In her works, women are the central characters. Novel by novel, they proceed through the path of liberation. According to Hermit, "She deals with the phenomenon of migration, her emphasis being on her female characters, their struggle for identity, their psychological



trauma and their final emergence as self assertive individuals free from the bondages imposed by relationships of the past" (2).

Though the protagonists in her earlier works like *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* are unable to adapt according to the circumstances, yet in later works like *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World*, they emerge as pioneers:

Though her characters are aware of the social oppression and the brutalities inflicted on the women characters yet they emerge as survivors who have successfully borne the brunt, both physical and emotional. (Myles 107)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b. 1956) started her literary career as a fiction writer with story-collection *Arranged Marriage*. The stories in this collection deal with the life and problems of immigrant women. In her novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), she uses magic realism. Her next story-collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* deals with the theme of dislocation and relocation. Her next novel *Queen of Dreams* portrays the plight of immigrants in the United States. In this novel she takes up the issue of attack on the World Trade Centre of 2011. In the words of Beena Agarwal:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni perceives new dimension of feminine experiences as immigrants in the background of the issues like racism, terrorism, painting, dreams and the challenges of acculturation. In her novels one can see a Kaleidoscopic view of the burden of patriarchy, more dynamic mode of man and woman

relationship, complexity of immigration along with uncompromising reverence for Indian nationality and spiritual life. (11)

Anita Rau Badami (b. 1961) is also an Indian writer portraying the immigrant experience in her works. She does not portray the plight of immigrants in a sentimental way, but their anguish in their struggle towards the settlement in a foreign land. She depicts the cross-border terrorism and feeling of insecurity in her works. Her major works are *Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* In *Hero's Walk*, she talks about the cultural- gap and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* deals with the life of sikh minority. Her works are women-centered, but she defends herself to be called a feminist writer.

Manju Kapur (b. 1948) has written four novels – *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006) and *Immigrant* (2009). She takes up themes like rejection of traditional values and taboos, challenge against the existing norms, familial relationships, problem of marriage, gender discrimination etc. She advocates the third wave of feminism in her novel *Immigrant*.

The major novels of Gita Hariharan (b. 1954) are *The Thousand Faces of the Night* (1982), *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994) and *When Dreams Travel* (1999) whereas *The Art of Dying* (1993) is a story-collection. According to Shirish More:

The works of Githa Hariharan carry their special significance in the present scenario. Through her works, she attempts to tear apart the veil of sophistication



and social equality by presenting the status of women even in the present age. She tries to portray the custom-ridden Indian society, especially in the southern part of India. (157)

Gita Mehta (b. 1943), who belongs to the family of freedom fighters, lives in India and abroad. She writes about Indian culture and history. Her major works are novels *Raj* and *A River Sutra*, and works of non-fiction are *Karma Cola* and *Snakes and Ladders*.

Born in London, Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967) is an Indian-American writer. Her major works are *Interpreter of Maladies*, a short-story collection based on the lives of Indian immigrants. Her second work and first novel *The Namesake* is a diasporic novel which deals with the themes of cultural gap between the parents and emergence of tension between them due to the generation gap.

Daughter of Anita Desai, Kiran Desai (b. 1971) was born in India and is now a permanent resident of America. Her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), a winner of Betty Trask Award, is a much acclaimed novel. Her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is a winner of 2006 Man Booker Prize and 2006 National Book Critic Fiction Award. Her fiction deals with immigrant experience. Kiran Desai deals with the issues like multiculturalism, anguish of Third-World immigrants, clash of cultures and terrorism etc. Her novel *Inheritance of Loss* is about the postcolonial chaos and desperation.

Only one novel *God of Small Things* of Arundhati Roy (b. 1961) has been published. She is a social activist

and advocate the upliftment of the down-trodden. Beena Agarwal writes:

For her exceptional consciousness for the predicament of those who are 'God of Small Thing' (the marginalized communities) and extraordinary linguistic innovations changed the history and paradigms of women novelists . . . She has portrayed most of the sensitive issues like confrontation between the ruling class and labour class, apathy of society dominated by patriarchy, corruption in politics and administration, tyranny and injustice on the caste oppressed and the predicament of minority. (9)

Shobha De (b. 1948) is an eminent modern writer of novels like *Socialite Evenings*, *Strange Obsession*, *Sisters Sultry Days* and *Starry Nights*. She is an advocator of feminism. She is known as India's Jackie Collins and her works are sometimes charged as pornographic.

Thus, after the brief review of the major women novelists of India, it can be concluded that from the portrayal of traditional, stereotypical women characters and typical experiences, the Indian women novelists articulated the realistic experiences in their writings which were available to them at that time. At the same, with the advent of freedom of the country, the tendency to provide education to the girl-child enhanced. This, subsequently, provided new experiences and exposed to them to the new world and helped them make their writings matured. From the depiction of the miserable plight of the women, the Indian women novelists start



giving voice to their own thinking and understanding of the outside world and thus they start writing for the emancipation of their fellow women.

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