

The Genesis of New Women: A Study on The Perspective of Women Writers of Indian English literature

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ABSTRACT

Écriture Feminine is generally translated as “Feminine writing”. Women’s writing and Women’s studies gained momentum in academic circles as interdisciplinary courses in the recent past. Women are academically excelling and economically becoming more independent. They are striving to achieve self-sustenance by taking an active role in the social and cultural construct of society. Women are empowering themselves and scaling the heights in their chosen paths of life. Even though women are an equal part of the social, economic and cultural construct of society, they are forced to encounter unequal opportunities and gender-biased social justice. Women’s issues like oppression, suppression, physical and psychological harassment, sexual exploitation and women empowerment found their way into the writings of postcolonial women writers of India. The female experience can be better expressed in women writing than in the predominant male expression. As literature and society are entwined deeply, the post-colonial women writers have tried an in-depth analysis of female consciousness and psyche and explored the gradual transformation of the suppressed and suffering women to the status of ‘New Women’. The emergence of ‘New Women’ and the nurturing of the concept is the main concern in the writings of the women writers of Indian English Literature.

Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Geeta Hariharan, Geeta Mehta, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manju Kapur are some of the glorious roses in the bouquet of Indian English Literature. They have exercised a great feminist influence on society.

This article attempts a study of the depiction of women's issues and the genesis of the concept of new women and its nurturing in women's writing in Indian English literature with special reference to Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Gita Hariharan and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Keywords: female consciousness, the quest for individual identity, gender-biased social justice, socio-cultural taboos, transformation, new women, women empowerment

INTRODUCTION:

Human suffering, problems and related issues may vary from country to country or from one large geographical area to another geographical area as problems and issues are mostly country-specific and area-specific. The early feminism theory that originated in western countries was socio-cultural, political and economic-based where racial and ethnicity issues did not arise. The feminist theories of western countries were directed to the needs of white women or western women. Whereas the racial and gender problems faced by the women in the British colonies were completely neglected.

“If the Euro-American feminist movements focus on the gender pay gap, unpaid domestic labour or the dehumanizing aspects of pornography, these forms of oppression and subsequent resistance are not necessarily useful for women outside of Euro-America” (Feminism 101). Hence postcolonial feminism came into existence as a response to western feminism, to cater to the needs of the women in colonial countries and to address their specific issues which differ from Euro-American women's problems.

Race and ethnicity problems are much-debated topics in British colonies, quite unknown to the dominant white race. Social, political, historical, gender-based oppression and racial oppression have different perspectives for postcolonial countries. Likewise, the problems faced by women in liberated British colonies are different and need to be addressed specifically. For instance, treating women only as a sexual commodity or for the rearing of children or a head maid in the family, or a mandatory veil for women in Islamic countries or the Devadasi system in India as such, are all culture-specific oppressions that were not found in Euro American culture hence these issues were not addressed in the western feminist theories whereas the postcolonial feminism addressed these problems and tried to give women a new status through their writings by paving the way to the genesis of “New Women” a “brave women”, or a “modern women”.

“Postcolonial feminism embraces the potential for diverse, organic feminisms that seek to end the ramifications of sexism, racism, capitalism and imperialism in their totality. It reminds us of the united front of “sisterhood” is less in the spirit of feminism than are solidarity and awareness of the multitude of global experiences that comprise womanhood” (Feminism 101).

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In the Indian context, Vedas, Upanishads and ancient Indian Hindu texts considered women as the embodiment of the goddess trio: Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvathi. According to Hindu mythology Lord Shiva, the destructor or the transformer of the universe had given an equal status i.e., the left half of his divine self to his consort Parvati, which depicts the Arthnariswaratatva, harmonious coexistence of male and female entities. Lord Vishnu the perpetrator had given a place to his consort Lakshmi on his chest “vakshasthala” and Lord Brahma, the Creator of the Universe made his wife Saraswati sit on his lap. All the above instances from the mythological texts illustrate the dignity and respect for their consorts and also exhibit the equal status given to them.

In the present scenario, it can be interpreted as equal status for wife and husband, which should ultimately be resulted in no gender discrimination between men and women but the patriarchal system advocated by the ‘Manu Smriti’ never allowed it in Hinduism. In the mythological texts, women are considered the powerful reincarnation of Shakti. Shaktism is a major tradition of Hinduism, wherein the metaphysical reality is considered feminine and Devi, the goddess is the supreme. Neither the Shivaites nor the Shakteyas treated women as their equal counterparts.

Likewise, no religion advocated the oppression and humiliation of women, the problem is mainly with the misinterpretations of the religious texts and as a result, women are subjugated to male domination and discrimination which ended up in the plight of women. Women and girl child abuse is one more common phenomenon in the patriarchy. Most of the women in semi-urban and rural areas and particularly in slums are leading a wretched and pathetic life. Even the educated lot is not an exception most of the time. They are subjected to unequal opportunities and gender-biased social justice.

In the post-colonial world, space is recreated for women mainly due to postcolonial women writers. They are striving to achieve self-sustenance by taking an active role in the social and cultural construct of society. The female experience can be better expressed in women writing than in the predominant male expression. The genesis of ‘New Women’ and the nurturing of the concept is the main concern in the writings of the women writers of Indian English Literature. Discomfort and humiliation in married life, alienation in family, the fundamental challenge of survivability of women and girl child, domestic violence, economical dependence, traditional and socio-cultural taboos imposed on women, the quest for individual and social identity and gender-based justice are some of the major issues that found their way into the postcolonial literature by women writers. This paved way for the emergence of a strong “New Woman”. Some of India’s most influential female writers who played a key role in changing the prevailing traditional mindset of women are

MahaSweta Devi, Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, KiranDesai, JhumpaLahiri, ShashiDeshpande, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Anita Desai:

Winner of the Sahitya Academy Award and shortlisted for the Booker prize three times, Anita Desai is a prolific writer of Indian English literature. In the novel *Where shall we go this summer?*(1975), Desai portrays the identity crisis of modern women as Sita's quest for female identity is the major theme of the novel. Sita's predicament is such that many Indian women can associate their alienation and disharmony in family life with the protagonist. Sita in her forties, married to a businessman Raman, having had four children, wonders about her fifth pregnancy and says "no positively". Sita's "positively no" depicts the attitudinal change of modern women, which can be viewed as recreating space for herself. She does not want to confine herself as a childbearing machine and ultimately end up rearing them which is a challenge to the womanhood advocated in the Smirits. Deprivation of love and affection from her husband leads her to loneliness and disharmony in her marital relationship. Marital discord is a recurring theme in Anita Desai's novels. Sita is a contemporary woman and she has taken her own decision to go to Manori Island along with her four children and resolved "positively no" to giving birth to a fifth child. She questions the very basis of marriage and motherhood whereas her mythical namesake unquestioningly followed her husband Lord Sri Ram into the forests for fourteen years with her consent where she was kidnapped by the demon king Ravana and faced many hardships to reunite with her husband Lord Sri Ram. Women of ancient times subjugated themselves to male domination and authority and the same tradition was followed in the later years. In Hindu tradition, women in mythological texts such as Sita, Savitri, Sumati, Anasuya, Arundhati and a host of iconic women are the role models for women of the later years and to date, it is followed in some staunch orthodox families. In modern times this attitude is influenced by education, changing social norms, the influence of mass communication, worldwide changes in the conditions of women, globalisation, the ideologies of feminism and to a great extent postcolonial writings.

"Anita Desai is obviously conscious of her choice of the names as with the names strike certain expectations, expectations that are thwarted". Finally, she resolves and compromises and the play ends on a positive note. "The life of Sita is a study of feminine consciousness, the question of control of women's body, suffering and struggling within the framework of conjugal life".

"Tragically, Sita's dreams of getting love and affection from her husband ended in a nightmare. The point at issue is that her husband ignores her instincts, and she likes him to treat her gently and tenderly which he cannot do. As a result, in the long run, the husband-wife relationship is dragged into difficulties that come out in the form of an identity crisis, for both Raman and Sita stand for binary oppositions. Raman is a creature of society, more or less an extrovert, more accommodative,

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and apathetic whereas Sita is hypersensitive, has an introverted personality and is a pessimist. She not only hates Raman for his lack of feeling but also derides the subhuman placidity, calmness, sluggishness and the routine manner of her husband's family. As a reaction against these when she speaks with rage and anguish and with "sudden rushes of emotion." (WTS 44)

Kiran Desai :

Kiran Desai, daughter of Anita Desai is a winner of the Man Booker prize in 2006 for her most popular novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. "In her novel, she portrays not only the legacy of loss that is a part of the contemporary era but has also given a voice to various female characters: Some traditional, timid and submissive, Some vain and lost, some assertive, confident and self-dependent. Desai has represented various faces of Indian womanhood through various female characters."

Kiran Desai depicted the plight of women in her novels. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a marvellous portrayal of three successive generations of women ranging from meek, submissive and a victim of a patriarchal society to the contemporary new women. Nimi, Sai's grandmother was neglected by her husband Jemubhai Patel. Nimi is a traditional woman who suffers injustice and oppression from her husband and is a silent sufferer like most other average women. She represents the average woman of her time. Jemubhai married Nimi for the greed of money that was offered as dowry, a handsome amount, at the time of marriage which "included cash, emeralds from Venezuela, Rubies from Burma, uncut Kundan diamond, a watch on a watch chain, lengths of woollen cloth for her new husband to make into suits in which to travel to England and in a crisp envelop, a ticket for passage on Strathnaver from Bombay to Liverpool (91)." He used her affluent family background for his cherished dream to go to England. He feels ashamed that his wife "Nimi" could not learn English and that she is not a sophisticated woman. Even though Nimi brought a fortune of wealth in the form of dowry she was ill-treated in her in-law's house. Jemubhai Patel is also a stereotypical dominating and greedy man of his time. According to Dr. Vipin Kumar Pandey: "Jemubhai is very sensitive against the filthy manners towards anyone whereas he himself hurts his wife with little brooding that whatever she is no matter but is his wife of flesh and blood and should be respected. Nimi in the hand of a brutal patriarchal system suffers a double loss, loss of her human self, and loss of her sanity. Death was the last refuge and the only relief to her whom the patriarchal society crushed all her life. So her journey has been full of challenges and predicaments".

The second-generation women are Loli, Noni and Sai's mother. The transformation process takes off when Sai's mother elopes with a Russian and marries him against the will of her father depicting the metamorphosis of modern women and also the changing cultural and traditional values of

society and the inevitability of accepting them in general. Kiran Desai's women started recreating space for themselves.

Sai Mistry is a third-generation woman who returns to Kalimpong, as an orphan after the sudden demise of her parents to live with her grandfather Mr. Patel. Sai is bold and wise enough to face the situation when she found herself betrayed. Kiran Desai meticulously depicted the process of transformation from a meek stereotype woman to a New Woman who can face the challenges in her own stride.

Gita Hariharan:

Gita Hariharan, an author and editor won the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' prize for her first novel "*The Thousand Faces of Night*". The *GajarHalwa* is a short story from her anthology of short stories *The Art of Dying* (1993). Perumayee, a sixteen-year-old village girl from Salem is hired to work in a memsahib's house in Delhi through Chellamma. She learns all the household chores like babysitting, washing, and cooking. She has also learned the art of escaping the work or the so-called city smartness when unnoticed by her memsahib within a short time.

Perumayee is now economically independent and wants to buy a beautiful blue sweater for herself. Gradually she made friends with other girls working for other memsahibs. She easily adopts the urban culture which is quite fascinating to her when compared with her small village background where there was no work even to sustain. Once she is through with all the household work she plans to change for a higher wage in a richer colony. Perumayee wants to use her adjustability skill positively for a good hike in her wage. She readily imbibes the customs of urban living and finds that it is a good source to feed her family back in the village. As an elder girl of the family, she shoulders the responsibility of her family as her drunkard father abandoned her family. Geeta Hariharan subtly points out the migration of village girls to cities in search of job opportunities. She reminisces her past while grating heaps of carrots to prepare *gajarhalwa*. *GajarHalwa* is a combination of grated carrot, milk, and ghee likewise the author symbolically represents the character of Perumayee as an amalgamation of the innocence of a village girl, the smartness of a city maid, a sense of sharing responsibilities, ready to learn and adjust in a new alluring environment.

Jhumpa Lahiri: Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nilanjana Sudeshna in an Indian Bengali emigrant family in London, her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (2000).

Interpreter of Maladies was about Mr. Das and his family who were on a trip to visit the Sun Temple at Konark in India. Mr. and Mrs. Das hire a tour guide Mr. Kapasi to visit the famous Sun temple of

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Konark. The young American couple had three children namely Tina, Ronny, and Bobby. Mr. Kapasi observes a lack of harmonious relationship between the husband and wife. They acted like mere caretakers than parents. When enquired Mr. Kapasi revealed that he works as an interpreter at a doctor's clinic. Mr. and Mrs. Das appreciate his job and Kapasi feels elated. Mrs. Das's interest in him made him fly into the dreamland. He started keenly observing her. It reveals a man's fantasy for another woman even though he is married. He even dreams to take her hand into his hand while Mr. Das is busy taking photographs.

Mrs. Das suddenly reveals to Kapasi that the monastic dwellings that Bobby is not Mr. Das's son, an eight-year-old secret, she had never revealed. She got relief from her burden. Here Jhumpa Lahiri exposes the brevity of "New Women" to have her own sexual choice, an extramarital affair with Mr. Das's friend which was a taboo for women in Indian culture and tradition. This can also be viewed as the impact of cross-culture due to migration. Mr. Kapasi lost respect for her when he came to know about the secret. The dual standards for men and women can be observed here. He fancied taking Mrs. Das's hand into his hand, expecting letters from her, observing her physique and a strawberry applique on her T-Shirt.

Mrs. Das asked for a remedy for her pain then he enquires if it is pain she feels or guilt. Insulted by this remark she gets out of the car, joins her family and realizes that Bobby is missing. He is surrounded by aggressive monkeys. Mr. Kapasi rescues the boy and the family is united. When Mrs. Das reaches into her bag for a brush to smooth Bobby's hair, the address slip given by Mr. Kapasi to get his photographs flutters away in the breeze. Jhumpa Lahiri symbolically uses this situation. Lahiri depicts the cultural differences between Indians and Indian Americans. Mr. Kapasi's enduring through the loveless marriage shows the Indian customs and Mrs. Das's extramarital affair exposes the western culture of no restrictions and its influence on the Indian psyche.

Conclusion:

Women found a strong voice in postcolonial literature produced by women writers. The transformation of women and their identity quest can be seen as they are competing in every field equally with men and leaving their footprints. They are much more liberated as their voice can be heard through the stone walls of social and cultural taboos and even though they are chained by a load of customs and traditions. Kishwar Naheed aptly says in her poem *I Am Not That Woman* that her voice cannot be smothered by stones and the chains cannot smother her fragrance as light cannot be hidden by darkness, which depicts the emergence of a contemporary strong new woman.

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