



NEW WOMAN—UNDERWORLD TO WONDER WORLD

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ABSTRACT

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, silent women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood.

This paper throws light on new role of women. Today's women are career women and are fully capable to make balance between their career and family responsibilities. They are educated, economically independent and can take decisions. They make their children's future and guide them to right direction. Their journey is towards freedom, breaking the shackles of old tradition and subjugation of male members. This has been brought into the works of many female writers like Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur and Anita Desai.

This awakening amongst the feminists and women writers has helped them to project in their writing the image of a 'new woman'. In such times when radical change is going on all over the country, it has become quite desirable for woman to redefine her new role and determine the parameters so as to become an integral part of family and society.

Key Words-new woman, identity, survival, awareness, consciousness

Literature is a mirror of society. It has tremendous potential to reflect and raise issues and suggest logical solutions for them. The image of women in Indo-Anglican Literature has undergone a vast change through the passage of time. There has been a paradigm shift from the traditional image of women enduring, self-sacrificing to a more complex, fragmented, conflicted characters in search for identity and meaning in life and attempting to reveal the potential of women. Female characters from 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood.

The Indian novel in English in the pre-independence period mostly remained male-

dominated for a very few women novelists such as Toru Datt, Raj Luxmi Debi and Swarnkumari Ghoshal at the end of the 19th century. But during the post-independence period there appeared a number of women writers like Kamla Markandey, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande as well as younger generation of Githa Hariharan, Nina Sibal, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, who contributed significantly to Indian English novel and helped its development. In their novels, the appearance of the new, fully awakened woman, ready to fight against the patriarchal norms in order to live a meaningful life is a recent phenomenon. The female characters

created by these writers do not accept the low secondary status in a male-dominated Indian society that is conservative. The central theme, therefore, is the emergence of 'new woman' in the fast changing social milieu.

Women have been a vehicle of change in society. Recent women writers of the sub-continent portray women as rebels militating against the patriarchal society. This can be seen in the novels of Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Tasleema Nasreen, Shashi Deshpande, Daisy Abey and others.

The primary motivation of the novel has always been a projection of the social situation and the reflection of social consciousness. Literature reveals principally three sets of relationships—human being in relation to the universe, individual in relation to society, and man in relation to woman. According to the Bible, God created man in His own image. And then the Lord God created Eve out of Adam's rib. Woman is taken out of man (though it is mother who gives birth to a baby). God is male (created man in His own image). Man is created first. From the Bible to this day everywhere one can see deep-rooted gender discrimination.

In India, on the other hand, a woman is equated with man through the concept of 'Ardhangini'; on the other hand, in reality society is not ready to give that equal status to them in male dominated society. The tragedy is that even women are not ready to give the equal status to women. Gender discrimination can be seen in Shashi Deshpande's novel 'That Long Silence', Ramukaka had shown Jaya the picture of the family tree. "Look Jaya, this branch. This is our grandfather, your grandfather and here are the boys—Shridhar, Janu, Divakar, Ravi"¹ Jaya is pained at not finding herself in the picture and to hear that she does not belong to that family. "You are married; you're now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here".(That Long Silence, 142).

In the novel Jaya's maid-servant suffers at the hands of her drunkard husband and has to earn for her family. Many Indian wives have to undergo similar situations like Jaya. They are "unwilling to do anything that could result in their being tossed out of their comfortable ruts and into the big, bad world

of reality, to find for themselves."(That Long Silence, 143).

Time is changing rapidly. There has been a change in the mindset of the people. Women are being given many more opportunities than ever before. Even though educated and independent they still are in secondary position. Shashi Deshpande's Sarita in her novel "The Dark Holds No Terrors" tries to raise her voice against her husband. Often males want to make love whenever they feel like even though wives want it or not. Deshpande's Sarita gathers herself and says 'no' to her husband showing her courage:

"She remembered the first time she had been reading in bed when he turned to her, pulling the book savagely out of her hands. "That's enough. Come to me now." And he began what was then for them a peculiar type of love-making, with something in it that set it apart from all their other times together.....For, when she felt him against her, she knew there was nothing. It was a sham. And something about it sickened her. "No, No. Please, No."²

Saru (Sarita) realizes the futility of her surrender to her husband's tastes. Her abnegation to his tastes had seemed wholly natural at first.

"Now, for the first time she found herself wavering, hesitating, making her way back to her real self. I, as I would like myself to be." (The Dark Holds No Terror, p.191).

This awakening amongst the feminists and women writers has helped them to project in their writing the image of a 'new woman'. In such times when radical change is going on all over the country, it has become quite desirable for women to redefine her role and determine the parameters so as to become an integral part of the family and society, striking a true balance between extreme feminism and the conventional role of subjugation and self-denial.

"A woman supported by a man—wife or courtesan-- is not emancipated from the male because she has a ballot in her hand; if custom imposes less constraint upon her than formerly, the

negative freedom implied has not profoundly modified her situation; she remains bound in her condition of vassalage. It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice.”³

The new woman is also a career woman who is balancing between her career and individual freedom. Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists—Sumi (A Matter of Time), Indu (Roots and Shadows), Saru (The Dark Holds No Terrors), Jaya (That Long Silence) and Urmila (The Binding Vine)—all are career women. She tries to address particularly the problems of the middle-class working women. Her career women try to redefine human relationship in view of the newly acquired professional status.

As women’s secrets and strengths are revealed, so are the complications of family and culture, catching each in turn in the cycles of love, loss and renewal that become essential to their identity. ‘A Matter of Time’ reveals the hidden springs of character while painting a nuanced portrait of the difficulties and choice of facing women—especially educated, independent woman in Indian society. ‘A Matter of Time’ traces the transformation of the ideology from the stage of the internalization of patriarchal values through awareness of the value of female bonding and self identity to assertion of the ideology within the same family charting the course of social history and ideological change.

Kalyani, Sumi and Aru—grandmother, mother and daughter—are the figures around whom a vivid assortment of characters revolves. When Sumi’s husband, Gopal announces that he is leaving, Sumi neither tries to stop her nor asks the reason but quietly endures the situation but her daughter, Aru takes the initiative to talk to her father. When she fails in her attempt, she does not hesitate to drag him to court and discuss with a lawyer.

Sumi, always tries to balance the old and the new generation. She takes good care of her isolated father and grooms her daughters in accordance to modern society, giving them good education, learning them driving and developing a

sense of self-independence. She herself writes a play and takes up a teaching job.

Shashi Deshpande’s career women “are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equality between men and women but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to independent of their individual capabilities are realized in their own lives.”⁴

Indu, a journalist in ‘Roots and Shadows’ finds her job very dull and unsatisfactory. But her husband, Jayant wants her to continue and compromise. Indu finds it difficult to compromise with her honesty and decides to resign her job and devotes herself to the kind of writing she has always dreamed of. Indu, thus finally asserts herself as a writer. She realizes that her roots are to be an independent woman and a writer while her shadows are to be a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer.

So in the end, she did achieve her freedom. She had not let anyone, neither Kaka, nor Atya, nor even Jayant come in the way of doing. What she believed was the right thing to do. She had conquered her fears and achieved harmony in life. Simone De Beauvoir has rightly assessed the situation of women:

“Sometimes her lover or husband asks her to renounce her career If she yields, she is once more a vassal; if she refuses, she condemns herself to a withering solitude. Today a man is usually willing to have his companion continue her work; the novels of Colette Yver, showing young women driven to sacrifice their professions for the sake of peace and the family, are rather out-dated; living together is an enrichment for two free beings, and each finds security for his or her own independence in the occupation of the mate.”⁵

Urmila of the ‘Binding Vine’, however, is the most rebellious of Deshpande’s protagonists. She works as a lecturer in a college and is thus financially independent. Self-reliant and highly self-confident, she has an identity different from that of her husband. She neither wants to live on her husband’s

money nor submit before him. Indu, Saru and Jaya are aware of the inequalities in society but they do not attempt to set right anything.

Thus we see that the important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through her women characters is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. It is only through self-realization and self-analysis, through awareness and courage; they can initiate to change their lives. They will have to fight their own battles and nobody is going to do it for them.

Not only Shashi Deshpande, but Manju Kapur also, in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity. They are more discriminated and are biased in lieu of their sex. We see the budding of new woman in her heroines, who do not want to be rubber dolls for others to move as they will. They are not silent rebels but are bold, courageous, firm, action-oriented and decision-makers. The Indian women have really achieved their success in the last fifty years, but if there is to be a true female, independence, much remains to be done. Like many others, Virmati also, the central character of the novel 'Difficult Daughters', in her quest of identity, rebels against tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The title of the novel 'Difficult Daughters' is an indication to the message that a woman, who tries to search her identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and society as well. The novel tells the sad story of Virmati how she struggles to balance her family duties, the desire for education and elicit love. The major portion of the novel describes Virmati's love affairs with Professor and rest part deals with fighting struggle for freedom. She struggles between the physical and moral, the head and the heart. Finally she gives way to her heart and body.

In another novel of Manju Kapur, 'Home', when Nisha enters in college for higher studies, she falls in love with a boy and decides to marry him ignoring his caste and creed. Thus the novels depict how the family norms are ignored by the new

generation. Novels of Manju Kapur present the changing image of women that is my main focus how women are creating wonder world for themselves. Her women characters are moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards confident, firm and ambitious women making society aware of their wishes and demands and in this way providing a medium for self-expression.

Though there is much talk about woman's liberation, it is a truth that society expects a woman to make compromises to keep the family intact and happy. Meena Shirwadkar, in 'Image of woman in the Indo-Anglican Novel', says: "Marriage is an obligation for womanhood but it makes a demand on woman. She is expected to go through a long process of learning what she has to learn in order to adapt herself to the new environment."⁶

The institution of marriage, with all its expectations falls heavily on a woman. However, when it becomes a battlefield between two egoistic individuals who are not ready to compromise, it proves that the fittest can survive; the strategy of survival varies from woman to woman; when she succumbs to the internal pressure of her own self and the external pressure from the society, she either commits suicide or loses her identity. The brave one does not want to make a compromise and comes out of the shackles of the union. Taslima Nasrin's protagonist Nila proves a brave character and she wants to retain her individuality against the destructive forces that threaten her identity as an individual and as a woman since marriage subjugates her. Through the character of Nila, Nasrin portrays the inner struggle of an artist to express her feminine urge for self-expression. Nila leaves Kishan's home. Nasrin raises consciousness among women by the successful exit of Nila.

Taslima Nasrin looks at the woman from another perspective. Though her novels revolve round love-affairs or sexual relationship, this is also an important issue, when women are humiliated and subjugated. In another novel 'Shodh', Jhumur whose husband doubts about her pregnancy, is broken and deliberately develops her relationship with Afzal and

becomes pregnant just to take revenge from her husband.

When we look at the revenge of Jhumur, a new face of womanhood is exposed. Jhumur cheats her husband so calculatingly. It is absolutely freezing. At the end, the same cruel husband who got her aborted starts looking like a buffoon. She reduces him to be a puppet in the hands of her cunning ploy. Taslima writes, 'I made up my mind to be pregnant with Afzal. I did not want to offer Haroon a body ready to receive his sperm. I wanted him to sow his seed in fallow land and wait foolishly, a day after day, to see it sprout. I did not have any sense of guilt about it. I was not a loose woman I wasn't deceiving him. I was merely paying him back.'⁷

There is a transformation on the part of woman. Now they are aware of their rights and hence revolt against the traditional norms and fight for equality in the male-dominated society. In this fast changing world, the role of woman in the society too, has been changing fast, affecting greatly the sexual mores and social norms prevalent in the society. I cannot forget to mention Shobha De whose novels reveal her protest against the image of woman as an auxiliary. She destroys the distorted image of woman and therefore, the female characters in her novels appear more powerful than man. The journey of Karuna in 'Socialite Evenings' is a journey of a middle class girl to a self-sufficient woman. Her entry in the glamorous world of modeling and friendship with Bunty, are the acts of rebellion. After marriage she establishes extra-marital relationship with Krish, revolts against her insensitive husband and finally divorces him. She also rejects the ideas of her second marriage. She does not want to conform to the traditional image of woman anymore. The women such as Karuna, Anjali and Ritu attempt to destroy the gender discrimination-the real source of women's oppression.

In 1960's, with the rise of feminism, there emerged the New woman who is completely different from her traditional counterpart. This New woman is conscious, confident and sometimes even aggressive. She occupies the center and has got rid

of her position of the 'other'. She is now aware of her destination, that is, to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs imposed on her by male-dominated society. The modern women depicted by Shobha De do not depend, for their survival, on their fathers, husbands or sons. They are financially independent and have the required strength to face life with all its ups and downs. They are assertive, practical and strong. They fall into the category of strong woman who solves her problems herself.

If we talk of Arundhati Roy, in her novel 'God of Small Things', she deconstructs stereotypical constructs about women and we get the message that women can play an equal part with men, only if they get a distinct voice of their own and learn to transcend the traditional barriers of their silence. Roy's Rahel, in this novel, helps to establish the ever changing role of women in Indian post-colonial literature. She is portrayed as having great intellect which became apparent, even at a young age. Rahel has the power to see past, the incidents of everyday, to look beyond the borders and barriers of the family and gender, and overcome the oppression of women. She is strong willed-willed, independent and never sees herself as a victim.

Another notable character in this novel is Ammu. After a failed marriage with a Bengali drunkard in Calcutta, a thin veneer of romance bloomed between Velutha and Ammu. Ammu started viewing Velutha in a strange way. Gradually she seeks her life in the world of Velutha. The social constructs of 'love laws' were shattered. When she violated the social barriers she seemed to say that "women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants and cheap laborers. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men's lives. Our humanity is denied".⁶

Throughout the novel, Papachi tortures and harasses his wife always quite brutally. In order to escape from the tortures, Ammachi starts scribbling cooking tips which later prompted her to establish a pickle factory.

Roy provides a window through which Indian womanhood can be explored and interpreted. I can say that Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur both shifted the issues related to women which were till recently in the periphery. Arundhati seems to assert that "a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the 'other'. She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation."

In brief, we can say that woman is both winner and loser and she has to set a milestone of success on the path of life which is full of pebbles and thorns of problems. She has to be her own problem-shooter and has to rise from within. The new woman has to create a balance between her individuality and social responsibility as a member of human society. Life without a life partner becomes a life of isolation and loneliness on earth and nobody is an island in him. Life is a symbol of peace, love and understanding that men and women have to share for a happy home and happy life.

Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of woman to one ideal. The novels emerging in the 21st century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also redefine mythology by using new symbols and new methods. In the end, the Indian women writers' work is significant in awaking society of women's demands, and in serving a source for self-expression and, thus, creating their own story and re-writing the History.

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