

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

September 2020 Vol. 9. Issue IV

www.galaxyimrj.com

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Shattering Stereotypes: Representation of Women in Indian English Fiction

Susan Sanny
Asst. Professor,
Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous),
Bengaluru.

Article History: Submitted-28/07/2020, Revised-02/10/2020, Accepted-03/10/2020, Published-10/10/2020.

Abstract:

Literary texts and writings have been framed by writers of diverse socio-cultural, political and religious milieu. The ephemeral reality of life is predictably reflected in literature and women's position in the society is no exception to this phenomenon. Women have been oppressed, suppressed and marginalized in the sphere of sharing the available opportunities for the fulfilment of their lives, despite the fact that they possess equal potential, expertise and acumen, and work unequivocally for the progress of their loved ones. In the works of Indian writers, we find the idiom of feminine sensibility and its suppression in a male dominated society. The writers seem to unfold through the imaginative, richly textured writing, how women protagonists rebel against the conservative manacles of the society thereby interrogating gender politics. The representation of women in literatures emerges partly from the existing reality of the society and partly from the author's sensitivity to dissect fiery issues. Writers have critiqued through their creative works the condition of women in their own society and have tried to map the gradual erosion of the stereotypes built around women characters in the literary arena.

Keywords: Culture, Feminist, Social consciousness, Patriarchy, stereotypes, Gender politics

Indian society is conformist and caste based and the structure of patriarchy has prevailed in our society right from ancient Vedic period. Women have faced discrimination and prejudice in varied arenas- like in the family and society since time immemorial. The struggle for rights and freedom from societal norms has been a long and enduring one. In India, women enjoyed equal status as men in the early Vedic period. But in the later stages child marriage and the ban on remarriage of widows became prevalent in Indian communities. Certain practices like the Jauhar and Sati became popular. The cases of female

infanticide, dowry, rape, sexual harassment, selective abortion have further stigmatized and restricted women's freedom and mobility.

Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women's production, reproduction and sexuality. It is a social and ideological construct which considers men as superior to women. It imposes masculine and feminine character stereotypes in the society that strengthens the unfair power relations between men and women. Subordination of women is due to a patriarchal system and due to this system, a type of hierarchy and hegemony is maintained between the two biological sexes. However, it needs to be understood that such a system is not biological but a social construct. Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashata, in his article titled *Man's World*, rightly points out: 'feudal patriarchal norms are so firmly entrenched in Indian society that any assertive and independent creation of space by women is violently resisted. Feminists believe that this subconscious sense of displacement has made even modernist men uncomfortable as they themselves are born into traditional Indian families that are fed on ideas that differentiate sexes by patriarchal virtues.' Since time immemorial subjugation and exploitation of women has been a persistent social issue. But human history reveals sporadic examples of women who have been leaders and who were powerful and ingenious enough to decide their destinies. One or two women out of the hundreds become exceptional, acquiring enough self-assurance to shed the fear of blindly pursuing worn-out empty traditions and social taboos. In *My Days* R.K. Narayan writes: 'I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. Man assigned woman a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, individuality, stature and strength.'

Feminism is an ideology against oppression and exploitation of women in a patriarchal system. It gained prominence with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of women* (1792) and since then there has been a serious debate on issues related to women. The goal of feminism is to establish and promote egalitarian opportunities for women. The image of women in fiction has undergone a sea change during the last decades. Writers have moved away from traditional depiction of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards female characters searching for identity. The women writers in Indian English fiction like Githa Hariharan, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande,



Mahaswetha Devi, broke the literary and social norms to become the voice of the voiceless, thus bringing the gender issues to a wider spectrum of interaction.

A trend in Indian writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. The assertiveness of men stands as an impediment in the path of many women who try to take assured strides to be successful in their lives. Evaluating man and a woman as separate entities and not as ordinary human beings could be regarded as the main cause for all the miseries perpetrated on women by their counterparts who are expected to safeguard them. Compared to the women of ancient times, the women today are more assertive, more liberated and more articulate in their expression. This paper focuses on women who are shattering the stereotypes imposed on them and their quest for identity and social equality through the novels of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's novel *Chemmeen*.

Githa Hariharan has carefully shown the patriarchal system in her novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The novel is an example of women's sufferings in the patriarchal cultural matrix of Indian traditional society. Her depiction of patriarchy is based on her clear social assessment and realistic societal analysis, which advocates feminist ideology. *The Thousand Faces of Night* depicts the struggle of Devi complemented by the stories of four other important women: her grandmother, her mother, her mother-in-law and her maid. All these women have been both a victim and a survivor. Their lives have been blemished by anguish, bias, sacrifice, and yet they are unassailable and strong. The women in the novel struggle in a male dominated society for the sake of protecting their identity. The cogitations made by Githa Hariharan are realistic and fearless. Hariharan's women characters are depicted as ensnared amidst traditions, old values, myths and modernity and are victims of a male dominated society.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a narrative that relentlessly challenges the expectations about what it is to be a good wife, mother, and woman. Devi's marriage in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a marriage arranged by her mother. Earlier Devi refused an offer of marriage from her African-American friend Dan because of her ambivalence towards American culture. 'The possibility of imposing permanence such as marriage-however flexible in transient America- was somehow obscene.' (6) She returns to India for the sake of her widowed mother Sita. 'Amma's letters brought with them an unspoken message of loneliness, poignant in its quiet dignity. She has always been a strong, self-willed woman ...but the image of her alone by the sea teased me like a magnet.' (16). Devi felt a strong

bonding with her mother and ‘became a one-celled unit.’(13)Devi’s mother plays the marriage card and Devi is soon led to the altar of marriage. Devi’s broad-mindedness and education challenges the myriad blind beliefs, but she sheds her desires to fulfill her mother’s desire and to uphold the family honour. Mahesh, even before their marriage, openly tells Devi about his nature of work. ‘I will be in Bangalore only ten days of the month,’ Mahesh says. ‘Are you ready to accept that? My father is there, of course, and our old maidservant, but you will be lonely sometimes. Have you thought of that?’(22)Though the frankness of Mahesh initially impressed her, she gradually realizes the different faces and roles she has inherited. Devi remarks about her initiation into marriage by stating that ‘my education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood.’(54)

Devi states ‘the sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above my neck for years.’ ‘I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, ...The games it plays with me are ignominious ... The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for.’ (54) Mahesh is totally unaware of her loneliness and does not feel it necessary to share business matters with Devi. When Devi asks him to postpone his business trip, he comments sarcastically that ‘he would be born a woman in his next birth’ so that he could be free from earning his living. Mahesh, like the men in the Indian society, wants his wife to be acquiescent and passive. He wants Devi to attend to his father and him, manage the housework and to receive his friends properly. According to Mahesh, education is not essential to make a woman happy. He justifies his statement by stating that Devi’s grandmother who was illiterate was a happy woman. As time progresses her urge for retribution becomes apparent. She grows wild in her fantasies and comments, ‘I will grow a garden of weeds.....Wild common –blooded weeds that plunge their tenacious roots deep into the helpless soil.’(58)

Mahesh seems to be insensitive to Devi’s needs and harps on the need to have a family. Motherhood is considered a heavenly gift and a redemptive factor for an Indian woman. Sita writes to Devi about the significance of motherhood: ‘my dear Devi ... women have sought the deep content that comes with motherhood. When I held you helpless in my protecting arms, when you first smiled at my face bent over yours, when you lisped that precious word Amma, what vistas of joy opened up before me! (86) However, for Devi, barrenness, is the price she has to pay as penance for her marriage with Mahesh. The rejection of his plea ‘to have a baby’ (74) is the important step on her part to assert her



identity. Devi's grandmother narrated stories about women like Gandhari and Amba who protested against ill-treatment in their own powerful ways. Devi perceives an equivalent between the lives of Gandhari and that of her mother. Her mother says, 'Gandhari's anger, wrapped tightly roundin a life-long blindfold, burnt in a heart close, very close to mine.' (29) Devi says, 'In my grandmother's mind, the link between her stories and our own lives was a very vital one. ...The lesser lives we knew did not always rise to the heroic proportions of my mother's version of Gandhari's sacrifice.' (30) Sita dismisses these stories as they offer no hint for her to deal with reality. The photo of Sita holding the veena prompts a recounting of Gandhari's story by her grandmother. Gandhari's blind folding is an act of protest. In the same way Sita's decision to discard the Veena is an act of both retribution and dissent when her husband shouts and directs her to 'Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?' (30)

Devi had heard many stories of persecution at the hands of husbands, but she is not prepared for a similar maltreatment from her husband. Devi feels embittered like Gandhari. She ponders 'I must have known, even then, that Gandhari's pride, the fury that was to become her life-force, the central motive of years of blind suffering, was no piece of fiction.' (29)

Mayamma, on the contrary, firmly believes that women are not supposed to ask questions. Mayamma the family housekeeper asked a question only once in her life and the answer she got silenced her for her life time. Nevertheless, Devi gains insight by questioning her grandmother. She learns that stories are meant to be revised and retold. Devi decides to 'do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with.' (95) The act of walking out on Mahesh provides substance to her life. Condemning and trampling on the marital vows, Devi elopes with Gopal. He is no better than Mahesh. Devi muses, 'my grandmother fed me fantasies, my father a secretive love. My mother sought me out with hope, and when disappointed pushed me forward in the direction she chose. You could say I have been lucky. I have been well looked after. I have mimed the lessons they taught me, an obedient puppet whose strings they pulled, they pulled and jerked with their love.' (136) She reflects, 'I have made very few choices ... But I was too well-prepared, and not prepared at all. America, Jacaranda road, Mahesh, Gopal. I have run away from all my trials ...' (137) Life with Gopal disenchanting her and she feels like 'a kite that had snapped free of its string.' (129) Having failed to delineate her identity as a wife or even as a rebellious lover, Devi finally returns to her mother, 'to stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have

to start from the very beginning'(139). It is in her rapport with her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself.

In *Indian Writing in English Prospect and Retrospect* the well-known critic K.R. Srinivas Iyengar declares "the Indianness of Indian writing consists in the writer's intense awareness of his entire culture." Githa Hariharan deftly explores gender relations by means of Indian mythology. In the novel, Devi's grandmother dwells on mythology and these lessons indelibly imprint themselves in her mind. Devi's grandmother is not oblivious of the thousand faces of the night engulfing matrimony, yet she is optimistic and wants Devi to be aware of her feminine vices, frustrations as well as resilience, so that she could endure these dismal hues and somehow survive.

Feminism is generally based on protest and revolt against the established orders. Devi internalizes all the pain borne by Sita and Mayamma and finally revolts against the social institution of marriage. This was her way of turning the contradictions of her life upside down. The women belong to different generations and are different in terms of education and social circumstances. 'She thought of the three of them-Mayamma, Sita and herself. Three of the women who walked a tightrope and struggled for some balance; for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves.' (135) Mayamma could not bear a child for several years, Sita has a girl child, and Devi couldn't bear one. Mayamma's husband and mother-in-law tortured her physically. Sita's troubles are more mental and Devi's are due to her husband's indifferent attitude which disturbs her emotional equilibrium. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a reflection of the elements of feminism and reveals the struggle made by Indian women. Devi's character is a unique example of this process. Indian society is patriarchal and it is based on a rigid social structure which can be changed only through a social awakening.

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai a Malayali novelist focuses on the oppressed classes. Thakazhi in his novel *Chemmeen* unequivocally presents the sad quandary of fisherwomen in our society. He raises our social consciousness against the unjust system that victimizes women. Women, especially fisher women, marginalized from the mainstream life have always been experiencing subjugation from their male counterparts. Their life is generally a static and stagnant one in connection with the roles assigned to them in society and in the family. Pillai presents women in *Chemmeen* in the conventions of gender politics and addresses the universality of female suffering. Age-old values along with the superstitious



beliefs and traditions of the fishermen community in Kerala is portrayed in the novel. The first instance of independence of women is dramatically portrayed in *Chemmeen* through the subaltern image of Karuthamma.

The corporeal and psychosomatic distinctiveness of women is defined and inhibited by the society and in this novel Karuthamma as a representative of all women folk, challenges and questions the society. In *Chemmeen*, the myth of chastity is used as a means to subjugate women. The mythical woman like Savitri is hailed as the epitome of model woman. The novel *Chemmeen* is built upon the view that a fisher woman should always remain chaste in order to keep her fisherman alive. The mythical female character associated with coastal community of Kerala is the Kadalamma. Chakki narrates to Karuthamma about the first fisherman who 'On a mere plank of wood ...had rowed through waves and currents a point beyond the horizon. While on the shore his faithful wife had stood facing the west, waiting. A storm blew up and churned the sea. Whales with their mouths gaping open gathered. Sharks beat the water into frenzy with their tails. The undertow dragged the boat into a whirlpool. But he miraculously survived all these dangers ...How did all of this happen? Only because a chaste wife stood on the seaside, praying waiting for her husband's safe return. That was the lode of hope the women of the seaside clung to. (7)

According to the myth, the chastity of the women on the shores protects the men folk from the fiercest turbulent condition of sea. The women are portrayed as 'daughters of the sea' and men as 'sons of the sea'. The women of the fishing clan lived 'within walls that were inviolable.'(10) The fisher folk women were encircled by the thick high walls of tradition and taboos. It was a fort with no doors, no windows. (11) 'Chakki 'the inheritor of a long tradition of sea lore' advises her daughter (7). Chakki counsels Karuthamma and says 'In this vast sea, there is much to fear my daughter, my magale. All of which determines whether as a man who goes out to sea will return. And the only thing we can do as women is keep them safe with true minds and bodies. Otherwise, they and their boats will be swallowed by the undertow. The life of the man who goes out to sea rests in the hands of his woman on the shore.' (8) Chakki is adamant about the myth of chastity inherited from her ancestors and imparts a great truth to her daughter Karuthamma. 'Virtue is the most imp thing my daughter. Purity of the body and mind! A fisherman's wealth is his fisherwoman's virtue.'(9).Chakki tells her daughter 'Magale, you shouldn't be the reason why this shore turns barren or be the reason why the mouths of its people are filled with mud!'(9)

The myth that chaste woman is accountable for the life of her husband, is strongly enthused in the minds of the fisherwoman. During the marriage ritual, Karuthamma is instructed 'the religion of wifedom' (Chem102) by the neighbourhood woman. They tell her, 'Our men live in the sea where the waves rise and fall, daughter!' (Chemmeen 103) and if the woman fails to be chaste the old sea song states, 'Her fall from the grace cause the waves to rise as high as mountain and climb onto the shore. Dangerous serpents foamed and frothed as they slithered on the sands. Sea monsters with cavernous mouths chased the boats to swallow them whole.' (Chemmeen 104). Nallapennu retells the stories of devastation caused by the unfaithful women. She tells Karuthamma 'People and customs change. But a daughter of the sea has to safeguard her virtue.' (104) While conversing with Pareekutty, Karuthamma tells 'My Bossman you are a Muslim!' When he questions her, she seems helpless and ponders about how she was bound by the 'traditions of the sea' (17). 'An age-old moral code of that community was vested in her too. And perhaps that was why she was scared of straying.' (10)

What *Manusmirti* speaks about the plight of women becomes actualized in Karuthamma – 'at every stage in her life she is under the control of men -in childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's and when her husband is dead under her son's. She should not have independence.' Rousseau declares that 'a woman should never for a moment feel herself independent, she should be governed by fear ...and made a coquettish slave ... a sweeter companion to man.' The novel depicts, a great change in Karuthamma's character when she breaks the manacles of oppression fashioned by the society and defines a path of her own based on her wishes and dreams. Her strong will is seen when she threatens her mother: 'I won't consent [for marriage] unless that money is returned. Otherwise I shall kill myself. That is certain.' (92) When Chembankunju plans to buy a second boat, Karuthamma pleads 'you have to give that money back Accha!' (90). Chembankunju spoke in a grave censorious manner, 'Let me make this clear. This is men's business. You have nothing to do with that. You are to be married off.' (90) Almost all the women Chakki, Panchami, Nallapennu, and Pappikunju in *Chemmeen* suffer one way or other. However, like Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Karuthamma takes a revolutionary opposing stance against male dominance and especially against her father's heartless and fraudulent nature. When Palani asks Karuthamma the reason for Pareekutty's visit, 'she decides to take her troubles head-on. Karuthamma had the fortitude for that'. (167) 'Karuthamma discovered courage like she had never known before. A purpose. Life and circumstances had brought her to it. Until then she had been a timid woman. Afraid of



everything and everyone, without a will or desires of her own....that life had to be kept safe ceased to matter.’ (227) Karuthamma could be considered as an epitome of a new woman who refuses to live in a taboo ridden society and has the grit to live independently, following her own wishes and instincts. She is not afraid of what others think of her behaviour. When Pareekutty meets Karuthamma, she forgets her disappointments and felt that ‘she was not a defeated woman. She had a great wealth. A wealth that no other woman had! She would never know what it would be to be troubled by the world’ (233). Through love, she questions the existing authority and asserts her own identity by being herself. She wishes to transcend the barriers of caste and follow the religion of love. According to Beena Agarwal in *Mosaic of the Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande*, ‘If literature, has any purpose then it is to show one, bravely and uncompromisingly, the plain face of truth... Once you have told the truth, you have broken free of society, of its prisons. You have entered the realm of freedom.’ (77)

In the words of Tagore ‘Why will not a woman be given the right to shape her own destiny?’ Perhaps the answer lies in the writers’ dream of creating an innovative society free from gender bias and narrow social construct. The writers introspect the psyche of the woman, her cares and worries and therefore the novels are the slice of the trauma faced by the subjugated and marginalized women. Though a woman is born to be free as a man, she is captured and victimized by the patriarchal culture. She has been ‘the second sex’ and has to conform to male standards. The need of the hour is to rewrite the values in consonance with the changing times of society. The problem lies in the fixed mindset powered by the aspiration to control through age old dogmas without damaging the social fabric of our culture. “Myths can’t be translated as they did in their ancient soil. We can only find our own meaning in our own time”-Margaret Atwood. The novelists have innovatively tried to shatter the stereotypes around women and provide space for women to realize their potential through the essence of retelling the myths.

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