

Woman, Gender and Identity in Indian Women Writing in English- A Consideration

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Abstract

If women narratives are partly fictions, they include stories set by the narratives within which their lives are intertwined. Indian women's voices seem still very much present in post-colonial literature, certainly more audible than ever. They need to claim their right to exist and have to clear a psychic space for themselves. They can afford to be not only parodic but playful and highly sophisticated as well. In the work of Indian women writers, notably Arundhati Roy, Meera Syal and Bharati Mukherjee, gender is not the main focus of their narratives. The difference in emphasis between male and female writers shows that there is a mutual relation between the fictional construction of gender and the way that gender is socially and culturally established. Indian women's writing involves both a feminized awareness of gender identity and the social context which historically and traditionally had enclosed the life of the female subject.

In the works of these women writers, woman's experience in the Indian family and receiving society has been rather one of friction and disjunction. The female protagonist builds a gender identity from two patriarchal frameworks, i.e. Indian or foreign, which remains discrepant and unsteady. Commitment to one cultural position is not probable without restricting available cultural options and without denying critical parts of a gender ethnic identity since the female protagonist is floating between intermingling and contentious cultural contexts. The Indian community and British/ American society provide diverse models of femininity which either undermine or reinforce each other. On the level of fictional representation, Indian women writers have reshaped their ethnicity to adjust to the 'changing needs of women.

In the texts of these Indian women writers, the use of the elegiac mode tends to rely on the contrast between two distinct and divergent cultures, which implies an underlying disillusionment about the homeland. The invocation of the homeland is made with regret and sorrow. Such a nostalgia for the old world is being expressed in flashback including images of the physical and natural setting and of the people left behind, but also of dark images of past adversity in the homeland, as in Syal's *Anita and Me*¹ and Mukherjee's *Jasmine*².

The elegy permits to call into questions the relevance of mainstream values since the receiving country will not allow the fabric of established cultural patterns, but can only persist by incorporating elements of British or American cultures. The quest for a stable and singular identity, in other words the renegotiation of a new ethnic identity, generates an inexhaustible host of meanings where the conflicting elements that compose one's identity produce a sense of cultural marginality, as in Roy's *The God of Small Things*³. The woman protagonist can only reconstitute a sense of self by coming to grip with her cultural multiplicity. Juxtaposition of diverse figurations including images, symbols and metaphors is definitely loaded with

cultural meaning. It further involves the opposition of images within a specific cultural context, whether Indian or British / American and conveys the confusion of the ethnic subject's identity, since the tension between wanting to belong to the new society and yet wanting to retain the traditional culture varies from one individual to the other in intensity and emotional weight.

By implying that coherence and stability are problematic in the traditional and new culture, juxtaposition breaks down a simple division of viewpoints. Juxtaposition does not only avoid binarism but includes as well the convergence of commonly-held cultural positions, such as specific images associated with gender roles which show that both cultures are more inclined to valorize patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity.

Elegy, juxtaposition and imagery as literary techniques clarify, to some extent, the paradoxes of ethnicity in a complex and changeable social terrain. Symbolism and imagery underline the elegiac and manifold representation of ethnicity. For instance in *Anita and Me*, the recurrence of the garden images is a culturally charged motif, the symbolic meanings of which produce an ambivalent view of the immigrant experience. The garden is simultaneously a proof of the persistence of the traditional way of life and thus the acquisition of a home. The home itself demarcates ethnic cultural boundaries and particularly protects family members and established cultural practices against the assimilative pressures of mainstream society. It transmits, therefore, discrepant meanings, i.e. it denotes cultural insularity as a kind of bondage to a system of imported and displaced beliefs and values which hamper self-fulfillment and positive and creative interaction with the outside world. As to the images of the family, particularly of intense family relations, they provide a strong sense of group identity, whose interdependence among family members at times inhibit the second generation from becoming independent and from fulfilling personal objectives. Intergenerational conflict solidifies the tension inherent in the process of assimilation.

In thinking beyond femininity in its past and present representations, women writers, particularly Indians, have created narratives in which they alleviate the restrictions of gender, celebrating a changing femininity in which a woman becomes more like a man, psychologically and socially. In this context, they are challenging the very ground on which ethics are based through the deformations of gender. The new femininities invented and narrated by Indian women writers symbolize the pursuit of dreamed but true-to-life female/ woman identity including inappropriate unfeminine features such as intelligence, ambition, coldness and violence.

The trope of femininity gives Indian women writers a flexible weapon with which to attack cultural misogyny. The male evocation of femininity as negative associations of inferiority and evil has probably been a fundamental feminist *raison d'être*. Thomas Gramstad aptly quotes, "though feminism carries on exploring about what is biologically/naturally given and culturally built, feminist analysis of femininity has highlighted the supposed female virtues of social sympathy, revealing in femininity a great aptitude for supportive relationships with care and love"⁴.

Despite all the various ways in which women are defined by others and themselves, stereotypes of the fictive feminine offer contradictory evocation of femininity beyond culture, as at once inferior, weak, dependent on the one hand, and threatening, transgressive and sexual on the other hand. There are no fixed or stable identities, but perceived social models of femininity and masculinity. How far do Indian women writers provide a spirited defence of legitimate demands for fair and equal consideration? Women, women's rights and issues have been a major focus for

some contemporary feminists who have paid enough attention to the exploitation and subordination of women. Conformably to a universal ideology, i.e. liberalism, women should be free to exercise their reason and choose their roles in life. Though theoretically the analysis and programme of the ideology is applicable to all mankind, in practice reluctance has been displayed to extend the rights of men to women.

From a theoretical standpoint, how could women's subjection for so long and in various parts of the world be explained? Liberal feminists failed to provide an appropriate explanation for the injustices so universally inflicted on women. They shared the general liberal assumption that human nature was pretty much the same every where, regardless of differences in culture, social class or gender and which was in marked contrast to the line adopted by some radical feminists. Penniya Nokhil subverts, "Liberal feminists' main failure to explain women's inequality meant that the liberal strategy for tackling it was inappropriate. The achievements of liberal feminists should be acknowledged: a significant change in the climate of opinion, particularly change in stereotypes and role models suggests that changes in the law and conventional codes can influence culture and inevitably thought and behaviour"⁵.

Yet, changes in language and the portrayal of women reflect inevitable changes in attitudes. Important barriers to the appointment and promotion of women in many occupations have been broken as well as there is more sensitivity to the feelings of women on sexual violence. Whatever the feminist trend towards permissiveness, feminism is difficult to pin down and define. The diversity in feminist thought can be viewed as an indication of its special strength.

Political ideologies are linked to a particular social class or rationalization of interest within society. Feminism means different things to different people, which is perhaps hardly surprising as its fundamental thrust is to set women's rights from the undermining of old assumptions and the breaking down of previous barriers between spheres. But, to what extent the outlook for feminism seems more problematic to Indian men and women? Some apparent victories achieved by Indian women have proved illusory or double-edged, though challenging the assumptions behind a patriarchal society. It is those who preserve the freedom of women to control their own bodies that have been pushed onto the defensive by increasingly militant campaigners against caste dependency and rape. Particularly in India, there is a greater awareness of the disproportionate burden placed on women in domestic and economic chores, upbringing and care of children. The everlasting discrimination and oppression suffered by Indian women because of their belonging to a specific caste and gender are described by some women writers though scorned by some radicals and represent a deep challenge to established socio-religious and political creeds.

Particularly in literary criticism, feminist and post-colonial theories have started with subverting representations of hierarchies, i.e. gender, class, culture in colonial or patriarchal setting. Indeed, the discourses of colonialism and patriarchy have defined Indian woman as other not licensed to speak for herself but to be spoken for. But, feminism has tried to eradicate the burden of inhibitions women have supported for ages and to urge them to think and live for themselves, because others controlled and moulded the social structure. Indian women write from a culturally shaped situation that is gendered: woman's writing is probably to embrace insight into the particular shared experience of women in a specific culture that has rendered them to an inferior status. The images of post-colonial women, notably Indian, in the last four decades have changed and moved from traditional self-sacrificing towards confused minds searching for freedom and proper identity, transgressing thus male-

centered powers. Yet, the maintenance, persistence and perpetuation of images of Indian women as tradition-bound, submissive, sexual, fecund, victimized, affirm the images of the West as an advanced, progressive, self-controlled entity. The latter is placed in opposition to a Third World which remains closed into a system of representations that defines it as chaotic, primitive, emotional, female, or simply other. Once more, perceptions of the Indian women are rooted in imperialist thought and colonial mentality. Thus hierarchical relations of power are maintained to simple binary oppositions.

One of the contributions made by Indian feminism has been to increase one's awareness of the part words play in perpetuating particular types of social power relationships, for instance, bringing to mind and deconstructing stereotypes. Indian feminist literature seeks to understand socio-religious oppression and promote ideas about the related ways in which gender, race, caste, sexuality work together to influence Indian women's lives. Consequently, to as great an extent as possible, Indian feminist writers have come to recognize that different forms of social oppression, notably casteist differences, associate in a way that makes it difficult to separate one from the other. Therefore, the committed feminist writers, particularly of Indian origin have a very acute part to play promoting sensitivity to women's problems and unveiling the weight of overwhelming traditions whose negative aspects have been doomed accepted because they have been endured. The Indian women writers' fiction is, thus, a form of raising awareness, identifying problems and suggesting forms of resistance and negotiation, notably in the case of Indians, the relationship between women, community, caste and nation is fundamentally straining. With the increased education and migration of Indian people with wives and daughters to Europe and the U.S.A. as part of the cultural diaspora, there has been an influx of stereotype, widely prevalent in Hindu culture defined as being backward, racist, patriarchal which reaffirms once more the stereotyped notion that there is only one Indian culture and that it is highly repressive in its orientation to women.

Isolation due to sexism within their own communities is not unique to immigrant Indian women. It is a reality for all women in societies. At the same time, the contrary values embedded in the stereotypes are used to legitimize certain perspectives where the heroine is portrayed as being a strong character and her strength becomes from dissociating herself from her culture. She acquires her fullness of character that is denied to her within her Indian culture. Indian women's culture is, therefore, breaking down from the inside when relationships between mothers and daughters become strained as daughter urged for education, mobility power outside the confines of the home and sexual autonomy, as it is depicted in Syal's or Roy's novels.

Woman's location determines her status not only in the domestic sphere but also her place in society. Her relocation to another culture, particularly the U.S.A and Great Britain stereotypically associated with freedom and emancipation for Indian women from patriarchy inevitably leads to a new consideration and allocation of gender roles. Such a process is thus evolving and provokes consequential intergenerational clashes in the Indian diasporic communities. Diasporic experiences seem to be gendered in the sense that emigration to a new country requires readjustment of the traditional roles in the domestic realm, since this socio-economic phenomenon makes new demands in which gender relations have to be renegotiated. On the one hand, women who earn an independent income, even if they face racism or exploitation, experience greater independence and control over their life than they

had probably been used to before, i.e. in traditional patriarchal societies like India. On the other hand, they are supposed to maintain homeland relationships and socio-religious and cultural traditions in order to transmit them to their own children. Such requirements are to reinforce patriarchy and the confines of home both as a refuge from material and spiritual insecurities of exile and a trap in which the conflicting needs of family, work and traditional and modern patriarchies have to be faced. Such a situation is particularly painful but preferable to returning to the native country, notably on the terms and demands dictated by men. Diasporic women characters are caught between old and new patriarchies as well as ambiguous pasts and futures.

Patriarchy in itself presupposes a second role. Dowry, child marriage, plight of widows bear adequate testimony of it. Indian women are described as a homogeneous group, and that is a common error. It is part of their world view which is projected as the only reality of India. The degradation of women is a pressing reality and remains today in many sections of society. Generally, Indian women are described as the neurotic victims of their suppressed sexuality that leads them to an unnatural or confused behaviour approaching the perverse.

The English colonizers influenced the Indian perception in contradictory ways. The Orientalists rebuilt the fame of Indian civilization in a remote past. The Christians condemned the ills in contemporary Indian society, particularly the evident low status of women. The nationalists glorified a lost past and a humiliating present brought with free and independent women influenced by European colonial discourses. Yet, in this context, some particular socio-religious elements need to be kept in mind. India had always celebrated the intensity of spontaneous love as incarnated by Shiva, an example of sexual and religious power.

The rigid sexual norms imposed by patriarchal morality were first limited to the Brahman caste and later considered as the social norms because of the agreement between Indians and British colonizers. Brahman scriptures were seen as the locus of authenticity, containing rules of social behaviour which became specific normative values and tools of oppression on Indian women. Such a colonial construct, based on British Victorian morality with its puritanism and hypocrisy, was to relegate the erotic to obscene matter, and to associate sexual mores for women in agreement with the code prescribed by the bourgeoisie in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The puritanical British attitude was to reinforce the respectability of women from the emerging middle-class as against the crude and licentious behaviour of lower class women. Once again, it was to serve colonial interests and purposes, i.e. White man's burden to save India from itself.

Out of ignorance or because of the influence of Western feminism Indian women writers start to think for themselves and seek to explore the suppressed sexuality of women in the Indian patriarchal society where representation of female sexuality is not in terms of heterosexual romance but rather the rearing or holding of a baby. How far are Indian women's sexual lives never solely a private affair? Monique Wittig avails, "Though sexuality is regarded as an innate human drive, its expression differs according to cultures."⁶ Patterns of sexual behaviour in a society are results of the fundamental spirit of a culture. Consequently, the same sexual behaviours have different meanings and outgrowths in different societies. Traditional societies have tried to control sexuality by setting it securely within matrimony and kinship structure. In specific societies of male-dominated family structures, marriage becomes rather an instrument of regulation over female sexuality.

In the Western culture, Engels preceded the feminists in attacking overtly the sexual morality ingrained in male-dominated forms of family and envisioned the

eradication of the patriarchal family as indispensable to free women from male control. In fact, the feminist movement started to be engaged with the idea of sexual revolution only after the advent of cheap, effective and available contraceptives for Western women. Such a possibility to separate women's sexuality from reproduction facilitated their assertion towards their own sexuality. This female prerogative challenges the cultural ideals of women's sexual purity, virginity and life-long sexual loyalty towards the husband. But, while Western women become more or less sexually assertive, they are not essentially sexually fulfilled. Those committed in sexual liberation expect a new form of sexual involvement based on serial monogamy. Teresa De Lauretis enunciates, "The breakdown of the patriarchal family has contributed to the atomisation of society and to the disintegration of kinship and related human relationships."⁷ The idea of sexual liberation, as it is understood and practised in the Western countries does not fascinate Indian women. The majority of Indian women (and men) think that individual rights must be strengthened neither by attacking nor isolating oneself from family and community. The interests of the family are fundamental and take precedence over individual interests and needs. To be meaningful, individual rights have to be respected by those with whom one is closer rather than being held in a way that removes an individual from the respective community.

In India, the idea of the place of sex in life differs greatly from that of Western Women due to different cultural values and philosophies. Indian people have special respect for those who can live satisfactory lives without the need for sex. Indian women seem to regard sexual deprivation less painful than being cut from their children and family. This self-denial, no doubt, is closely linked to the understanding of the risks implicated in having intimate male relationship at the cost of other valuable ones, i.e. children's long term well-being, respect and reverence from the family and community members. While Indian women do not seem to find it hard to subordinate their sexual needs in order to enhance the well-being of their children, Indian men think that they ought to be free for occasional fun and do not realize they threaten the stability of their conjugal life. Even if a husband has extra-marital affairs, it is wife's duty to forgive him, for he is her lord.

Most Indian women seem to depend much more on their children for emotional subsistence than on their husbands. Motherhood brings both personal fulfillment and consideration which probably could not be provided as a mere woman. In her part as a mother, she remains culturally much more praised. The traditional martyred Indian woman can more easily cope with emotional incompatibility and other types of stress in their conjugal lives for they invest their emotions across an array of relationships within the joint-family, parents, and sisters in law, brothers and children. Certainly, they try to stick to the rules of the game far more denied by men, and their option to sexual restraint is a proof of their subjection to patriarchal⁸ norms, but a pre-condition for a stable family life. Yet, women writers such as A. Roy or B. Mukherjee offer matriarchal criticism of patriarchal institutions, notably sexuality which remains a complex and contested domain within the Indian culture where male is the unique empowered sexual agent. How much are sexual life and its social codes perceived as haunted by conflict and fluidity?

Patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive trends toward feminist growth had been revealed by post-colonial Indian women writers and shaped ways of eradicating those attitudes, To illustrate this, let us have a glance at Anita Desai's and Mannu Bhandari's writing in which the central woman character is portrayed with great intuition and insight which turns one's attention to what a culture is and how writing

may mirror it. The new code of values, notably freedom and love, growing out of the bonds of feminism, and the power and vitality of women is reinforced and represented through sentimental fiction.

In Anita Desai's *The Outsiders*, the heroine is a rebel against patriarchal community in order to explore her own potential or to live on her own terms, regardless of the consequences that such a rebellion may have on her life. Self-chosen withdrawal takes on the form of a weapon for survival in a patriarchal community and criticizes those cultural ideologies that come in her way of becoming a free individual. Desai's women characters find freedom not by living in their own confined selves or by clinging to others but by connecting with others and asserting their intellectual and economic independence. They strive for a balance established within the harmonious individualistic existence in the community of men and women. Whereas Desai's heroines choose to become outsiders to find freedom, Mannu Bhandari's women reflect the dilemma of Indian women who are portrayed as standing at the crossroads of community and freedom. Her writings depict the helplessness and confusion of women in their attempts to overcome these particular conflicts. But, education and economic independence help them to get rid of humiliation issuing from dependent relationships with men. The struggle between the mother, the wife and the self is sharpened by the social discrimination based on gender.

In post-colonial Indian society freedom has given women a chance to fulfill specific desires; but due to various conscripting attitudes of the society, this newly won freedom causes awful grief on their lives, and remains greatly dominated by men and the society in general. Her society compels a woman to see her roles and duties as a mother and a wife as her fundamental priorities.

In fact, each woman writer describes different kinds of self chosen exiled existences of women that become a way of breaking the patriarchal hold over their lives. Each portrays the patriarchal community from the woman's point of view as obscure, cloistered, oppressive and destructive. The patriarchal home is the site of sexism and other damaging practices. Exile, thus, becomes a vital metaphor in their consideration of their true identities through which they intend to interrogate and dislodge the patriarchal codes of womanly existence. Therefore, self-chosen exile means the desire to feel at home, to escape from being compelled to live in a prescribed manner. Through their escape into solitude they gain insights into their true selves that enable them to free themselves from the shackles of patriarchal expectations.

The crucial point is that feminist empowerment and fulfillment can emerge only through a process of dismantling the patriarchal establishment of knowledge. The visions of emancipation point to the fact that the theory of Indian post-colonial feminism is by no means a discourse and that Indian women cannot be categorized monolithically. Yet, patriarchy remains an analytical category by feminists in theorizing women's subordination: the patriarchal control of major social and political institutions acts as a special form of discrimination against women, particularly the expression of female sexual subjectivity and resistance to male domination.

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