

**LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR OF SELF: THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE  
EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT BY WOMEN WRITERS**

**Aditi Abhishikta**  
Research Scholar,  
Andhra University  
Visakhapatnam,  
Andhra Pradesh - 530003

**Siddharth Anahat**  
Student,  
Andhra University  
Visakhapatnam,  
Andhra Pradesh - 530003

**Abstract**

The illustration of women in Indian writings has witnessed a new-fangled outlook with the interpretation of multiplicity of women and the scope experienced within the woman as an alternative of limiting to a scrupulous aspect. The most vibrant theme existent in the writings of Indian women novelists is incisive penetration for a woman's individuality or the journeying of the self-thoughtful with the trends of reminiscence, introspection, dream, stream of consciousness, magical realism etc. As the core objective of literature is to link with the specific time, space and situation of an individual, it is substantiated and strengthened with the experiences of the subject discussed.

**Keywords:** patriarchy, inhibitions, traditional enslavement, shifting identities

Circling around the revolt against the British rule, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) could be seen as the first proper English novel showcasing the trials and tribulations of a middle class wife. Among the other notable writers are those whose writings have not only brought recognition to Indian Writing in English worldwide but created a remarkable dimension in the history of Indian English Literature.

Starting from Toru Dutt(1865-1877), Krupabai Sathianathan (1862-1894), Shevantibai M. Nikambe (1865-1895), Swarnakumari Ghosal (1856-1932), Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) as pathfinders in paving the way and inspiring the new generation of men and women writers to the

contemporary Indian women writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Dina Mehta, Nergis Dalal, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Attia Hosain, Krishna Sobti, Ashapura Devi, Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai, Q. Hyder, Indira Goswami, Gauri Deshpande, Meena Alexander, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are some of the leading torch bearers. Their portrayals give a clear understanding of a mutual relation between the past and the present, conflict between tradition and modernity and a strong sense of Indianness which has conquered a unique individual identity in Indian Writing in English. Such writings not only provide insights and a treasure of understanding but also a reservoir of implication and a base for discussion.

Thus a galaxy of women writers have dealt with a large number of issues related to religious or moral ethos, political strategies, economic realities, scientific truth, caste and gender discrimination, racial barrier, subaltern plight, superstitions and stereotypes, subjugation of women in a patriarchal society, feminine sensibility, multitude of paradoxes, shifting identities, mythic memory, feelings of alienation, protest against suffering and intellectual challenges, making the society conscious of women's demands and their predicament in the society in creating a platform for self-expression. Women writers in the post-independence time, followed the tradition established by men writers of an earlier generation as Seshadri writes in *The New Woman in Indian English Women Writers* (1970):

The focus in their novels is not on women and their gender related problems, but rather on social themes. The imitation of the male pattern was almost inevitable, as India underwent so many changes after independence and the social issues were part of everyday life for men and women in India (12).

The novelists have exploited their skill in projecting convincingly the agonized minds of the persecuted women. Their portrayal of women characters in the novels invariably bears authenticity to their feminist approach, outlook and perspective. Their keen observation of the life of Indian women and their interest in the study of their inner mind are evidenced by their vivid and panoramic portrayal of their plight. The women novelists focus in their novels on the existential predicament and travails of the subdued women in a male dominated society governed by rigid traditions and restrictions.

The first Indian women novelist who made pioneering efforts in writing novels of profound psychological significance was Toru Dutt. Although she is pre-eminently renowned as a poet for the versification of a substantial number of poetical work, she is recognized as a novelist for her fictional work like *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (1879) written in French, *Bianca* (1878) or *The Young Spanish Maiden* written in English. These two novels are self-projection of her personal agony and anguish of life. Toru's typical attitude, feelings and sentiments, which are characteristically Indian in all respects, manifest in the character of her heroines.

Another woman novelist, who has proposed her own Indian sensibility and manner through women characters in her novels, is Krupabai Sathianathan. Her novels *Kamala: A Story of Hindu life* (1894) and *Saguna: A Story of native Christian Life* (1895) reflects on her sentimental reaction resulting from the impact of conversion of her family to Christianity. These novels are also self-revelatory of her personal life of grief and agony.

Shevanthi Bai Nikambe is one such novelist who is not less distinguished than her predecessors Toru Dutt and Krupabai. As a supporter of feminism, she combated inequality and

abuse meted out to simple, moderate, unsophisticated housewives. She determined chiefly on the tragedy of unsuccessful marital life and of widowhood. She advocated the independence, emancipation and liberation of women in order to disentangle them from submissive servitude and inhuman torment to which they were subjected by their husbands, mothers-in-law and others.

In her novel, *Ratnabai* (1895) the protagonist is mistreated by the relatives of her father in law for going to school for higher education. This novel promotes and voices the need of liberation and education of Indian Women. Therefore its revolutionary intent is fore grounded in the story.

Another woman novelist of the pre Independent India was Sorabji a feminist and a social reformer. She was an advocate by profession. She has portrayed the deep mental agony of the married and unmarried women in her writings. *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901), *Sun Babies* (1904), and *Between the Lights* (1908) are the stories that focus realistically on the inner mind of the dormant women living behind purdah. The first one is a collection of ten stories each in search of inducing sympathy and elevates their voice for liberation from persecution. These stories are challenges in discovering into the deeper chamber of the mind.

Most of the Indian women living in a conventional and traditional family feel subdued to raise their voice against antagonistic supremacy of the male persons of the society owing to their inferiority feeling and stiff code of conduct forced on them. Their ambitions, wishes, intellect and sensibility are authentically expressed in the writings of the women novelists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their novels show how such women in spite of being highly educated undergo psychological suffering due to inferiority complex and deep sense of inhibitions.

They illustrate the image of new woman waiting for unrestraint and liberation in a world that keeps on changing with rapid speed. The Indian women novelists mentioned above belong to the pre-independence period during which both Hindu and Muslim communities in India were being governed rigidly by their traditions. Since India has been a custom bound nation, its women also chain up by numerous social and religious customs and conventions that give them imprisoned behind curtains.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain the feminist writer has brought to attention the dreadful life of Indian women in her fiction *Purdah and Polygamy; life in an Indian Muslim House* (1944). The novel unveils the silken curtain of Purdah and unmark the distressed mind of house wives living like engaged birds in the orthodox Muslim families. She has panoramically represented the evils and abuses of customs and traditions that had enslaved the married women and made them almost vulnerable and voiceless. She upholds the retort of women and shows how Indian women carry on physical and psychological torment merely by virtue of their femaleness.

In view of their miseries, the women novelists of feminist perspective committed themselves to fictionalizing women's cause with a view to ameliorating their position and releasing them from the state of traditional enslavement. With the increasing awareness of feminism as a new revolutionary idea, the trend of feminist writing persisted in Indian literature even after independence. The novelists of the post-independence period who highlighted the causes of women, are Anita Desai, Rama Mehta, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy etc., their main focus being undesirable dominance of men over women and the contemporary issues concerned with women's identity.

In Kamala Markandaya's writings one finds a sharp contrast between East and the West, between the concept of ancient India and that of new modern India. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) portrays the rural life in India focusing a South Indian village where life seems to have

not changed for a thousand years. It deals with the miseries of the peasantry. Her depiction of rationalism and traditional religious faith in *A Silence of Desire* (1960) is unquestionably outstanding. *A Handful of Rice* (1966) portrays the cruel economic veracity in rural area. She has created an awareness of the socio economic forces and their impact on women.

Shashi Deshpande gives an authentic picture of the middle class educated women and their exploitation in a patriarchal society. In her novels the protagonists become architects of their own destinies. Her writings have the depth of feminine sensibility as well as a thematic and technical maturity adding a new dimension to the Indian English fiction. In her two novels *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and *That Long Silence* (1989), the women protagonists attain 'Personhood', a phase of self-discovery without neglecting the family. They discover themselves, coming to new terms with the family.

Nayantara Sahgal has written several novels based on the political theme such as *This Time of the Morning* (1968), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977). These novels portray the striking elements of some leading political personalities. She has also written *The Day in Shadow* (1991) with a moral vision pleading for an enduring companionship and an empathetic approach in order to disentangle the personal and social problems. She has given a new meaning to 'the virtuous woman' being courageous and determined to live with self-respect.

Gita Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the prestigious commonwealth award. It followed with the publication of a collection of stories, *The Art of Dying* (1993) and the novels *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). In her works, one would see women struggling in their relationship with men and society. Uma Vasudev has given a picture of completely liberated women. Her women are free from the traditional middle classed prejudices and taboos. Her novel *The Song of Anusaya* (1978) is a clear example of it. Jai Nimbkar's novels *Temporary Answers* (1974), *A Joint Venture* (1988) and *Come Rain* (1993) are based on the identity crisis of the middle class married women in the contemporary patriarchal society

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala has a unique combination of intellectual genius with a close observation on a milieu that gives a clear canvas regardless of the setting whether local or cosmopolitan, traditional or modern, naïve or sophisticated. Her novels are bright examples of this such as *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956). She has dealt with East –West encounter in *Esmond in India* (1958) and *Heat and Dust* (1975). She mainly focuses on family life, personal relationship and social problems.

In Anita Desai's novels one could see human relationship as the central object. She has created a new age of psychological realism. She is well known for the depiction of sensitive inner feelings of her women protagonists. Some of her notable works are *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices of the City* (1965) about three siblings and different ways of life in Kolkata, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) which won the Winfred Holtby Memorial Prize, *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) *Journey to Ithaca*(1995), *Fasting, Feasting*(1999) and *The Zig Zag Way* (2004). Some of her novels were shortlisted for Booker Prize. Her writings are mostly unpredictable like those of R.K.Narayan and Kamala Markandaya.

A number of Contemporary Indian women writers have focused on female subjectivity in their writings. Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993); Ruth Prawar Jhabwala's *Heat and Dust* (1975), *Get ready for Battle* (1962); Manju

Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002), *the immigrant* (2008); Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003) gives the picture of pierced agony on the alien land with the quest for identity and feminine sensibility. The turmoil becomes intensified in women's lives first being a woman and next the unsettled being lacks much in being the insider in the host land. Thus, women writers have vividly presented each and every layer of the women psyche having the power and strength of first being a woman with the accurate comprehension of women problems and then being a part of the similar experience at close quarters which give their writings the depth of understanding and appreciating the feminine experience. In the observation of Carol Muske in *Women and Poetry: Truth, Autobiography and the Shape of the Self* (1997) women are found estranged from the knowledge of their 'self' and 'individuality' being solely attached with the responsibility towards men and raising children. She agrees that this dissection of spirit both invigorates and exasperates them from having a free expression. A literary voice provides them with the opportunity of breaking this silence.

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### Authors' Introduction:

Mrs. Aditi Abhishikta is a poetess, writer, painter and a vocalist. She has done her Diploma in Hindusthani Classical Music (Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, Miraj) and Fine Arts (Prachin Kala Kendra, Chandigarh). She acquired Rank 1 in AURCET 2013 among all Arts Courses in Andhra University. Recently she has submitted her Ph.D. thesis with Indian Writing in English as her Specialization in Andhra University. She has to her credit more than 15 articles published in National and International Journals of repute and also presented papers in good number of National and International Conferences with regard to her specialization. She has more than ten years of teaching experience in Gurajada Educational Society, Sri Prakash Educational Institutions, Andhra Pradesh and Harkamaya College of Education, Gangtok.

Mr. Sidharth Anahat is a poet, writer, painter and a social worker. He is serving as a Cyber co-ordinator in Bliss Foundation, Visakhapatnam. He is certified in Fine Arts from Prachin Kala Kendra, Chandigarh. He has to his credit more than 10 articles published in National and International Journals of repute.