
Feminism and Post-Modern Feminism in Women Novelists

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ABSTRACT

Feminism has been subtly handled in the massive work of English novels in India. Feminism is defined as cultural, economic and political movements that are focused towards establishing legal protection and complete equality for the women. In Indian writing feminism has been used as a modest attempt for evaluating the real social scenario as far as women are concerned. The Indian English novelists use oriental approaches of feminism. There are several novels in English literature of India that aptly portrays the actual status of the women in Indian societies. However, the modern aged women have realized that they are equally competent like the men and those they are not helpless. Unlike the past when men were considered as the sole bread earners, in today's age, women too have become direct money earners of any household.

Key words: - *Feminism and Fiction*

Writing about the growing participation and emergence of the Indo-English woman writers.
Sharad Srivastava Remarks:

“The Indo-English woman writers have a special advantage in this respect as they have themselves been exposed to the stresses and strains to which the ‘New woman’ is subjected. Also writing in the English language is sometimes more helpful to a UN inhabited frankness so necessary to the portrayal of the emotional, moral and spiritual problems of the new woman”. 1

Indian feminist scholars and activists have to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India.

They define feminism in time and space to in order to avoid the uncritically following Western ideas. Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, and relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes -dowry, siring sons etc. - kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nairs of Kerala, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest women rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender-neutral.

The ‘modern’ or the ‘feminist’ or the ‘path-breaking’ women writers have carved a niche for themselves in the male dominated world of fiction writing. All the writers differ from each other in some respect but the basic concern in their writing is the same i.e. to present a woman’s world in its true light.

“Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society’s treatment of women. It attempts to analyse the reason for and dimensions of women’s oppression, and to achieve women’s liberation. To some, liberation is defined as social equality with men, while others feel that the narrow definition reflects the class bias of what is described variously as bourgeois feminism, career feminism, mainstream feminism or liberal feminism”.²

Feminism does not particularly talk of equality and rights of a woman but it is more about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts. The main cause for the dissatisfaction of the women in today’s society is the superior attitude of the men. Throughout, the women have suffered in silence and feminism talks exactly about that. Women have affirmed their fundamental rights and have realized where they exactly went wrong. Indian English novelists have frankly highlighted this concept. Authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya have actually used the various aspects of the male dominated society as their main theme. However, the concept of feminism is handled in restricted conditions by the authors. Today, Indian societies have broadly accepted feminism keeping aside the patriarchal predominance to an extent.

In India, feminism is looked at as a practical effort. Right from the past, women have faced several problems and they have been exploited by the men and the society at large. They have been constantly struggling to find a meaningful and respectable position for themselves. Women have always been portrayed as subservient and passive. With the introduction of Western education and with the growth of women’s institutions, things had begun to change. It led to the commencement of women education in India. All these developments had helped in inculcating the sense of individuality among the women. These changes helped in developing the feminism trend in English novels writing patterns of India. This concept was misinterpreted as womanhood movement in India. Feminist ideologies strongly influence the Indian literature and English novels. The concept of feminist ideologies had precisely come from the West. Today’s women are educated and economically independent. They search for their own identity. All these changing images of Indian women are portrayed in the write-ups of the contemporary Indian novelists.

FEMINISM RELATED ENGLISH NOVELS

There are several Indian novelists who produced novels that revealed the truth of Indian societies and how women are being treated here. They present the aspects of feminism with authentic and impressive language.

The struggle of an Indian woman for her true identity clearly emerges in the Indian English novels. Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*, Navantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us*, Gita Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* are some of the novels that use this theme of feminism and highlight the status of a woman in Indian societies. Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* or *Voices in the City* are some of the examples of feminist theory based English novels. More authors like Gita Mehta, Shama Futehally and Nisha Da Cunha work exclusively on feminine themes and emotional crisis faced by a woman. Kamala Markandaya and Kamala Das are two well renowned feminist writers of India. Some more examples of female subjectivity oriented English novels of India are Ruth Pravar Jhabvala’s *To*

Whom She Will', Kamala Markandaya's 'Two Virgins' and Santha Rama Rau's 'Remember the House'.

The Indian English novels based on feminism and its different aspects depict the position of a woman in general. She has been portrayed as the key figure of Indian families and at the same time she has been projected as the subject of suffering, domestic slavery and suppression. The hidden thoughts, feelings and the realization of a woman are found in the feminist oriented English novels of India.

Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian Women Novelists in English tends to be a significant document discussing not only the evolution of some outstanding Indian English women novelists but also contains the feminist movement as it filtered gradually in Indian English fiction from the West examining how the Indian novelists' stipulation is wider in perspective and more comprehensive in application in comparison to their Western counterparts. Founded on Elaine Showalter's concept "from feminine to female", the book meticulously dissects the French feminist doctrine revealing how leading Indian women novelists have created their own model, pattern and concept of "feminism" suiting the Indian context, adhering to the Indian system and drawing inspiration from the plight, the struggle, the resistance and the compromise practiced by the contemporary Indian women of all classes, creeds-urban or rural. In a comprehensive, compact and scholarly manner, the author has critically evaluated the five major Indian women novelists in India, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De and Bharati Mukherjee while revalidating their unquestionable status in and contribution to Indian English fiction. Some recent and upcoming female novelists like Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Namita Gokhale, Anita Nair and Manju Kapoor are also discussed briefly for the sake of academic completion. Postmodern Feminism is a particular kind of Postmodernism and a particular kind of feminist theory that has become prominent in feminist thinking over the last couple decades. In order to understand it, first we must examine Postmodernist epistemology in general, and then compare postmodern feminism to other feminist perspectives. While there are many critics of Postmodernism, it provides a very useful theoretical perspective.

Anglo-Indian writer, who started as a novelist in the 1950s, and then in the mid-1960s began her successful career as a screenwriter with the Ivory-Merchant film team, Jhabvala won her first Academy Award for *A Room with a View* (1985) for best adapted screenplay. The second came for *Howards End* (1992). Both films were based on E.M.Foster's novels. Jhabvala's novel *Heat and Dust* was awarded the Booker Prize in 1975.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala was born in Cologne, Germany. Her father, a lawyer, was of Polish-Jewish origin and her mother was German-Jewish. Jhabvala attended Jewish segregated school before she immigrated in 1939 with her family to Britain.

In 1948 Jhabvala became a British citizen. She studied English literature at the University of London, receiving her MA in 1951 from Queen Mary College. In the same year she married a Parsee architect, C.S.H. Jhabvala, with whom she moved to India. For the next 24 years she lived in New Delhi. Increasingly disenchanted with India Jhabvala moved in 1975 to New York City, dividing in the following years her time between two countries. Later Jhabvala also became a US citizen.

Jhabvala started to compose stories at an early age, but as a housewife in Delhi, she found enough time to write seriously. Her first novel, *To Whom She Will*, appeared in 1955. She also began to contribute short stories to the *New Yorker*. Her early novels depicted ironically the life and manners of Indian middle-class families, Europeans trying to understand India, and the clash between Eastern and Western cultures. Often her stories are seen from the point of view of an outsider. Some Indian critics have labelled her authorial detachment as a sign of old-fashioned Western attitudes toward India. "Jhabvala is a connoisseur of divided souls, conceiving characters whose inner longings are at odds with their outer protective coloration," wrote Deborah Mason in her review of Jhabvala's short story collection *East into Upper East* (1998). The "East" in the title refers to New Delhi and the "Upper East" to New York. Noteworthy, Jhabvala's German-Jewish heritage has never occupied a central place in his work.

Jhabvala's Booker Prize novel *Heat and Dust* was a love story, which contrasted the 1920s and the 1970s. Olivia, a bored colonial wife, is married to an English officer, Douglas Rivers. She falls in love with the local nawab, a minor Indian prince. She becomes pregnant, has an abortion, and abandons her husband. Fifty years later her step-granddaughter, the narrator, travels to India to investigate the enigma of the family scandal. "Fortunately, during my first few months here, I kept a journal, so I have some record of my early impressions. If I were to try and recollect them now, I might not be able to do so. They are no longer the same because I myself am no longer the same. India always changes people, and I have been no exception." In her diary she tells about her own affair, she also becomes pregnant but she decides to have the child.

Jhabvala's adaptations of classic English novels include works by Henry James and E.M. Forster. In *Conversations with Screenwriters* Jhabvala revealed that when she writes a scene, she doesn't think much about it, how it's going to be in the film. "I just think, 'How are these two characters going to interact with each other?' I know it can't be the same as on the page in a novel - it must be much more direct and the language has to be simpler." The adaptation of *A Room with a View* was very faithful to the original text, although Jhabvala made small changes to streamline Forster's work for film by combining events.

A Room with a View was the first Forster novel to be adapted by Merchant Ivory Productions. It was followed by *Maurice* (1987), written by Kit Hesketh-Harvey and James Ivory, and *Howards End*, for which Jhabvala won her second Oscar. In 1990 she won the Best Screenplay Award from the New York Film Critics Circle for *Mr. & Mrs. Bridge* (1990), starring Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and in 1994 she received the Writers Guild of America's (WGA) Screen Laurel Award. - Ismail Merchant died in May 2005. At the time of his death he was working on *The White Countess*, based on a screenplay by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Kamala Das, the controversial writer who had her feet firmly on the ground and could get to the brass tacks in no time at all. She had a child marriage and three children followed. Her husband agreed that she should follow her instincts and in the process, augment the family income. But being a woman, however, she could not enjoy a regular morning-till-night working schedule. Her writing schedule was, on the contrary, a night-till-morning affair when the family had all gone to bed. Her working table was the kitchen table where she would cut up the vegetables, get the table cleared, and then, start typing. Though this working time-table reflected on her health, it did give her time to manage a home as well...a woman's idea of an essential pre-requisite for a job.

Anita Desai seems to have had a simple middle class upbringing with a German angle to it. Her mother, Toni Nime was of German origin. Perhaps that is why Desai has confluences of sorts in her writing.

Shobha De, a controversial writer, has had diverse career roles ranging from model to columnist. All her published novels have been successful. Currently we have witnessed her make a literary transition from writing-projects based on a rather flashy, elite society with emphasis on its extra-marital affairs, to a more mature and rather philosophical work on life and the myriad of twists and turns in relationships.

Sudha Murthy has reached her destination the hard way having shouldered many a responsibility on the way, including supporting her illustrious husband through it all. She has fulfilled her dreams, though it appears as though she has always taken the back seat in life. She now heads Infosys Foundation, is an engineer, a teacher, writer, mother and wife.

These women writers have given literary work in India an unmistakable edge. They are able to sensitively portray a world that has in it women rich in substance. Their women are real flesh-and-blood protagonists who make you look at them with awe with their relationships to their surroundings, their society, their men, their children, their families; their mental make-ups and themselves.

Sudha Murthy, the reputed wife of Infosys giant Narayana Murthy, has written a tenderly humorous account of their modest beginnings and their subsequent growth in life. Her account of her life before and after Narayana Murthy, the birth and growth of Infosys and her novels in general, provide an impetus and kindle positive thinking in her readers. Her work exudes simple realism and empathy. All the little things in life that go a long way are highlighted. She says, for example, that she chose to stay back to keep house and rear the children while her husband went out to brave the outside world, and in the process, let Infosys grow out of their cramped living quarters where it had been born in the first place! Her huge contribution in the birth and growth of Infosys is well known. Women writers in India can no longer be claimed as the exclusive property of India. Their work and their art belong to the world.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a famous Indian American author of Bengali origin. Her first novel, "The Namesake" was a major national bestseller and was named the New York Magazine Book of the Year. Jhumpa Lahiri became the first Asian to win the Pulitzer Prize when she won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her book "Interpreter of Maladies".

Much of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction deals with the lives of Indian-Americans, particularly Bengalis. Her debut collection "Interpreter of Maladies" won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It was a collection of nine distinct short stories addressing the sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants. "The Namesake", her second book and first novel, came out in 2003. It was named the New York Magazine Book of the Year. Mira Nair is making an eponymous film based on the novel.

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