

---

## WOMEN IN INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

Dr. A. L. Kulat

Principal

Shri Shivaji Arts & Commerce College, Amravati

### Abstract

Fiction is the most powerful form of literary expression in Indian English literature. It is generally agreed that the novel is the most suitable literary form for the exploration of the experiences and ideas in the context of our time. An important feature of the period was the growth of Indian women novelists in English. Their appearance added a new dimension to Indian English novel. Indian women novelists in English have been presenting women as a centre of concern in their novels. A woman's search for identity is a recurrent theme in their fiction.

**Key words:** slave, orthodox, benign, nationalism, sensibility, passionate.

The position of the Indian women in society has been a source of inspiration for the writers through ages. Traditionally she is worshipped as a goddess, but socially she is degraded to the role of a slave. Besides, there is such an aura of sanctity and tradition that it is highly untenable to imagine her out of it. In a manmade society, when women rebel against any injustice they are stamped bad and are promptly chastised by the men who dominate their lives. Great writers like Tagore, Premchand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Malgonkar have made a very searching study of the social position of the Indian women, but even they never dared to cross the boundaries of tradition. Whether it is Tagore's Bimla or Chaurulata, Narayan's heroines, it is observed that they remain strictly Indian and traditional-bound. We find a good deal of similarity in all these cases, hence it is not difficult to predict their reaction.

The post Independence novelists' attitude to women has undergone considerable change, especially in the case of writers who have come into contact with a highly westernized and cosmopolitan society. To a certain extent one can say that some of the characters of Indian authors are faintly rebellious to the conventions.

R K Narayan concentrates on the orthodox family and incorporates numerous features of the Indian life. He largely deals with middle and lower classes which constitute the bulk of Indian population. He describes various relationships in his novels where father's influence is immense and all pervasive. In *Swami and Friends*, the father is an archetype of all father figures in Narayan's later novels. Chandra's father in *The Bachelor of Arts* behaves like a medieval knight. Ramani in *The Dark Room* is a tyrant who represents cruel men in India dominating over women. Bulling husbands like Ramani and patient wives like Savitri are common features of our traditional society. Women is a helpless creature to be guarded by her as a child, by her husband in her youth and her son, when she is old and a widow. A female child is ever a liability. In *Shushila* the novelist portrays an ideal Hindu wife rooted in Indian culture. According to the Indian custom, a guest is a God, and a typical Indian woman like Savitri has "a genius for

---

making the existing supply elastic and translating an ordinary evening course, with a few hurriedly into a feast.”

Granny is an integral part of the Indian household, an inevitable part of the extended family. Narayan maintains that in a joint-family, children are well brought up as there is a congenial home-atmosphere for them. Swami's granny in Swami and Friend is benign, talkative and ignorant. Swami felt very snug and soft in the faint atmosphere of cardamom and cloves. She is a representative of thousands of Indian grannies, who uphold the values of traditional society. Sriram's granny in the Waiting for the Mahatama, is a woman of strong will and conviction. She scrupulously sends to the bank every pie which she receives on the behalf of her grandson and gives the entire amount to him the day he attains maturity. She, being a pious Hindu, cannot touch the skin of a dead animal.

Amitav Ghosh's Shadow Lines undercuts nationalism by questing history, the official version of history, on which the idea of nationalism is based. Thamma's idea of nationalism is based on attraction of freedom from the colonial rule. She would not hesitate to kill the English magistrate in the name of freedom. The use of the word 'us' is significant in the novel. Thamma is conscious of the fact that she is the part of a large community sharing a common interest. She finds her place of birth odds with her homeland, Dhaka. She forced to realize that no amount of bloodshed can make the borders 'real' by highlighting the fact that even after partition there might be any difference between two region across the border.

In Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain Nanda Kaul married to a vice-chancellor in Delhi. She seeks freedom from her mundane existence. The husband's extramarital affairs compass her to reflect on her situation, though she does not want to create a scandal because of her middle class morality. She comes to Kasauli in search of freedom from her cluttered and choked past. But she cannot completely reject her roles as a wife and mother, and so accept her granddaughter coming to live with her.

In the God of Small Things, Amma, as a wife of drunkard manager possess a dilemma of feminine sensibility. Some extent it brings forth the colonial perspective of society. Mr. Hollick, the manager of the tea state, wishes that Amma should be sent "to his bungalow to be looked after." Amma doubly effected or colonized. She resists against her husband's whims to be offered as a gift to Mr. Hollick and the on the other, she fights for feminine sensibility in her own family. When she divorces her husband and comes to her parents, she reports about it to Pappachi, but he does not believe in her story and does not believe that an Englishman, would wish another's man's wife. Thus Hollick's demand for Amma's body presents an example of "otherness" in postcolonial literature.

Ratna of Kanthapura is a young widow. Her marriage took place when she was only ten. Through the character of Ratna, Raja Rao has underlined the problem of the child marriage and young widow in India. Ratna is educated and she wears her hair to the left like a concubine. She also puts on nose rings and earrings, and also bangles, which the widows are not supposed to put on. Other women criticize her for this. Ratna does not accept that her marriage ever took place. She says that she saw her husband just one day and that does not mean marriage. She

hardly knew anything about marriage or a husband. Ratna's uncle does like her way of living. She moves freely with men like Morthy's friend.

In the Princes, for the first time Malgonker faces a real conflict with tradition which is hitherto lurking behind culture and confusion in his previous novels. Prince Abhay knows his mother only as a tradition-bound lady for whom the seven Satis are the sole world and who is neglected by her husband. His relationship with her is more cordial than loving. In Abhay's own words the maharani is a "young woman cast on the dust heap in the full bloom of youth, growing to the verge of middle age with all her womanly desires still unslaked, rebelling, refusing to spend the rest of her life shut away in the dark corner of palace, a volatile bundle of yearning tearing herself away from the shell of conventions. There was something pathetically heroic about it." Yet Abhay is shocked beyond reconciliation, when the queen runs away to lead her own life, that too in the light of courage kindled by none else than himself. Because with the lightheartedness civilization Abhay advises his mother to 'break away before it is too late.' And to lead a life of her own. But tradition means more to him than his mother's happiness. A Bend in the Ganges is a document of the freedom movement and partition. Though the two heroes Gian and Debi are two equal and opposite forces occupying the major part of the novel, it is Sundari who dominates the scene.

In this novel it may be Jean that reappears as Sundari. Jean never cares to let Henry know about her activities, just as Margot in Distant Drum. But Sundari's revenge is two-fold. On one hand she proves to her husband that she can very well pay back in his own coin and on the other she shakes Gian's self confidence for Gian's betrayal hurts her even more. Sundari is married to Gopal under the dark clouds of her brother Debi's arrest, and the bridal couple sets off their honeymoon. She makes futile attempts to infidelity at a crucial moment in her life, put off the spark of faith in her and her individuality rebels against tradition. Though the revenge is very planned and carried out even more dramatically. It does not affect Gopal as much as Gian. Gopal realizes the gravity of the situation – but for him, fidelity is not an end itself. But for Gian this shock is something more than he expected. He believes that Sundari loves him. Sundari finally leaves Gopal and when Gian comes to rescue her family in Duriabad, she once again picks up on his degradation as a human being, who built his fortune on a set of monstrous lies. But she solely realizes that Gian has changed and she accepts him through grudgingly at first. From her childhood she teaches Debi to be brave and strong. But her real victory is Gian, for she succeeds in making a man out of a liar and a cheat.

It would be interesting to compare Malgonkar's women characters with those of Tagore's, for Tagore's heroines, in spite of all the passionate longing of their hearts, could never dare step beyond the boundaries of accepted traditional norms of their times. But for Malgonkar's women the 'love and respect' they expect from their men is as important as their morality. When they are deprived of what they cherish most, life loses its charm for them and fades away as an unrealized dream. So the sweet dream revenge becomes more important and even more precious than traditional morality, for only a diamond can cut another diamond.

A careful analysis of all these characters reveals a beautiful sentiment. Women can seek justice and strive for happiness and she need not be tradition-bound when her own mental welfare is at stake. All these characters of women in Indian English novels are depicted as appears to the novelists. Though they are deeply rooted in the Indian tradition, they are somewhat modern in their thought and behavior.

**Reference:**

- A History of Indian English Literature: M. K. Naik.  
Critical Essay on Indian English Literature : O.P. Budholia.  
Indian Themes in English Fiction: Bhaban Prakash.  
Indian writing in English : K.R. Shrinivasa Iyengar.