



Surmounting Cultural Ingraination of Gender and Nature in Indian Women's Literature: the Ecofeminist Way

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ABSTRACT *It is well researched and documented that the discrimination, subjugation and inferiorization of women in Indian society is brought about by patriarchal constructs, which had been embedded into the culture and traditions of our society over the ages. The glorification of women in popular culture and their frontal positioning in religious and cultural ceremonies are just decoys, to subvert and thwart any form of resistance to patriarchy. Culture is a nebulous force, which has its origins in the region, language, religion, and caste and class stratification of the society; and can ruthlessly inhibit people within its gambit, from overcoming its influence. Language as the primordial component in the creation and dissemination of culture, has a manipulative clout over all other components; and can be discerned in all literature, be it poetic, fictional or scholastic – academic, political, philosophical or religious. Religious literature relegates the secondary status of women as God ordained and all other forms of literature ingrain this in culture, unintentionally as in women's studies or innately as in fiction. Popular culture on the ubiquitous TV and www too, has a literary base as scripts, storyboards or content, which only gets accentuated with explicit visuals. A critical examination of contemporary literature in English by Indian women writers including émigré writers reveals that most are still entangled in the gendered concepts of nature and culture. To surmount this, women writers need to appreciate that as midwives of comprehension and knowledge, they must overcome self discrimination, evolve a gender neutral language, exemplify women who have triumphed over all odds in their narratives, document their coping, nay, overcoming strategies with statistical proofs, develop a deep ecology consciousness and strive towards an egalitarian environmental and cultural ethic for our post-modern societies, which is ecofeminist in approach.*

Gendering Culture

None can transcend his cultural identity. **Karl Marx**

The culture of a society is noticed in the customs and traditions it follows. But society and its culture are not a homogeneous whole and further more they are in a continuous flux of change and transformation. Tradition by definition is anything that is passed down from generation to generation; unchanged or with localized modifications. There is a catch here, as along with the good, the bad and reprehensible too are passed down generations. Hence along with knowledge - ignorance, along with science - superstition are also passed down. Culture as observed in traditions is a nebulous force of religious, social, economic and political drives, which shapes the psycho-scapes of the people living in that society and there is no escape from this. The regulatory authority for perpetuating culture is the agency of women and hence they themselves can never transgress the value codes. These value codes having their origin in the ancient Aryan societies and codified in the cardinal text - Manu Shashtra and which are designed to protect and perpetuate patriarchy through control over women's sexuality. The concept of 'pativrata', as the highest form of womanhood to be aspired by every woman, became the ideology, through which women have become self-regulating in adhering to the patriarchal value codes. 'The 'Pativrata' concept was the master stroke of Hindu-Aryan genius and is one of the most successful ideological construct by any patriarchal system, anywhere in the world.' (Uma Chakravarti, 1993). Thus culture became truly gendered, especially so, in a highly tradition bound country such as India.

Indian culture is gendered beyond redemption - or so it would have appeared a century ago or even at the time

of independence of India from colonial control and transposing of British culture on Indian society. But the forces driving the independence movements for almost a century contained within a grand project to build a modern India - a truly democratic, secular and socialist republic and hence were able to enshrine the necessary safe-guards in the Constitution after independence. But 67 years hence, even after the efforts of autonomous women's cooperative movements, the culture of post-modern India remains gendered still clinging to the fast weakening patriarchal traditions. The hold of tradition on culture is so strong that it resisted the Constitution of India for so long and proves the Aryan genius' introduction of the 'pativrata dharma' – a 'dharma' which approves and affirms women's life of bondage and along with the belief in 'karma' – their own fate, for being born a woman; have proved very successful against the onslaught of the modern women backed by an enabling law and justice machinery. But now into the post-modern times; the times are a changing and changing fast and as no tradition has truly stood the test of time, the tradition of patriarchy too is getting diluted progressively, with the fore-seeable future of a truly egalitarian society.

Depiction in Fiction

Language being the primary component of culture, is the appropriate point of reference to understand culture and a graphical representation of which is seen in the literary works produced by the society at large, but especially women. Hence to study culture as seen in the literary works of contemporary women writers will definitely reveal how gendered the culture still is and whether women have raised themselves above their now redundant dharma and karma.

As Arundhati Roy says in an interview – ‘fiction is truth, in fact the absolute truth’. Truth can only be fully revealed without being bogged down by pressures, when it is designated as fiction. Thus the depiction of women by women in contemporary English fiction will give us a perfect reference to check the progress in the socio-psychology of women. A brief evaluation of writings by women litterateurs including – Anita Desai, Shashi Despande, Bharati Mukherjee, Anees Jung, Diva Kumari, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meena Alexander, Gita Mehta, Arundhati Roy and others; should definitely reveal the ongoing changes in the culture of our post-modern society.

Anita Desai- a critical view of the depiction of women in her works reveals that it is gloomy, dark, bleak and violent. The nemesis of the women seems to be the culture of patriarchy ingrained in the society, through immediate family, marriage and the relationship with the men within. Most of the stories involve women who suffer married life and become depressed, violent or suicidal. Eg. – Maya- in *Cry A Peacock*, Manisha- in *Voices in the City*, Nanada – in *Fire in the Mountains* and Sita- in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Tara- in *Clear Light of Day*, is the only woman whose marriage is successful. The only truly emancipated woman, Brinda- in *Clear Light of Day*, is an unmarried woman. But the women in Anita Desai's works have progressively developed along feminist thought as seen in the characters who rebelled against patriarchy and its institutions and traditions, instead of withdrawing into a shell, turn violent and self destructive, lose sanity or commit suicide have grown in self confidence and cooperating in groups, but still appear to be accepting and accommodating patriarchy and their sexuality still repressed.

Shashi Despande – Another feminist writer, whose women protagonists are mostly middle class, educated women, feel persecuted and their desires suppressed within the patriarchal culture. The women also seem anti-matriarchal, as noticed in the character of Saru- in *The Dark Holds No Terror*. Indu- in *Roots and Shadows*, feels oppressed in her maternal home. The nemesis of all women here too is marriage, whether arranged by the family or of own volition, as a gesture of rebellion against patriarchy, is but an entrapment. ‘Where else could I go? What else could I do? There was Sonu and this child to come. For a moment I thought. It's a trap. Keeping you in a cage until you lose the desire for freedom, until you forget what the word ‘freedom’ means.’ Manju in *If I Die today*. Women in Deshpande's novels are victims of family and social oppression. The fight back by the agency of women is seen only in the character of Urmila- in *The Binding Vine*.

Bharati Mukherjee- the women in her novels shuttle between Indian and American cultures creating for themselves, their own an existential dilemma. All new experiences are weighed against their cultural upbringing, which is rooted in patriarchy. Marriage and motherhood still remain the main goal of all her women and they accept their misery as ‘karma’. ‘all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her.’ Desirable Daughter (04).

Anees Jung – In her revealing work *‘Breaking the Silence’*, Jung explores the experiences of women across the world and her characters face marital discord, family oppression and financial insecurity, but tolerate silently. In *‘Unveiling India’*, Jung traverses the entire spectrum of repression suffered by women across nations and cultures. However in *‘Breaking the Silence’*, Jung's abiding faith in

the capacity of womanhood can be noticed, as the women in them emerge as individuals in their own right. ‘Once a woman finds her own strength, she can't be looted.’(p33).

Chitra Divakumari – the general theme in her four novels – *The Mistress of Spice*, *Sisters of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire* and the *Queen of Dreams* – is about moving away from Indian cultural roots and assimilating into American culture. The works appear semi-biographical with characters struggling with dual identities and values, personal space and the real meaning of love.

Jhumpa Lahiri- In *‘Interpreter of Maladies’*, the depiction of Indian socio-cultural tradition is realistic and the women characters struggle with self identity while establishing socio-cultural and socio-linguistic bonds with Americans. A culture within its ambit works as a unifying factor, whereas across nations as a dividing factor - is the truth is reflected in all her works. She explores the cultural heritage of India in the sculptures and traditional way of life.

Meena Alexander – She too writes about migration and colonial impact and women liberating themselves in the enabling culture of the United States of America.

Gita Mehta – writes of merging of cultures in a witty and candid manner and analyzes Indian culture, history and mythology. However her protagonists are mostly men.

Kiran Desai – A reading of her *Inheritance of Loss*, reveals a dark and gloomy world of its characters, reflected in her description of nature as – ‘All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths.’ Desai's cultural depiction of women of the times comes out alive in the suicide note sent by Nimi, the wife of the Cambridge educated anglicized judge, Jemubhai – ‘- as a woman you wanted dead; well, as a woman who wanted to kill herself, without a witness, without a case; so simple, a single movement of the hand and for the police, a case so simple, just another quick movement of the hand, the rupees made an oiled movement between palms.’ The honorable judge had expressed scorn on his wife in such a forceful manner that has – ‘stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers and turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation.’ The only recourse Nimi could find was to end her suffering with herself.

Arundhati Roy- *‘The God of Small Things’* is a dark and sad story of the lives of people who are tradition bound and even in a matrilineal cultured society, life of women is still a highly stifled existence. One major difference in this work is that nature reflects the culture and the entire text is closely knitted with description of the nature around and how the interplay of nature and culture work out. However the description of nature is as gloomy as the story line. ‘The green for the day had seeped from the trees. Dark palm leaves were splayed like drooping combs against the moonlight sky. The orange sun slid through their bent, grasping teeth. A squadron of fruit bats sped across the gloom. In the abandoned ornamental garden...’.(p187)

Most women writers have remained within the frame-work of family, marriage and Indian woman hood in their narratives and continue to show women as victims of patriarchal culture. All émigré writers are guilty of running down India and its culture and venerating the liberating American culture. The autobiographies of women are biographies of pain suffered by suppressed and oppressed women and

are deeply depressing. Most of the fiction is semi-autobiographical and can be presumed to an extent that it reflects the cultural moorings of the writers, which is still tradition bound. However the recent fiction of many of the writers shows women coming out of restrictive situations to develop an independent identity.

Transcending Tradition

It is only in the chik lit, pop fiction of Shobha De that the post-modern Indian woman comes of age. Her women have left tradition far behind, while still cherishing certain Indian values and strive to be economically independent and ultimately win their sexual freedom. Sex and sexuality are not hidden behind tradition, culture and its gendered concepts, but take centre stage as the protagonists remain single to retain their freedom and are involved with men on their own terms. They are not overtly sensitive to emotions and understand the feminine power to control and direct the male psyche. The traditional Indian male who happens to be the villain in most other works of women writers, is vanquished in the novels of Shobha De. The demon is exorcised and the gendered concepts of culture are shattered as the compelling reality of sex is exposed. De's description of feminine sex is as a celebration, almost a religion. However De's protagonists are almost always urban, educated and upwardly mobile women and all the characters are fictitious.

If only Karuna, Nisha, Aasha Rani and Aparna; the protagonists in *Socialite Evenings*, *Sultry Days*, *Starry Nights and Snapshots*; respectively are real women in flesh and blood, we may wonder. Surprise! For we have real life heroines with modest backgrounds, who have vanquished the evil forces of gendered culture working against them and emerged as the all conquering feminine manifestations of power – Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga.

Follow Every Rainbow by a new age post-modern woman, Rashmi Bhansal, is the kind of book that can inspire the women of India. The stories of 25 successful women entrepreneurs in the book, interestingly reveal that the Indian woman has truly evolved. The common thread of advice given by these 25 women to women is that – *Believe in yourself, have a dream, work with passion and sincerity; you can choose to be victim or you can choose to make decisions that empower you.* It is this boldness that is missing in most of the fiction, except Shobha De' and few others.

A review of women's studies and scholarship of women's movements reveals that, much work has been done on studying the status of women across various regions, religions, class and caste stratifications in the society and all of it only reveals the persistence of the evil of patriarchy as violence against women. The emphasis in most women's studies is on individual level characteristics and the focus is more on women's education, crisis intervention, shelters and documentation of the consequences of patriarchal culture on the society. 'Kali for Women' a feminist web site displays a lot of work being done in this field.

Crisis of Cultured Nature

Works of all contemporary Indian women scholars have done yeomen service to the study of gender in culture, but a big disservice to the depiction of nature in culture. Man interacts with nature through the medium of culture. It is culture which provides the values and knowledge for human-nature interaction. Unless the cultural values of a society are sensitive to ecology, human relationship with

nature will not be sustainable and harmonious. Ecological crisis affect women adversely; women bear the brunt of the economic and social consequences of climate change as destruction of the environment results in the elimination of women's method to survival. During extreme climate catastrophes women suffer disproportionate mortality and the surviving women and girls are subject to intimidation and gender based violence. It is essential that women writers are sensitive to ecological issues in their narratives.

The literary works of women who are ecologically sensitive reveal another world and another femininity. The works of Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), *Making Peace with Earth* (2013) and others have established her as a leading ecofeminist writer who is active in many movements on food and agriculture, biodiversity, biotechnology, bioethics, genetic engineering, and had done phenomenal service to these causes. However she faults western patriarchy for all the ills plaguing us and ignores the stronger cultural forces of Indian patriarchy.

Mehda Patkar the activist, speaks eloquently on issues of ecology, development and displacement at various forums, but does not prefer to work for a more feminist approach towards culture. Most of writers, who are ecofeminist in thought, are activists of various women's movements in India - Gabriele Dietrich, Gail Omvedt, and Ilna Sen are some of the prominent voices. They conclude that women's movement needs to go beyond women's issues (violence, sexuality, identity, etc.) and provide women's perspectives in all struggles on issues of development, ecology and religion. Omvedt (1993) shows how rural women are at the forefront of alternatives through their focus on 'stree shakti' or women's power, rather than women's oppression. The discourses among the activists had led to better strategies and alternatives.

Catalyzing Cultural Change

The best way to catalyze the transformation of culture towards an egalitarian society is through lionizing the real life success stories of women who have believed in their self worth and found redemption. Women's studies need a refocusing for tuning-in to the success stories of women, so that success can breed further successes and environmental movements and their scholarship needs to become women centric. The writers themselves need to overcome their inherent, but hardly discernable self-discrimination – the internalized feeling, that "I am a woman" and hence somehow innately weak and dependent. Their writing needs to be bold, to capture the successes of women in their long march towards freedom, happiness and a brave new world.

Language itself has been rapidly changing to more gender neutral expressions and will continue to evolve along with the change in culture and vice versa. But what is most required, is an imbibing of deep ecology and its importance to the cause of women's issues, into the language used by writers.

'Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society.' Karren J. Warren (1993).

This then is the feminism of the future; a feminism that women writers will portray in their narratives, a feminism that is conscious of the cultural effect of patriarchy on women and nature, as well as the need to align with both women and ecological movements. The necessity of this can be deduced from the recommendations of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) which stresses much on linking both the issues.

Ecofeminism – the Literary Realism

The feminism of the post-modern woman, especially its writers need to be sensitive to the cause of ecology and nature and follow the pastoral tradition in its post-modern incarnation; as a concern for nature, as against romanticizing 'countryside' or using landscapes to highlight human emotion. Colonialism has eroded the poetic pastoral traditions and encouraged prose and later fiction. 'Even if pastoralism interposes some major stumbling blocks in the way of developing a mature environmental aesthetic, it cannot but play a major role in that endeavor.' Buell (1995: 32). A mature environmental aesthetic needs to have a vision of an integrated natural world, that includes the human. It is our consciousness that gives rise to our conscience, our ability to take responsibility for our behavior towards other species of the earth and towards the earth

itself. Our consciousness must address both environmental and social exploitation simultaneously, if there is to be real social justice and a place for it to be practiced. The dualities of calmness and suffering and of mothering and dying are woven not only within feminine experience but in the whole of nature. The realization of feminists that the exploitation of the planet is of the same mindset as the exploitation of women and minorities will spur them to be sensitive about it in their narratives. Then concern for the exploitation of women in terms of gender, religion, caste and class; will accompany concern for the environment in terms of species, elements and atmosphere and vice versa. The attainment of a vibrant harmony between man-woman and human-nature and in fact for our earth and all earthlings, can only be through ecofeminism. As midwives of comprehension and knowledge, women writers should deliver literature in all their forms - poetry, fiction, biographies, auto-biographies, scripts for films and TV shows, storyboards for cartoons and of course the blogs - which are ecofeminist in culture. It is in feminist content of the multifarious blog sites, that the true-blue post-modern Indian woman can be discerned. Ecofeminism in literature will have to drive the cultural change led by the post-modern woman, be it urban or rural, towards an emancipated society. Our very survival on this planet depends on it!

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