



Early Indian Women Novelists : Their Ideas & Concerns

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore how Indian women novelists contributed to the growth and development of novels in themes as well as in techniques immensely. To elaborate, they wrote about the problems of farmers, their constant obsession with fear, hunger, and despair. Further, they portrayed human predicaments from the perspective of a sensitive woman. Naturally women's search for identity, their self realizations and liberation have been discussed and debated in all its minutest details in their works.

KEYWORDS

Indian women, who were adulated and educated in Vedic period, lived subjugated life behind purdah system during Mughal period. When the wind of education started flowing among Indian women, the enlightened ladies never looked back on the path of progress. Whether in struggle for freedom, in literary field or in a modern voyage to space, Indian women always proved their worth, talent and might. Here we are concerned with literary talent of our women, specially in English fiction writing. One of the most tangible effects of the gift of English education is the growth of prose and fiction writing. At first, the remark sounds paradoxical because India is known to be the fountainhead of the art of storytelling. But the researchers have found that in Oriental literature, we have little evidence of the 'novel proper' even though we have several collections of tales with moral import. Novel writing was born and developed in Europe in 18th century but it was in the latter half of 19th century that the western impact on India's culture resulted into the development of formal written prose as a functional and artistic literary medium. As Bengal first came under British influence the first novel was written in Bengali in 1858. Similarly the first English novel also came from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the pioneer novelist of many celebrated Bengali novels. He wrote his first English novel 'Rajmohan's Wife', which was originally serialized in a journal and, later on, published in the book form in 1864. Interestingly, some Indian women had also started writing novels around the same time breaking the shackles of dogma and tradition. In this context the names of Rajlaxmi Devi's 'The Hindu Wife', Toru Dutta's 'Binaca', originally written in French, Mrs. K. Sathianandan's 'Kamla - A Story Of Hindu Life' and 'Shaguna', the story of Christian life, Mrs. Swarna Kumari Devi's translated novels namely 'An Unfinished Song' and 'The Fatal Garland' may be mentioned as the earliest attempts at novel writing by Indian women. Apart from them, Santa and Sita, the two daughters of Ramanand Chatterji, the editor of the Modern Review, also made path breaking attempts in the field of novel and story writing. Among these writers Toru Dutta's name is prominent. Though a precarious writer, she had a limited fund of experiences due to an insulated life. As a result, her novel was an autographical projection, dealing with their tragedy and bereavement.

Mrs. Swarna Kumari Devi dealt with historical themes in her novels. In the writing of Santa Chatterji and Sita Chatterji, we find a hint of the new realism breaking into the mould of traditional romance. All these novelists left their own mark in the contemporary literature.

However, it is only after the Second World War that English novel by Indian writers came into being, though initially the spade work was done by the trio of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.

Narain and Raja Rao. Very soon the women writers took the cue from them and started enriching Indian fiction in English. There are, of course, various reasons for the sudden flowering of English novels by Indians during the period often described as the Gandhian age (1920-47). As Prof. M. K. Naik (1995:104) has rightly observed, "A society compelled into self awareness like this provides a fertile soil for fiction and is no more accident that three major Indian novelists viz. Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narain and Raja Rao began their career during this phase."¹ In fact during this phase, some new themes such as the ideal of freedom struggle, the man-made famine, the communal problem, the plight of the untouchables, the exploitation of the landless poor in the wake of industrialization and the British rule and the East-West confrontation were introduced in the Indo-Anglican novel with great passion and fervour.

Along with these the female novelists added a new dimension in spite of their small numbers and other handicaps. They made a mark on the strength of their individual talent. The same thing had happened in England where the various writers like Jane Austen, Brontes, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Wolf had created another great tradition of the English novel. In fact, it is seen that women are natural story tellers and fluent writers. However, it was after Second World War that the women novelists of quality appeared on the Indian literary scene and started enriching Indian fiction with their stimulating insights and varied approaches.

At the initial stage Kamla Markandeya and Ruth Prawar Jhabvala drew attention, Kamla through novels like 'The Nectar in a Sieve' (1955), 'Some Inner Fury' (1957), 'Silence of Desire' (1960), 'Possession' (1963), 'A handful of Rice' (1966) and 'Coffer Dams' (1969). As for Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, she came with 'Nature of Passion' (1956), 'Esmond in India' (1958), 'The House Holder' (1960), 'Gel Ready for Battle' (1962), 'A Backward Place' (1963) and the much admired 'Heat and Dust' (1975).

In fact Kamla Markandeya wrote about the problems of peasants, their constant obsession with fear, hunger and despair with great insight. In novel after novel she refers to grim suffering and poverty undergone by the people because of bungs in politics or catastrophe of Nature but ultimately it is the vibrant spirit of man that does not accept defeat. Even in her latest novels where she tries the East-West theme, her basics do not change. Thus writing about her novel "A Handful of Rice", K. R. S. Iyengar (2009:359) observes, "If the outer theme of the 'The Nectar in a Sieve' was rural economics, the theme of "A Handful of Rice" is urban economics."² In

fact, in her latest novels one comes across greater sophistication and mature craftsmanship but one misses the freshness and compulsion and spontaneity and involvement. As for Mrs. Jhabvala, she reminds one of Jane Austen -- in her approach to maladjustment and contradictions caused by the conflict between tradition and modernity. In fact, her peculiar mixed background creates a complex situation which sometimes is an advantage and sometimes a serious handicap. Born of Polish parents in Germany, she came to England quite early when she was barely twelve and took an M.A. degree in literature from London University and ultimately married an Indian Architect in 1951 and settled in Delhi but towards the 70's she left India but visited the country at regular intervals. Living in India after Independence provided her with rare insight and sharpened her perception of the Indian political scene and dilemmas of manners, customs, poses and affections. Thus for her, Delhi was an 'unreal' city where she observed many complex changes at the level of social interactions at various cultural centers, clubs and groups. She looks at the contradictions of the Indian society and particularly its self-deception at such events and situations. Just like Jane Austen, who was brilliant in her treatment of 18th century middle class milieu, she has treated the same kind of chase of the female for the purpose of marriage in a genuinely comic manner in many of her novels. One major difference between her early novels and the later ones lies in the fact that while the earlier ones look like caricatures as exaggerated exposure, her later novels like 'The House Holder' and 'A Backward Place' embody a trauma of a trapped married couple. The problems of marital life are complex and only occasionally she deals with this theme in depth and insight. Her short stories are perhaps much better because there is greater discipline. In all her stories and novels her women characters easily draw our attention. As has been rightly suggested by K.R.S. Iyengar (2009:391), "Mrs Ruth Prawar Jhabvala is no sentimentalist, hence does not falsify or merely idealise life"³. She is at once human and detached in her portrayal of social life in Delhi.

After Jhabvala, the name of Atta Hussain and Anita Desai draw our attention by their contrasting styles of communication. Atta Hussain is known for the single novel 'Sunlight on a Broken Column' (1961) and an earlier collection of short stories entitled 'Phoenix Fled' (1953). These promised a talent for reminiscence and sensitive observation with autobiographical touches. Certainly as an autobiographical novel written from the point of view of a Muslim narrator, the novel provides a gripping account of the turbulent times of pre-partition days. Based on autobiographical form and divided into four parts, the novel describes a hectic period of 20 years in the life of Leila, the narrator-heroine. When the novel begins, this orphan girl is about fifteen and has lots of dreams at this impressionable stage. But towards the end, the narrator is described first as a mother and then as a widow in the independent India. She is thoroughly disillusioned by the turn of events in which politics played havoc with the lives of both the masses and elites among the Muslim community. Obviously in terms of social and political documentation, the novel is remarkable.

The name of Anita Desai also evokes considerable interest because she had added a new dimension to the legacy of Indian women writers by eschewing the social background and instead concentrating on the inner climate of sensibility. As K.R. Srinivas Iyengar (2009:397) rightly observes, "Her forte, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility, the particular kind of Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among the Barbarians and the Philistines, the anarchists and the amorlists."⁴ She was immediately hailed as an original talent having the courage to say 'no' to political and social questions and instead concentrate on the stream of consciousness of her hyper-sensitive female characters. From her first novel "Cry the Peacock" (1963) to her latest "Journey to Ithaca" she has presented a large portrait gallery of strong female characters such as Maya, Manisha, Sita, Bim, Nanda, Kaul and others, who are quite hyper-sensitive, vulnerable and yet assertive. As she has stated more than once, writing for her is an "effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things". Her novels are 'existential' studies of human conditions presented through portraits of female pro-

tagonists ranging from a school girl to a mother. But all of them are trapped in their own destinies and lead a traumatic life which often ends in a violent death. In some other novels, however, an attempt is made to examine the possibility of a genuine reconciliation. However, Anita Desai's central theme, if there is one, is the depiction of human predicaments viewed from the exclusive angle of a sensitive woman who has to suffer at the hands of a callous society, nay, male-dominated society.

Among the women writers of post-Independence era every novelist has chosen her own milieu and Nayantara Sahgal is no exception. She is known to be an exponent of the 'political' novel. It has to be remembered that politics is just one of her favourite concerns or obsessions and women's search for identity and self-realisation is her important trade mark. She has also been described as a strong feminist, who has written on women's issues, particularly her search for liberation and identity in the midst of male dominance. In this respect she is no different from other women writers like Mrs. Jhabvala or Kamla Markandey or for that matter Anita Desai. Though Nayantara Sahgal is usually described as an exponent of the political novel, the fact remains that politics for her is a kind of mirror for reflecting the political era which she has passed through as the daughter of Vijayalaxmi Pandit and niece of Nehru. Thus she was particularly privileged to watch many events on the political scene during the last phase of freedom movement and the gradual erosion of political values after Independence. Moreover, with her liberal education abroad, she could easily feel the widening gap among Indian women and their western counterparts.

In most of her novels the theme of broken marriages is treated from the angle of clash of ego and unbridled political aspirations. Her two early books 'Prison and chocolate Cake' (1954) and 'From Fear Set Free' (1962) suggest it in no uncertain terms that autobiography is in her blood and they provide us with authentic pictures of India's freedom struggle affecting the children who were in the thick of the Indian struggle for Independence. Moreover, the clash between idealism and a desire to reach the top position in the corridors of powers seem to be a constant refrain in the novels like 'This Time of Morning' (1965), 'Storm in Chandigarh' (1969), 'A Situation in New Delhi' (1971), and also in some of the later novels where she resorts to fantasy and other unconventional techniques.

However, in general, it could be said that Sahgal's feeling for politics and her command over expression pertaining to problems of this type certainly set her apart from other female writers who do not find the murky incidents of politics to their liking. In this respect, she easily invites comparison with George Eliot whose interest in religious and moral issues immediately separate her from the other female novelists of 19th century.

Political novel was of course tried in India in 1930s by many progressive Indians. But a genuine political novel with a dominant role to political ideas against a set political milieu was absent before 1930s. Perhaps the Indian freedom struggle reaching a crucial stage under the leadership of Gandhiji could be described as the original inspiration behind this sudden flowering. It is thus possible to see a connection between this development and rise of Indian novel in English.

Thus we see that women novelists in India have made significant contributions in enriching Indian novel in particular and English literature in general.

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