

# Post Independence Journey of India Women Novelists in English

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## Abstract -

*Women have been designated as the most natural story tellers since the ancient times in the world. As they had to take care for their infants and made them sleep, women, for ages have been imagining and creating bed time stories for their children, which has no doubt, played very important role, though indirectly, in giving birth to the faculty of imagination in the people, which has played significant role in the field of research and thus innovating the new ideas, new ideals, new comforts, new technologies for human life. This paper discusses the journey of Indian Women novelists in English after independence and the impact of politics, society, economy in the psychology of women.*

**Keywords :** Women, Post-Independence, Psychological, industrial, film, financial independence, respect and proud for the nation.

India, being one of the oldest civilizations of the world, has to its credit a long history of cultural development along with the experience of different rulers from various parts of the world, ending in its physical, social and political diversity of life. If we look back to the first quarter of the last century, we see that Indian National Movement, specially after the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi, had filled common men with the feeling of self respect and proud for the nation. During this time, under the British rule, the spread of education compelled Indians to express themselves through literature and spontaneously they chose novel or fiction for the expression of their views. Slowly it turned out to be the greatest medium for the expression of changing social milieu, political,

economical and psychological development of the Indian society. Initially this task was completed by the male writers of the society like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan etc. along with some female writers like Toru Dutt (Bianca), Raj Lakshmi Devi (The Hindu Wife), Cornelia Sorabji (Her great collection was published in the Macmillan's magazine) and finally Iqbalunnisa Hussain (Purdah and Polygamy : Life in an Indian Muslim House household, 1944) who told either the tale of their own life or life around them with a particular sincerity. As the education of women spread widely during the post-independence era throughout the country, we see that number of women writers took the charge of writing novels very naturally and easily, as they were born with this instinct and one after the other novels were poured down by their pen, making people realise the changing conditions of Indian society in every respect of life.

The journey of Indian women novelists of quality start with the first generation of women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhbwala, Nayantara Sehgal, and Anita Desai, who won international fame and recognition with the publication of their novels. Kamala Markandaya started writing novels when India had just liberated itself from the Britishers. At the threshold of newly won freedom, India was suffering from communal disturbances, hence, poverty, hunger and starvation were the major problems of that time. Industrialisation and urbanisation were eroding the very basis of rural life. Markandaya used fiction as a vehicle for communicating her vision of life. She portrayed racial conflicts, temperamental disparities, cultural divergences and sexual perversions as factors working in the form of barriers of communication in her novels. Her novels include Nectar in a Sieve, Some Inner Fury, A silence of Desire, Possession, A Handful of Rice, The Coffin Dams, The Nowhere Man, Two Virgins, The Golden Honeycomb and The Pleasure city.

Kamala Markandaya's first novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' is the story of a South Indian village where industry and modern technology play havoc. The major theme of this novel is hunger and degradation. Her second novel 'Some Inner Fury' is a tragedy technically composed by politics. her third novel 'A Silence of Desire' deals with the spiritual reality, being a major concern for every individual in India. 'A Handful of Rice' deals with urban politics and economics, which presents a very realistic record of the

politics of Tamil Nadu of that time in India. All of her novels deal with such other realistic problems of the society but her major concern remains to carry on her fight for the oppressed women in male-oriented society. Sudhir Kumar Arora, in his study on *Karnala* Markandaya affirms, "She has succeeded in studying women thoroughly. Being a woman, she inherits innate propensity to delve on the plight of women. She perceives their wretchedness from a sociological and psychological perspective. She delineates their dilemma in the form of rootlessness and crisis of identity : a desire to be treated not only as someone's mother but also as a liberated individual. Throughout her novels her consciousness of what it is to be a woman, both as a member of society and as a individual, emerges as one of her instinctive and passionate concerns"<sup>1</sup>

In her award winning novel 'Nectar in a Sieve', Markandaya presents the socio-economic picture of Post-independent India and its disastrous role in the life of rural women. It plays a villainous role in the life of protagonist Rukmani, who endures it with her courage and faces boldly the challenges of her life created by nature in the form of drought and men in the form of industrialization. Generalising the life of poor farmers in India, Rukmani Says, "Fear, constant companion of the peasant Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax, Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death."<sup>2</sup>

Markandaya throws light on the miserable conditions of women in the society due to poor economic condition of India. She has artistically presented the picture of hunger which compels kunthi to adopt the path of prostitution and this later on lures her to blackmail Rukmani and Nathan so that she may save herself from starvation. This dragon of hunger swallows Poor Old Granny and makes a false promise to Ira that it will not touch the life of kuti, her brother if she sacrifices her chastity. Through this incident Markandaya defends those acts of women which are labelled as sin in the society.

Second important woman novelist after independence is Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Although a European by birth. after marrying an Indian architect, Jhabvala came to Delhi and became a socialite in the upper strata of Indian society after independence. Here, she developed an interest in the manners and morals, rituals and culture of Indian society and presented them with pleasant frankness in her novels. K.R.S. Iyengar

observes in this connection, "Living in Delhi in the years after independence, Mrs. Jhabvala has had opportunities of exercising her powers of close observation on a milieu that changes chameleon - like from local to cosmopolitan, from traditional to conventional, from naive to sophisticated; only, sometimes one hardly knows which is which."<sup>3</sup>

The double event of independence and partition gave Delhi an opportunity to change itself to such an extent that it became the shelter of most of the Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan, provided the place for numerous foreign Embassies, international agencies, numerous foundations, cultural centres, clubs, groups and above all a centre of intrigue and power, The artist in Jhabvala witnessed every change minutely and diligently and presented them artistically in her novels which she published over a decade. Some of her novels are - To whom she will (1955), The Nature of Passion (1956), Esmond in India (1958), The Householder (1960), Get Ready for Battle (1962, and A Backward Place (1965) besides certain collections of short stories.

After Independence Indian society was being transformed from traditional to modern culture under the sway of English medium education, industrialization, urbanization and above all the frequent visit of Europeans of India for different purposes. It gave an opportunity to Mrs. Jhabvala to look at Indian society from two angles. First, as a foreigner, who is settled now in India, revealing the views of foreigners for Indians, and secondly as a member of Indian society, revealing the short comings of its traditions, and values among its inhabitants.

In her initial novels Jhabvala deals with the themes of marriage negotiations in the Indian society but in later novels she discusses the marital relationships of couples who either wriggle within the cage for better understandings (as in the 'Householder' and in 'A Backward Place') or break loose to live their separate lives as in 'Get Ready for Battle' - The rich Gulzarilal living in sin with a widow, his wife living with her improvident brother and feeling frustrated with her efforts to find solace through social welfare activities, and both husband and wife feeling ill at ease with their worthless son, Vishnu.

Exposing the condition of women in the so called Indian society ( where woman is worshipped as goddess in many rituals) Jhabvala presents the reality in her novels in many ways. In one of her short stories Dev writes to Raj on a post card. "Like birds, like

fishes, so man also". Although at first Raj is unable to fathom the meaning of this message, later he feels he should follow Dev's example, go wherever he liked and just be free and happy like birds and fishes. Just to be free and happy might be man's ideal but what about women? In 'Esmond in India', RamNath tells his sister Uma.

So like animals, like cows..... Beat them, starve them, maltreat them how you like, they will sit and look with animal eyes and never raise a hand to defend themselves, saying, "do with me what you will, you are my husband my God. it is my duty to submit to my god."<sup>4</sup>

It shows the condition of men and women in the Indian society after independence. Through her reflections on women education in India. Jhabvala presents the picture of highly selfish men in the society, who fully appreciate in their own case the great advantages of a good education but deny it in the case of women. It is argued that women have their domestic duties to perform, and that, if they were educated, they would busy themselves in their books and have little time for attending to the management of their households. In the 'Nature of Passion' Nimmi speaks of her college and the lecture on Keats' poetry and Om makes fun of and laughs at the whole business of girls going to college. He speaks loudly.

It (this college) is only a waste of time and of good money and will perhaps even give her wrong ideas. Look at that one there, he said thrusting his chin towards Usha messaging her father's legs. 'How much money was spent on her education and what has it let to now? A betrothel today, a marriage tomorrow, children day after. Only with her we were lucky; she is too stupid to get any harm out of education. Usha laughed. She had failed many times to pass to her inter and reference to this always moved her to good humoured daughter.<sup>5</sup>

Jhabvala, being a foreigner, look at the society with certain objectiveness and this lets her decide her own views on such sensitive matters as religion in India. She freely satirises the fake swamis of India in her novels. To her the places where they dwell are seats of corruption. Her young characters loudly proclaim that, "God does not

need temples or priests, the ringing of bells. The clash of cymbals.... He needs love and pure heart"<sup>6</sup> Jhabvala notes with dismay that Indian as well as European pilgrims are robbed and deprived of their possessions in temples. They are stripped of all personal characteristics including their names when initiated by a Guru into religion. In the 'Heat and Dust', she refers to two cases - one in which the pilgrims were deprived of their watches in a house of devotion at Amritsar and the other in which the possessions of a European ascetic disappeared from a temple. She narrates satirically an incident of a young European boy child, who after being initiated by his Guru was called Chidananda. He had only his beads and the begging bowl in which he collected his daily good from charitable people. Yet the people visit temples, had their Gurus and believed in the age old dictum that 'God provides' and had faith that 'God provides and gives with both hands'.

In her journey of depicting India Jhabvala present pictures of suffering humanity in her novels. One, the harsh reality of slums around big cities where people can be compared to animals on the account of response and living they receive through the modern society and the other when the feeling of democracy infuses them with self-respect and power of voting. In the 'Get Ready for Battle' she describe the picture of a family in a hut living in the slum.

....The man slept. His wife sorted a few old rags. Woman was contemptuous of man. "Sleeping lying there like a stone. She stroked on of her rags and held it up agint the light. Her mother or mother-in-law was tiny, frail as a dry twig and bent almost double. She squatted on a borken string cot with a child in front of her. She was squashing lice in the child's head with her finger nail. She seemed to enjoy this work, crackling." 'There you devil go to hell' every time she caught one. <sup>7</sup>

She also mentions that in due course of independent India, the poor had started realising their helplessness. But they were developing a sense of dignity and self-respect. They said, "Perhaps we have no right to live that they should come to us and say clear out." And in the same breath they exhaled in protest. "We also have our rights, we are

not dogs." When the social workers made promises and said, "It often happens that children don't know when something is done for their good." The poor retorted, "words we cannot eat". Some of them talked only, some others advised them to work, but they wanted good, they told them in disgust."<sup>8</sup>

In the journey of Indian women novelists in English there are two major novelists of the first generation Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. Having a first hand knowledge of India's political history and political figures, Nayantara Sahgal focuses on the political themes of her novels specially the themes of life and its suffering after partition, the execution of emergency in 1975 and political situation after the death of J.L. Nehru. Her novels 'Storm in Chandigarh', 'Rich like Us' and 'A Situation in New Delhi' are few among many.

As we see that Kamala Markandaya deals with the problems of hunger, industrialization, unemployment, and other socio-economic transformation in her novels. Jhabvala discusses themes based on social background of India just after independence, Sahgal discusses political situations of our country, Anita Desai again a foreigner, discusses the inner climate, the sensibility of her women character and gives a psychological dimension to her novels by giving a new touch of stream of consciousness to her style in order to explore the inner psyche of her characters. Her important novels are 'Cry, the Peacock', 'Bye Bye Blackbird', 'Voices in the City', 'Where Shall We Go This Summer' and 'Fire on the Mountain'. Some other novelists of repute are Atia Hossain, Santha Rama Rau and Shakuntala Shrinagesh who continued the journey of 1st generation women novelists in English in India.

Three to four decades after independence when education was easily accessible to middle and upper class society and the growth of economy started going in upward direction; financial emancipation gave birth to a new class-working women, who was responsible for the great change in the socio-economic conditions of middle class families and their issues were discussed by number of women writers in English. The most important among them is Shashi Deshpande, who writes on the social and psychological issues of women and present the true picture of India society with the solutions of their problems in her novels.

Deshpande's first novel 'Roots and Shadows' won the Thirumati Rangammal Prize in 1984. The novel projects the inner world and thoughts of India. She is a revolutionary woman, who acts against dominance right from her childhood. At her ancestral role she hated obedience and passivity as a girl child. She even refuses to be cowed down by Akka, the rich family tyrant who dominated that family. Thus we see that feminism not only raises a voice against male dominance but also against women who cherish the value of patriarchy.

As an act of revolt she marries Jayant who does not belong to her caste and thus breaks tradition. She is an educated and financially independent woman who is also managing all the household duties. With time she wants to leave her monotonous service, but Jayant does not approve of it. Indu's self-alienation increases as she becomes aware of the conflicting demands made on her by her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer. She now wants to become a true woman and throw off the mask of an ideal woman.

Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman but Indu plays the role of an ideal housewife which restricts her self-development. She is denied the scope of giving free play to her artistic potential. At this juncture "she recognises her displacement and marginalization as a woman. The authoritative and dominating male does not only suppress the female voice but also brings silence, dullness and repulsion to the house women live in . Indu feels that she has no tangible shape, no form of her own. She remarks, "It's a trap..... That's what marriage is, A trap, a cage? ..... A cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other..... and it's not a joke, but a tragedy" <sup>9</sup>

The speciality of Shashi Deshpande is that she not only exposes the reality of male dominated society of India but also tries to give solution to such problems of women through her novels. She always chooses the middle path. In one of her keynote address she speaks on the silence of women in the family. She says, "We also need to remember that silence does not always mean acquiescence; human beings are ingenious, they can always contrive to step beyond the permissible women, because of the restrictions they have to always had to contend with, are even more clever than this. They have used the little space allowed to them, worked out strategies that subverted the rules and



masked protest as well as rebellion" 10 Deshpande suggests in the 'Roots and Shadows' that a woman can break the age old traditions and beliefs binding her feet with fetters. So Indu ultimately decides to do what she wants to. She decides to resign from her job and do the kind of writing she had dreamt of doing and of course not by leaving the family but being with them and supporting them in all possible ways. She will hold the roots of tradition but in no way will be the shadow of man made woman.

In almost all her novels, Deshpande takes up the case of middle class working women and tries to solve their problems with the best possible manner. But with the liberalization of common man various other problems appeared in the society and number of women novelists have tried to deal with them in their own manners.

During the last decade of the 20th century Indian society witnessed new development in almost every field of life as women became the earning counterpart in lower, middle and upper class society. The financial liberty allowed women to live on their own terms and sometimes misusing this liberty they cross the limits of social laws and suffer in their life. This leads them to introspection and after some jolts they come up more powerfully with new solutions. This new journey of modern women has been presented by Shobha De in some of her novels, very realistically. De's 'Starry Nights' presents the story of a filmstar Asha Rani who suffers the agony of unsuccessful relationships of her parents in the childhood. Her father, a renowned film producer in Madras, leaves his wife and two daughters for a young star girl. The girls with their unaffectionate, un-understanding mother found themselves deprived of emotional security in childhood. In Asha's searly teens her scheming mother pushes her in the never ending gluttony of blue film and then through sex in the cross world of Bombay cinema.

Asha's downfall begins as she rises in her career. Beautiful with a perfect and appealing figure, she finds herself in the hands of Kishan Bhai, a small film distributor. He loves her, but her childhood memories fill her with hatred for men. Soon she is infatuated towards the top most male star Akshay Arora in the film industry. Akshay, on the other hand, a typical representative of the society, has no courage to take a bold step. He keeps enjoying both the worlds. His wife Malini, an experienced woman

humiliates Asha in her friends's house and curses her to die a spinster. Akshay becomes afraid of Asha's true love for him and tries to get rid of her. He slaps her in an orgy and she falls ill. Meanwhile she finds herself attached to Amir Chand, who is the member of Legislative Assembly and Abhijit Mehra, the only son of a top industrialist. Soon she gets bored and asks Abhijit to leave her, she says, "You are not making love to me, you are screwing my image - my screen image. Go out of here Abhijit. Go back to your wife and make a man of yourself. I have my own life to lead." <sup>11</sup>

But what is her life? She tries again and again to meet Akshay but all in vain. Ultimately she accepts Abhijit's proposal to go to New Zealand and there to her surprise she meets Abhijit's father who gives her a huge amount of money to leave his son. She accepts it and goes to Wellington. In her boredom she marries Jammy Phillips a farmer, and starts a new career of housewife. Her life fills with happiness and she gives birth to Sasha. After five years, on the proposal of her husband she visits India reluctantly and realises that things have changed a lot in her mother's family and in the industry too.

Here she is invited as a chief guest for the Mahurat of a film and the old memories compell her to start a new innings, in the film world. But she is shocked as she is offered the roles of mother or mother-in-law. Once again she involves in an adulterous relationship with the young producer Jojo for getting main role. Meanwhile she receives a call from her daughter that Jimmi is having an affair with her nanny. Confused and desperate, she feels shattered. "Whichever way one looked at". She thinks, "there was always a man in the picture. A man using, abusing and finally discarding a woman." <sup>12</sup>

Afraid of failure and rejection she decides to find out the truth with Jimmi. On reaching Wellington she comes to know that her marriage is over. Once again she confronts the problem of existence and belongingness, what is her real place in the world? Where does she really belong to? Who are her relatives? For whom does she live and who needs her? Thinking about her whole life she comes back to India and is welcomed, unexpectedly, by her family in Madras. Her young sister's inability to make name as a star disturbs her. Appa's faith in her gives her strength and courage to restart their old family film studio in Madras. Now she has existence, belongingness and opportunity to do something creative in her life. She, then, manages to bring beautiful

Sasha to India to live with her so that she can give her daughter what she could not receive from her mother.

Instead of escaping from life's responsibilities, or yielding to the problems, Asha a representative of modern woman, chooses the right way of struggling and surviving through it. She realizes that her roots are very deep in the soil of India where she can and will grow. This story truly represents the story of modern Indian woman, for whom sky is the limit.

Thus, we see that all the writers discussed in this paper, successfully represent the conditions of women in the society after Independence. Kamala Markandaya depicts rural or urban woman as victims of their circumstances, Ruth Praver Jhabvala deals with the picture of upper class of Indian society and the condition of women during the fifth and sixth decade of the last century, Anita Desai explores the inner psyche of Indian women. Shasha Deshpande discusses the problems of middle class working woman and Shobha De depicts the picture of highly liberated Indian women, especially the women of film world and to our surprise we see that in every section of the society woman has been able to transform herself from the old traditions and believing in herself has incarnated into NEW WOMAN who is able to change her life according to her own faiths.

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