

The Portrayal of Empowered Women In Indian English Fiction – A Study

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ABSTRACT

Literature is a mirror that reflects society. Since society creates literature, it is bound to exercise some influence on the reader's mind and attitude – be it positive or negative. A writer's reflection of events describes his attitude of mind whether he is progressive, conservative or revolutionary. People are much influenced by looking at society through books. Books are the treasure-house of the thoughts and feelings of the individuals which substantially affect the readers as they own the characters they come across in literature. Hence it is imperative to proclaim that literature is written to refresh, to inspire, to unleash the mind. It attracts the readers not only through its matter but also through its manner. The aim of the paper is to present the portrayal of women in the Indian English fiction and how they have shown their prowess in fighting against their suppression, assert their rights, resist the oppression and finally find a space for themselves in the patriarchal society. By presenting women as autonomous beings the writers try to transform the society by changing the reader's mind and attitude regarding the role of women in the society. An attempt has been made in this paper to discuss the status of women in India from the Vedic age to the present, how they were deprived of their rights, their centuries long suffering, and how literature help women in our country to find their strengths, resist their colonization and make men accept the fact that they are equal to them in all aspects.

KEY WORDS: Women empowerment, suppression, resistance, autonomy, colonized.

INTRODUCTION:

“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women” says Kofi Annan the General Secretary of the UNO in one of his addresses. It is a known fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in almost seven decades of Independence, but still they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in this male dominated society. Patriarchal forces still prevail in the modern Indian society that resists the forward march of its womenfolk. Ironically, a country which has recently achieved the status of first Asian country to accomplish Mars Mission in its maiden attempt is placed at 29th rank among 146 countries across the world in gender discrimination. Swami Vivekananda vehemently reiterates that “there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing” (Women, 1990).

Women empowerment is a much raised and discussed topic round the world today. It literally means emancipation of women from the vicious grip of social, political, economic, caste and gender-based discrimination. It means granting women the freedom to make life choices. Even in this digital and highly advanced technological world, still there is a need to talk about women empowerment where they are fighting for their rights. If they raise their voice they are threatened with dire consequences and they become scapegoats of the wrath of the society. Their voices of protest are not heard; their anguished cries are not taken into consideration. Instead they are written off as lousy pranks of crazy women. If we delve deeper into the recently raised problem of the “Casting Couch” and subsequently the “Me Too” campaign in the film industry, it is crystal clear that the position of women is not changed much. Most of the female film celebrities who raised their voice against the injustice meted out to them are socially ostracized and left out

alone to fight their battle by themselves. They even lost their chances in the industry for raising their voices. Then what empowerment of women should we talk about when the reality is so grim?

From time immemorial India has predominantly been a patriarchal society. Man occupied a prominent place in every sphere of life leaving woman as a fragile creature to depend upon him for everything beginning from her existence to her sustenance. In such a circumstance, a woman's struggle in a male dominated society can easily be fathomed. She was considered good for nothing when it came to do something intellectual or artistic. Going to school or reading and writing were not something she was capable of. Her only work was to bring forth children, rear them up and look after household works. Operating with such background, it was inconceivable that women were able to think, study or able to make decisions, could express themselves in the form of speaking or writing. Women in India are, by and large, victims of social, economic and political exploitation. Thanks to the British rule in India, it became a blessing in disguise for women as it has given them an opportunity to obtain formal education which helped them in later stages to fight for their rights and protest against the injustice meted out to them in the patriarchal set up. The social reformers Raja Rammohan Roy, Jyothiba Phule and the likes believe that if society has to be transformed it is imperative to uphold the dignity of women and their emancipation is obligatory rather than imaginative. Then only one can think about the empowerment of women. Women empowerment occurs at various levels within sociological, psychological, political, cultural, familial and economic spheres of life.

Empowerment is a multidimensional process which enables an individual or a group of individuals to realize their full potentiality and power in all spheres of life and it gives authority to a person or persons to challenge a difficult situation and come out of it successfully. It gives a person freedom in decision making. In women empowerment, women become more capable of organizing themselves, increase their own potentialities, become self-reliant, assert their independence by making right choices, and control resources which assist them in taking up challenges and eliminates their own subordination. In the process of empowerment, women should consider their strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and move forward to unfold their own potential to achieve their goals through self-development. It is an ongoing dynamic process of creating awareness and capacity building which enhances women's abilities to change the structure and ideologies that keep them subordinate.

The Vedas, the Puranas and the Upanishads are the mirrors that reflect the glorious past of Indian society: its history, its civilization, its language and literature, philosophy and theology. The Vedic tradition has held a high regard for the qualities of a woman who is portrayed as the feminine embodiment of virtues, qualities and powers. Around 300 BC the status of women began to decline. The Manusmriti has played a major role in imposing severe restrictions on women's activities and status. From 500 AD to 1800 AD more Smritis and Puranas were compiled which further degraded the existence of women. Woman was seen primarily as wife, mother and a sex object. A woman's role, as an individual thinker or one capable of articulating her ideas, was unthinkable. In case she did express her thoughts and feelings, they were overlooked as though they amounted to nothing. These are some of the reasons the women refrained themselves as intellectual writers who can contribute a thought provoking idea in a male dominated ambience. Women writers like Ghosha, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maithreyi, Apala, Romasha, Brahmavadini, wrote short lyrics of devotional fervor and with a spirit of dedication and utmost sincerity. Behind their mystic and metaphysical presentation, one finds a divine sadness in their writings as they depicted every wound imposed by life on women.

The dawn of the new era of modern Indian literature reignited the minds of the writers. In the writings of this time, the impact of Western civilization, the rise of political consciousness, and the change in society was perceptible. A large number of writers made synthesis between Indianization and Westernization in their search for a national ideology. In the meantime, the Indian feminism too advanced by the stimuli of Western feminism, however it took slightly different route from that of the West. All these attitudes were combined to bring about the renaissance in 19th century India. Reformers supported female education in India, believing that social evils could be eliminated through the education of the women. Literature now enthused to the downtrodden and the exploited. Likewise the woman has been a focal point of many literary works, she is no longer a paragon of virtue and chastity to the extolled poets and philosophers. Arising political and social conscious in a fertile milieu have brought them out into the open protest against discrimination, dowry, rape and exploitation. The woman in Indian novel now reflects the shift in the sensibility as a writer and reader. The impact of the English Literature reflected in the regional literatures of the subcontinent introduced several important changes in women's personal and professional life. Indian women writers gave a new dimension to the Indian literature, in that they vented their deep seated feelings by way of art and literature. Contemporary writers like, Anita Desai, ManjuKapur, ShashiDeshpande, Shobha De, JhumpaLahiri, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth PravarJhabvala, Krishna Udayasankar, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy etc. have challenged the society for metamorphosis of women's status.

When the novelists try to draw the attention of the readers to the sufferings of the people and their struggle for survival in the colonized society, they present the variety and complexity of the country's culture. They project the culture of India that is reflected in the mode of life of the people – their thought processes and outlook on life and their needs, aims and aspirations. Since the writers have been aware that India historically has her own cultural identity, they regard it their duty to project the image of India by not only transmitting her own cultural identity but also by creating an awareness of this identity in the minds of her own people and the rest of the world. This quest for identity makes man conscious of the history of his country. He feels belongingness to the society he has been living in and he becomes an integral part of the evolutionary process of the country. National movements, industrial growth, egalitarian protest, social reform and political ideologies make a man conscious of his individual self who is engulfed in the cultural conflict that has arisen due to the western influence. As he is aware of the influence of economic changes and industrialization on the community, on the class structure, on the old relations among occupations and professions and above all on family ties, he finds it hard to come to terms with his existing life. The changes under the wave of colonial culture influences in family ties and community bonds in both urban and rural areas make the colonized fight and preserve a sense of identity.

When the colonized thinks of preserving his identity he has no other option but to fight –fight for his rightful place in the society that has hitherto suppressed him to the core. But protest is not as easy as it seems to be. When the colonized protests against the colonizer, the colonizer does not keep quiet. He uses all means to suppress his overt resistance with brutal force that he has in his hands. In course of time the resistance of the colonized is taken into consideration and his marginalized voice is heard. The colonizer finds this resistance difficult to combat. The colonized has learnt to raise his voice and to get the work done with his powerful resistance. But the same cannot be said in the case of women in India. Their centuries long subjection has made them so passive that they have to accept life with all its hardships. They are the subalterns, the marginalized voices which are not even heard. For centuries women have not learned to see themselves because the mirrors they look into do not reflect them. They reflect the male idea of a woman whether she is married or single. The mirrors reflect the men in their lives who can be either father or brother or husband confining woman behind purdah. When man can fight for the freedom that was denied to him, does not a woman have the right to protest against her subjectivity? Is she courageous enough to achieve the

higher goals of life? Is she conscious enough of her status in the patriarchal society as a human being and try to improve her lot? Or does she take her life as it comes treating it as part of her 'karma' or destiny?

It is only in the recent decades that women have consciously started exploring their emotional responses in shaping their identities. In the Indian freedom struggle, women were 'allowed' to participate in fighting for their country's freedom; in other words the freedom of 'man'. The psychologists view women's protests as deriving from a neurotic dissatisfaction with their ordained lot. Helene Duetsch remarks that "They (women) often participate in violent anonymous protests and join revolutionary movements. Most of the time they unconsciously protest against their own fate. By identifying themselves with the socially oppressed of the non-possessing class, they take up a position against their own unsatisfying role" (1973, 298). Once that political freedom is achieved, woman is again marginalized, her voice is not heard; in fact, she has become a victim of double colonization; previously colonized by the British, and now by the patriarchal system. In this sense, women are the real colonized with political freedom giving absolute power only to one part of the once colonized sect, that is men, and that freedom did not do justice to women in any way. They are further buried in their inner sanctums; they are never allowed to disentangle from the chains of andro-centric society. Independence or freedom is nothing but a mimetic discourse for them because it only sees a mere restructuring of power, shifting from the British colonizer to the Indian colonizer, without any radical change in it. As Krishna Sharma puts it: "... a lot of average women still suffer from the evils of child marriage, widowhood, dowry and divorce. As a wife, she is still a slave, who satisfies the sexual lust of the husband, as a mother, she bears children only to continue the family lineage in lieu of bread and butter"(1995: 9).

Indian English fiction depicts with equal passion the emancipation of women who are no longer the quintessential traditional women of Vedic lineage, but are now the empowered women asserting their identity. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes that "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways, but they do not succeed in living completely the life of a human being" (1979: 30). In *A Doll's House* when Nora bangs the door and steps into the night as she becomes aware of "her duty to herself", she awakens to the realities of the doll's house where she has been treated as no better than an object – a posture in the house who does her duty to her husband and children. By banging the door, Ibsen's Nora opens the door to the life of freedom and prepares the way for women all over the world to think about their place in family and society and also about their own identity. The woman who has been the focal point of bringing up children, of looking after her man, of nurturing familial and social relationships, of maintaining social values, suddenly awakens to intense introspection and discovers her status of 'non-being' in her family and society.

No doubt, the awakening of woman has been there, but rising to the full stature of being an emancipated human is still going on. But, in spite of all the hindrances in her way, this awakened woman earnestly desires to assert her individuality as a human being on par with her male counterpart. She awakens with a new sensibility and sensitivity which is essentially Indian. In spite of being shackled by traditions, outdated crumbling family and marriage laws of divorce, adoption, dowry, rape, inheritance and sexual exploitation, she is intensely eager to assert her individuality and self-esteem. This awakened woman is capable of revolting and demanding a place for herself in the andro-centric society. She does not want to play second fiddle to men despite a plethora of unequal restrictions, customs and laws. When she protests these socio-political evils persisting in the society, her resistance becomes socio-political like that of Meera, Mohini, Kajoli, Lekha, Gowri, Rukmani and many others, to name only a few. According to ShanthaKrishnaswamy,

The woman in the Indian novel now reflects the shift in the sensibility of the writer as well as the reader. She is no longer the paragon of virtue and chastity to be extolled by poets and philosophers. She is the symbol of imagination, of sensibility itself, of nature arraigned versus the forces abroad actively denaturing humanity The woman has now become the perfect image of the artist's insecurity. Her isolation, fear, bewilderment, vulnerability and sense of acute violation; potential and actual; are all mirrored through her conscience (1984: 3-4).

Anand's *Gauri*, who has been subjected to untold miseries and humiliations at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law, refuses to be treated like a cow. She comes out as a newly liberated woman. She protests against the injustice done to her. When she reaches home after being thrown away from her in-laws' house, she is sold by her own mother to a lecherous Seth when the mother has no other option left to choose between Gauri and the cow. With the help of Colonel Mahindra, she reaches her husband's house only to be further humiliated when her husband insists that she prove her chastity and innocence. It is at this juncture the woman in her rebels. She disentangles the Sita myth that engulfs her. "She waves her head to forget Sita and thought of the road to the town" (Anand, 1976: 214). Her acquaintance with modern urban world opens new vistas and horizons of hope. Now, instead of looking down to earth, she looks to the sun to draw substance and that gesture itself is an indication of her unbroken spirit and unmitigated will. Her confrontation with the age-old societal norms and restrictions shows her quest for identity and her questioning of male authority, thus asserting her individuality. It is in this restrictive context that the women's relentless endeavour to establish their separate identity and assert their individuality becomes all the more arresting. To achieve this, to carve out their identity, women often traverse onto the path of confrontation. Confrontation is not an attribute that is conveniently associated with a woman; hence its enhanced significance in the present context.

The writers as staunch crusaders of social equality, does not confine themselves solely to the projection of the suppression of women. They maketheir women to fight for their deliverance. Since the woman has seen man fighting for his freedom from the colonizer and its positive outcome, she understands her futile existence in the patriarchal society. In the beginning all women accept the old mythological iconic presentation of their class as subservient, self-sacrificing, chaste and devoted to family, but as time passes, they emerge as the strongest statements of female resistance to the traditional structures of patriarchy. Bhattacharya's women, after being subjected to suppression, protest against their victimized state. Kajoli in *So Many Hungers* rises in protest against her subjection. In fact, ChamanNahal regards her as the one character that can be studied from the feminist angle: "*So Many Hungers*! is a good feminist novel if read that way. His character, Kajoli, shows great courage in the face of all odds, and is really not dependent on anyone, neither on her grandfather, nor on her husband. She depends in the way we are connected to people.... In this respect, it is a great novel" (1991: 19).

Woman's power can rightly be defined as an individual's right to make decisions about particular aspects of her life in the society. When a person from the marginalized society raises his voice against suppression, he creates a space for himself and his fellow brethren within the confines of his location. He tries to shrug off the inherited burden with much greater energy in an assertive way. He asserts his individuality by making his voice heard. He understands his power and resists the colonial authority with all his might thus consolidating his power. Women, who have been bound completely to various chains – physical, social and moral – find it hard to come to terms with their changed position. Slowly, they start making room for themselves, stretching the limits a slight bit here, a little bit there, and in the process they enlarge the circle of their activity considerably. They adopt certain strategies which vary from one context to another, from one person to another, from utter conformity to the given norms to open defiance: "Although women could not rewrite the rules that structured their lives, they were extremely creative in crafting a space from within the prevailing gender system that gave them meaning, solace and dignity" (Dorothy Ko, 1994:

89). Even passive conformity to the existing norms and good motherhood has its victories, "... earning for the woman a space that bordered on the family's respect and therefore a degree of empowerment; the power that a young wife would exercise over her husband through either the denial or the giving of access to her body; the power of a fecund mother over the household even as her own sexual appeal receded (Mukhia, 2002: 64).

The idea of woman power that is rooted in the exercise of power to end male domination is often discussed with little result. It is also said that women need to exercise real power in order to reconstruct the entire society for the benefit of the great majority and for the advancement of humanity. It does not mean that obtaining power in the existing social structure will give women immense power to end sexual oppression. It may allow them to gain some material privilege, control over their destiny and the destiny of others but it will not end male domination. "Since women have been defined as the nurturers of the young and bearers of the cultural values of love and co-operation and yet, in the real world they have been generally excluded from the sources of power" (Gupta, 1992: 27), in order to survive in the male dominated society, they are forced to create a space for themselves, thus exuding power. Women, even the most oppressed in the society, do exercise some power with which they can resist the advances of the privileged classes. Though they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances, they exercise this basic personal power which is an act of resistance and strength. Many poor and exploited women would have been unable to develop positive self-concepts if they had not exercised their power to reject the oppressive forces that have colonized her till date. Without coming out of the confines of the close circuit of familial relationship, women can exercise immense power and thereby leave their mark on family as well as on the society.

It is true that the strategies the women adopt are confined within the given structure of power relations; within women's historically limited spheres of power, but it is precisely in this limited sphere that one finds their ingenuity in accommodating themselves in a more meaningful sense without overthrowing the hierarchical structure of authority. More often, women derive immense power out of abject conformity to the accepted social, moral or religious norms. This power equips the women to enlarge their space and legitimize their position in the family as well as in the immediate social community. Some women act in accordance with the ideal that gives them certain advantages including protection and support as well as social respect. Their growing sense of self-identity makes them strong enough to show their power and create a space for themselves in the society. In their revolt against exploitation and suppression begins their search for identity. Figuratively speaking, while the colonizers look for bonds with the new land, the colonized look for freedom of the old land; the former adopting surrender and the latter revolting in a number of ways. The revolts of the women who are the victims of double colonization arise from the strength they acquire after they become aware of their power and space.

The women writers of 21st century present the psychological dilemma of women in this concrete, corporate jungle who are torn between adherence to the norms of the society and break familial bondage. For the modern woman, the real freedom seems to be in rejecting the institution of marriage and enter into living relationships that have absolutely no chains. But what she does not understand is the fact that here also she remains a victim: she is left with the burden of looking after the kids when the man she lived with absconds leaving her to her fate. Hence in this changing scenario of globalization, modernization and spread of multiculturalism, women have to be physically alert, mentally strong, economically independent, and assert themselves finding a place and space in the annals of the history of the human race.

Conclusion:

The women in Indian English fiction, though victimized on all levels, finally emerge as strong characters exercising power over their male counterparts. In spite of their innumerable sufferings, they come out with renewed vigour and strength. They exercise their power as daughters, wives, mothers and also as responsible members of the society. They create a space for themselves not only in the family but also in the society by extending themselves to all who are closely or distantly related to them. Almost all these novels are realistic portrayals of society – its successes and failures, ifs and buts, and above all, a confrontation between the high and the low, the rough and the sublime. Most of the writers do not wish their women to fight for their rights leaving the portals of their families and society. They are very much a part of the close-knit family from which they cannot be separated however much the extent of exploitation is. They want their women to come out of the suppressed position and understand their power to protest against their suffering and raise voice so that they can face the world with head held high and print their mark in the family and in the society.

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