



## **‘Self-fulfilment’ through ‘Vulnerability’ as witnessed in Select Indian Women’s Novels**

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The concept of ‘vulnerability’ plays a dual role theoretically and practically as a base of ethics in research. The problem of gender equality has been the topic of discussion in the pre- and post-colonial Indian society for eons. It is present in practically all communities and religions, regardless of caste, creed, or location. It is unavoidable, particularly for women in the community. From the beginning, women have been subjected to harsh treatment under the pretext of bizarre religious beliefs and bespoke satanic moral codes. They are being oppressed both in their homes and in the community. When it comes to marginalized women, the severity of abuse and torture increases double. Subaltern women are in a more precarious position than women from other castes and classes. This essay attempts to highlight the sad and humorous ways that Indian English fiction portrays Dalit women's social servitude. This study also highlights the fact that the works of Indian women writers is significant in making society aware of women's demands and desires, and in providing a medium for self-expression and self-fulfilment-the strongest and best in themselves by being vulnerable.

Keywords: vulnerability, women, gender equality, moral, code of conduct, subaltern, self-expression, self-fulfilment.

### FULL ARTICLE

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their homes and in the community. When it comes to marginalized women, the severity of abuse and torture increases double. Subaltern women are in a more precarious position than women from other castes and classes.

The writings of Indian women writers have played a vital role in drawing attention to the needs of women in society and in giving them a platform to express and fulfill their own potential by being vulnerable and real. Women started to harness the power of the pen as literacy rates rose quickly. However, the women's journey was exceedingly challenging since they had to overcome long-standing male supremacy, taboos, and deeply ingrained cultural ideas. From the prehistoric era to the present, there has been conflict between two opposing sexes. In the first section, women's writing in general is criticized, while in the second, women's contributions to Indian literature in English are highlighted.

The consensus is that Jane Austen's novels, which became popular literature in the second decade of the eighteenth century, are roughly three hundred years old at the time of their publication. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* addressed the themes of gender, race, and enslavement prior to Jane Austin. Her poetry is based on a 17th-century sexual encounter described from the perspectives of women. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft examines male authors such as Rousseau, Milton, and Pope. In India, women have been writing for over 2600 years, but it all began when these women began to challenge the stereotypes of women that male writer perpetuated, using their writing to do so.

Women's writing takes shape by giving fresh opportunities for female authors and novelists to carry on the literary tradition of women. It is past time for the literary community to acknowledge women writers as authors of, for, and by humankind rather than classifying them in a distinct category and treating them as though their works are exclusively about women and their problems with anguish, distress, worry, and rage. Women writers have recently broadened their perspectives by addressing contemporary human rights, environmental, energy, equality, justice, human rights, water, peace, racism, violence, fundamentalism, and religious bias, among other concerns. As Chaman Nahal opines his views regarding feminism in India:

Both the awareness of woman's position in society as one of disadvantage or in generality compared with that of man and a desire to remove those is advantages. (Nahal: 1991:17)

Although the use of women as subjects in Indian fiction written in English is not new, the novelists' approaches are unquestionably distinct. Women in Indian fiction was shown as ideal beings with many virtues in the books published in the 1960s, but this was not the case in the later works. Women are well-educated, aware of their rights and privileges, and they expect to be treated with respect in society. Unquestionably, western feminist theories popularized by authors such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952) have had a significant impact in recent years. Indian women authors have successfully attempted to defy established literary and social conventions because of these influences.

Although authors such as Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha de, Bharati Mukherjee, and a few others initially denied any kind of feminist bias in their works, a thorough examination reveals a strong feminist intent because women's issues are central to their stories. Indian women writers can no longer be considered the only possession of their homeland; the world is the rightful owner of their skill and creations. Beginning with authors such as Sarojini Naidu, dubbed the "nightingale of India," Indian women have been expressing their genuine and sincere concerns about the state of India through their writing in English. Feminist topics have been skilfully employed at the national and regional levels by writers such as Nayantara Sahgal, Rama Mehta, Kamla Das.

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Indian literature has benefited greatly and notably from the contributions of women writers. One of the most well-known authors in India is Arundhati Roy. When Roy received the Booker Prize in 1997 for her first book, *The God of Small Things*, which explored about love has been translated into over forty languages and is about love in Kerala. She was raised in Delhi, India, where she studied architecture after being born in 1959 in Shillong, India. She is also the author of various nonfiction works, such as *Things That Can and Cannot Be Said*, which she co-wrote with John Cusack, *Field Notes on Democracy*, *Marching with the Comrades*, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, and *The End of Imagination*. Roy won the Ambedkar Sudar award in 2015, the Norman Mailer Prize for Distinguished Writing in 2011, and the Lannan Foundation Cultural Freedom Prize in 2002. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy's second book, was published in 2017. It tackles some of the worst incidents in modern Indian history. Its successful worldwide distribution and impressive media coverage further illustrate

The daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Nayantara Sahgal, is one of the authors of Indian Writing in English. She was therefore near the seat of power during both the Indira years and India's struggles with governance after independence. She was the 1986 Sahitya Academy Award for English winner for her novel *Rich Like Us*. This book takes place in New Delhi, specifically a month following the Emergency Proclamation. It is a wry, sensitive, and masterfully written analysis of India and its people following independence. It's an engrossing and colourful tapestry of India's past and present, with numerous unique narratives and voices combined into one. The narrative revolves around Rose the Cockney memsahib, a family that neither of them. Nayantara Sahgal's story captures some of the grandeur and foolishness of the Indian experience in all its humour and sorrow. One of the first female Indian writers of English to achieve widespread fame, her fiction focuses on the elite of India reacting to the crises brought on by political upheaval.

Novelist and short story writer Shashi Deshpande started off writing short stories and has since written twelve novels, four children's books, and nine collections of short stories. She is the recipient of three honours for her works, including the Sahitya Academy Award (1989) for *That Long Silence*. Her other books include *Ships that Pass*, *A Matter of Time*, *Moving On*, *In the Country of Deceit*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Small Remedies*. *Shade Play* is her most recent book. Many of her novels and short tales have been translated into European and

Indian languages. She has translated two plays and her father's memoirs from Kannada into English, Adya Rangachari (Shriranga), as well as a novel by Gauri Deshpande.

In addition to fiction, she has authored other pieces on a range of topics, including language, literature, women's writing, feminism, and Indian writing in English. These pieces have been collected into a book titled "Writing from the Margin." She has received invitations to give lectures at universities in India and other countries, as well as to take part in several literary festivals and conferences. Through her works, she addresses issues of gender inequality, feminine sensitivity, geocentric worldview, and the dilemma faced by Indian women who must choose between two opposing identities. Her focus has been on the psychological pain and oppressions experienced by frustrated housewives, who are forced to repress their inner turmoil to survive the inevitable existential crisis that confronts women.

She is among the authors of novels you should read seriously. She never falls for ploys. There's a serious tone to the voice, taking the narrative and delivery style extremely seriously. Among the writers with minimal posturing is her. Women are typically the main characters in her works. Readers have labelled her a feminist writer because of this. She has frequently voiced objections to this title. She deals with the themes of geo-centric vision, feminine sensitivities, gender differences, predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities through her works. She has focused on the psychological suffering, oppressions of the frustrated housewife whose only option was to suppress the storm within the inevitable existential predicament of women.

A study of women's issues in Indian women's fiction shows a lot of women who have been vanquished, "disempowered and crushed by the forces they have been struggling against." Ammu in the amazing writing of Arundhati Roy. In 1977's *The God of Small Things*, the protagonist fought for her life by marrying outside her caste and leaving her father's home, a repressive stronghold of male dominance. When she went to Velutha to satisfy her physical and emotional cravings, she threw out all notions of caste, class, and feminine modesty. Her world is shattered into pieces—her partner is killed, her son is taken away from her, and life is denied to her. Here, the "empowered" lady is brutally killed for the crime of rejecting the "undemanding roles" that society has assigned her as if to make fun of her desperate attempts to make a name for herself. Here she is, the "empowered" woman. The 'empowered' woman is here brutally extinguished for the crime of moving beyond the 'undemanding roles' allotted to her by society.

Shashi Deshpande avows her disinclination to be branded a feminist; but probes the role of the middle-class Indian woman in her precarious balancing of tradition and modernity in an existence within patriarchal value expectations. Her protagonists continually encounter the problems of space. They struggle to preserve their identity and to regain their self-hood even as they submit to society's compulsion to assume gender roles. They do not break away from familial responsibilities. Even when they jeopardise their yearning for self-fulfilment and always return to the fold of the family and the allotted roles within the patriarchal framework. The liberation sanctioned is in the form of an inner consciousness of oneself and the transformation effected is emotional and rarely, even spiritual. This is the case with Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988). In *The Binding Vine* (1993), woman's sexual harassment within and without marriage, and poetry

as a means of self-expression for the stifled woman, are thematised. The Protagonist Urmila who takes up Cudgels against the society for Kalpana — the rape-victim-provokes hostility within her own family towards the new role of liberator and rebel she has donned.

Indian woman's liberation is restricted not so much by external forces as by the in-built restraints and inhibitions within which she is trapped. Kalpana's uneducated mother Sakutai prefers silencing the atrocity against her daughter to punishing the villain. Inhibitions prescribed by society are too hard to overcome. Sexual violence generates hostility towards the female victim jeopardising the reputation of the family and ruining the prospects for marriage of the other girls. The stigma associated with rape tarnishes the innocent victim rather than the criminal. The experience Meera narrates through her dairies and poems in *The Binding Vine* is another instance of the silence imposed by woman on herself even as she herself rages for an outlet. Narration itself is here an act of liberation. It however remains an inscription in the void, unnoticed and unheard. In the case of the rejected woman, Anu in *A Matter of Time* (1996), the humiliation of rejection by the husband after several years of an apparently happy married life crushes her dignity. The secure family life is toppled. It is a painful struggle to regain poise and face the hostile forces of the society. Encountering the questions of her children and relatives is a terrible ordeal. But we realise that Anu wouldn't succumb to defeat. She becomes self-sufficient, writes a play for the theatre, and is recognised as an effective woman writer. Though Anu is denied fulfilment in her new independent existence by the terrible fate that snatches her life away, in her,

Shashi Deshpande shows woman rising like a phoenix out of the ashes of her married life. Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* struggle to regain their self-hood without breaking away from the patriarchal structure of marriage and family. Urmila's excursions into the male world of social protest and her involvement in Kalpana's case are almost viewed as transgressions of female rights in the *Binding Vine*. She is positioned within the framework of the family. The empowerment of these women largely derives from a recognition of their own inner spiritual strength or the hidden potential in their individual selves. No act of outright liberation or break away from the structure of the society is permitted by the author.

The protagonist's mother-in-law, Parvati Amma, sets an example of fearless self-assertion in Gita Hariharan's 1992 novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* by pursuing her spiritual ambition and stepping outside the family circle that would confine her to her roles as wife and mother. Hers is an agonizing declaration of the freed self. Mother Sita of the main character is another fearless and self-reliant woman who has always acted according to her own rules or roles. Devi is liberated from the constraints of feminine role-playing by going back to her mother and her veena. She has elevated her artistic originality with this displaying internalized patriarchal beliefs.

The limitations imposed on the characters may have been written by the authors. It is society's preference to ignore the issues of women's empowerment and their demand for space. Indian women are portrayed in their works in a way that makes a strong stance against the patriarchal system. Most female writers have restricted their work to the educated middle class, ignoring the urgently needed attention from the grassroots. In Indian English fiction, Sakutai and Kalpana may be the only voices of the marginalized lower classes.

These pieces signal the rise of the new Indian woman, one who is aware of her otherness, feels the need to speak up, carves out a place for herself, and is eager to fill in the blanks on the social map with her image. It is noteworthy that very few works of literature by the legendary three of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, with the wonderful exception of Mulk Raj Anand's *Gowri*, show compassion for the underappreciated species. Male authors' later works also seldom feature women as the main subject. In India, women's empowerment won't materialize unless their fight for identity and their strong need for self-expression are consistently portrayed. Women authors need to see behind their admirable middle-class lives at the miserable lot of lower-class women, the doubly underprivileged, who have never tried to speak out for themselves.

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