



*Journal of Advances and  
Scholarly Researches in  
Allied Education*

*Vol. V, Issue X, April-2013,  
ISSN 2230-7540*

**REVIEW ARTICLE**

**THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN IN INDO-ANGLIAN  
FICTION**

# The Portrayal of Woman in Indo-Anglian Fiction

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Woman has been portrayed in myriad roles - as a mother and protector, woman as inspirer and cherisher, woman as the motivating primal force-shakti protecting good and destroying evil, woman has been envisioned as a chaste, suffering wife, and also as charmer or lurer. These are some of the facets familiar in literature. The image of woman in Indo-Anglian novel is complex and multifaceted. Generally, She is presented as the heroine of the novel. Indo-Anglian fiction reflects how a girl is unwelcomed in the family and explores the reasons behind the traditional view. The same exploration is presented in the fiction of 'Big Three'—Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, who turned their attention to the realistic problems of the poor as well as the treatment of woman. Later on, the woman writers, like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, etc., explored the area of women's cause and put forth their writings from the feministic point of view.

Mulk Raj Anand had been too deeply involved in championing the cause of the underdog in society to pay attention to the travails of women. The women in Mulk Raj Anand's work is in an important character. In his novels, Anand shows how motherhood bestows a peculiar dignity of woman.

Untouchable (1935) is, perhaps the masterpiece novel of Mulk Raj Anand. Anand's main concern is with the suffering of an untouchable boy, Bakha, growing into manhood in an orthodox and caste-ridden society, but at the same time he provides a valuable sight into the lives of girls as well.

As K.R.S. Iyenger observes:

"It was Anand's aim to stray lower than even Sarat and Premchand"<sub>1</sub>

In this novel Bakha and Sohini are honest, hardworking and graceful. Though Bakha is at the core of the novel and Sohini is viewed from the outside, she comes off very much alive. She appears as meek, patient and courageous. She has to suffer insult from morning till night.

One day when Sohini goes to fetch water, at the well, Gulabo, the washer-woman hates the very sight of her innocent face. Gulabo says,

"Go back home: there is no one to give you water here!

There are so many of us ahead of you."<sub>2</sub>

When Gulabo taunts her, curses her, Sohini says, "Please don't abuse me. I haven't said anything to you."<sub>3</sub>

At that time Gulabo repudiates,"you annoy me with your silence. Eater of dung and drinker of urine! Bitch of a sweeper woman! I will show you how to insult one old enough to be your mother."<sub>4</sub>

When Sohini goes to sweep the temple courtyard, a priest tries to molest her. He holds her round breasts from behind, but when she resists, he starts shouting "polluted, polluted."

Today's contemporary Indian English novelists are writing for the masses using the theme of feminism, which not only interests the readers but also affects them. Through the world, feminism has generated interest amongst the people and India is no exception. Feminism is thoroughly accomplished through the work of the Indian English Novelists.

Feminism does not particularly talk of equality and rights of a woman but it is more about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts. The main cause for the dissatisfaction of the women in today's society is the superior attitude of the men. Throughout, the women have suffered in silence and feminism talks exactly about that. Women have affirmed their fundamental rights and have realized where they exactly went wrong. Indian English Novelists have frankly highlighted this concept. Authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya have actually used the various aspects of the male dominated society as their main theme. However, the concept of feminism is handled in restricted conditions by the authors. Today, Indian societies have broadly accepted Feminism keeping aside the patriarchal predominance to an extent.

In India, Feminism is looked at as a practical effort. Right from the past, women have faced several problems and they have been exploited by the men and the society at large. They have been constantly

struggling to find a meaningful and respectable position for themselves. Women have always been portrayed as subservient and passive. With the introduction of Western education and with the growth of women's institutions, things had begun to change. It led to the commencement of women education in India. All these developments had helped in inculcating the sense of individuality among the women. These changes helped in developing the Feminism trend in English novel's pattern in India. This concept was misinterpreted as womanhood movement in India. Feminist ideologies strongly influence the Indian literature and English novels. The concept of Feminist ideologies had precisely come from the West. Today's women are educated and economically independent. They search for their own identity. All these changes in images of Indian women are portrayed in the write-ups of the contemporary Indian Novelists.

There are several Indian novelists who produced novels that revealed the truth of Indian societies and how women are being treated here. They present the aspects of feminism with authentic and impressive language. The struggle of an Indian Woman for her true identity clearly emerges in the Indian English Novels. Rama Mehta's, '*Inside the Haveli*', Nayantara Sahgal's '*Rich Like Us*', Gita Haricharan's '*The Thousand Faces of Night*' are some of the novels that uses this theme of Feminism and highlights the status of women in Indian Societies. Anita Desai's - *Cry, The Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer, or 'Voices in the City'* are some of the examples of feministic theory based English novels. Kamala Markandaya and Kamala Das are two well renowned feminist writers of India.

The Indian English Novels based on Feminism and its different aspects depict the position of woman in general. She has been portrayed as the key figure of Indian families and at the same time she has been projected as the subject of suffering, domestic slavery and suppression. The hidden thoughts, feelings and the realization of woman are found in the Feministic Oriented English Novels of India.

Shauna Singh Baldwin, who won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Caribbean and Canada region last year, has said in one of her interviews ;

We are the third generation of Indian Writing in English. The first were Writers like R.K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya, who were writing from India. Next came the Writers who migrated to the West : Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee, Meera Sayal. Now its writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and me, who are Indian but born elsewhere. We are truly Diaspora Writers because though I had a spell of schooling in India, I have never held an Indian Passport.

(Quoted from *Shashi Deshpande : A*

*Critical Spectrum*, Ed., TMJ, Inder Mohan)

When we look at the growth of Indian English Novel, we discern three important stages of its development. The first major thrust came in the mid – 1930's when the big trio – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao appeared on the scene and made the real beginning of the Indian English Novel. The mid – 1950's and 1960's mark the second important stage when writers like Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Kamala Marakandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahgal came out with their works that changed the face of Indian English Novel. While with Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya the focus was on the socio-economic cultural world of the characters, with writers like Arun Joshi and Anita Desai, the internal world of their characters became equally, if not more, important. The appearance of women novelists added a new dimension to Indian English Novel. They, with their feminine sensibility, opened up a new vista of human nature and man-woman relationship. The political novels of Nayantara Sahgal's established this genre in Indian English literature.

The third important stage in the development of Indian English Novel came in the beginning of the 1980's. It was then that Indian English Writing received International Recognition mainly through writers of Indian Origin who have settled abroad. A new landmark was created in 1981 when Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize for his novel, *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* brought both the Booker Prize for 1997 and a great deal of money for her. Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer award and Shauna Singh Baldwin's Commonwealth award were new feathers in the Cap. All these things have established beyond that Indian English Writers have arrived in a big way.

The new breed of novelists, including writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Gosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Deshpande, Vikram Chandra, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapoor, have silenced the voice of supercilious criticism.

In the later novel, *The Old Woman and the Cow*, (1960) Mulk Raj Anand portrays the Indian peasant's wife who consciously rebels against the Sita-image. She tries to free herself and live an independent life. The novel opens with an elaborate description of Gauri's marriage ceremony; Gauri's entire life is a sad tale of suffering. She suffers under several oppressive forces. The crumpled atmosphere of the joint family does not make room for the free love between her and her husband, Kesara - Mother-in-law keeps a strong hold on Panchi, her husband, and continues to give ill treatment to Gauri. When Panchi goes to Peplan Kalan to own Gauri, she muses over "the prospect of the prize of a girl—a girl he could fold in his arms at night and kick during the day, who would adorn his house and help him with the work on the land".<sup>6</sup> Panchi hopes that Gauri

must be obedient for obedience is the most essential quality of a wife.

The novel presents an Indian rustic girl being transformed from a docile 'cow' into a tigress under the impact of modernity and being virtually reborn as a result of it. Thus, Gauri's journey of a meek, mild, obedient woman from traditional platform to the platform of modernity.

R.K. Narayan's novels offer a traditional image of the Indian woman, submissive, modest, humble, keeping her long silence most patiently. Thus, Margayya in *Financial Career* is portrayed as a meek and submissive woman. Similarly, Savitri in *The Dark Room* as well a highly docile, helpless and most depressed female character. However, Narayan has also created the vibrant and radical characters like Daisy and Rosie in his novels *The Painter of Signs* and *The Guide* respectively. Shanta Krishnaswamy says:

She is unique in that she is able to cast aside all culturally imposed feeling of guilt and shame on womanhood and sex. Narayan, however, in depriving her of personal fulfilment in marriage and domesticity, warns us about the excesses of rampant feminism which would lead to a destructive and deathlike androgynous blurring of the two sexes.<sup>7</sup>

Rosie rises up to grow into an emancipated woman, independent and well satisfied as a highly reputed stage dancer.

The women in Raja Rao's fictions are reduced to mere automatons. In Hindu society as well as many more cultures which are practiced in India, almost all of them more or less have denied woman the possibility of being a "SHE", a person capable of achieving individuation. She is non person and as described in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*: "Woman should not be." Woman in Raja Rao's aspire for more, but end up feeling bitter like Saroja or Savitri, who dutifully plays the role as the wife of a government officer in *The Serpent and the Rope*. The woman in his novels are the victim of domestic injustice and tyrannical tradition, but he proposes no solution to their dilemma.

Raja Rao portrays a long range of women characters in his novel *Kanthapura* (1938). The women portrayed, most of them are widow. In the novel, there is lack of unity among characters, mostly women are averse to their own sex. The words of waterfall Venkamma against Rangamma is noteworthy:

Why should a widow, and a childless widow too have a big house like that?...that Shaven widow had not even the luck of having a bandicoot to call her own.<sup>8</sup>

In backward village, the life of a widow is hell. The folks cannot see her wearing a good saree or combing her hair in a style. This has been depicted in the character of Ratna, another widow:

That young widow, who not only went about the street like a boy, but even more her hair to the left like concubine, and she still kept her bangles, nose rings and earrings, and when she was asked why she behaved as though she had not lost her husband, she said that was nobody's business.<sup>9</sup>

In the character of Ratna there is the spirit of revolt against the age old traditional prejudices against the widow. She is sort of a female figure of the 'women's lib'.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya through her protagonist Rukmani proves that with the traditional role, she can accommodate her other roles as a human being, and not through alienation and self-laceration, but through expansion and communion a deeper self-knowledge can be obtained. The protagonist Rukmani has to undergo a series of travail and suffering.

To sum up the character of Rukmani, one can say that she is the most desperate, tragic and helpless of all. Misfortune chase her as a shadow one after the other but her sheer will power helps her overcome them every time. She states:

We have no money. My husband can till, and sow and reap with skill, but here there is no land. I can weave and spin or plait matting, but there is no money for spindle, cotton or fibre. Where shall a man, turn who has no money? Where can he go? Wide, wide world, but as narrow as coins in your hand. Like a tethered goat, son for and no father. Only money can make the rope stretch, only money.<sup>10</sup>

Anita Desai is a stalwart figure among Indo-Anglian novelists. The question that she takes up in her novels is the question of women's freedom. Her protagonists are highly intelligent and sensitive women who end up exhausted on the verge of mental crisis in their attempt to manage a home and children and find emotional fulfilment. Her women yearn for freedom. They are irritated by the shatter, over-protected life reserved for them and the condescending, discriminative attitude adopted towards them not by the society but also by the family. They are not treated at par with men. In lack of freedom and disparity with men they lose their psychic balance. When their predicament reaches a climax they usually resort to drastic step. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* is a highly sensitive, caring girl, married to an older man of twice her age, a detached, industrious, down-to-earth, lawyer Gautam. Gautam remains oblivious of her emotional and physical

needs. An average evening for Maya is hardly more than a “quite formal waiting.”<sup>11</sup> Their married life is punctured all among by “matrimonial silence.”<sup>12</sup> Maya feels defenseless and utterly alone in the company of her husband. She very often feels humiliated, she complains of being treated as a wild beast on a leash which induces in her “a humiliating sense of neglect.”<sup>13</sup> Even towards the end of the novel, she is seen moving about “like a being that is haunted.” It is no wonder that during all these years her sense of helplessness, loneliness deepens:

I had not escaped. The years had caught up, and now the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, her psychic problem is aggravated by her infatuation which drive in her a kind of schizophrenia. She describes herself as “a body without heart, a heart without body.” Lastly, her loneliness, ignorance by the husband lead her to a dire consequence with Gautam being pushed to his death by her.

Desai is obsessed with the theme of loneliness and isolation which becomes visible in the novel *Voices in the City* (1965). It presents the odyssey of two young women, Monisha and Amla, who are doomed to reside in Calcutta, the city of death. It delineates the inner climate of youthful despair and angst permeated by the quest of freedom and identity.

Monisha is intelligent but unfortunately diffident. She is married against her will to a blind moralist, “a rotund, minute minded and limited”<sup>15</sup> official who is addicted to quoting from Burke, Wordsworth, Gandhi and Tagore, who are the spokesmen of individual liberty.

Monisha is more unhappy on account of the denial of freedom to her. She longs to thrust her “head out of the window” but “the bars are closely set.” She leads the life of an individual captive. Her father, her husband and particularly her mother-in-law, all are hostile to individuality and sterility. She describes her plight in the following terms:

Why am I so sad ? Why am I so afraid ? ...they put me away in steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth in me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret.<sup>16</sup>

When Monisha realises that there is no escape from it, she becomes a “sleepwalker, ghost, some unknown dreaded entity.” She develops an incurable claustrophobia and commits suicide.

In the novels of Shobha De, most of her protagonists are from middle class background who move upward to socialite society and all of them find marriage stifling and dull. The men portrayed are unromantic, overwhelmingly possessive and slightly ridiculous as in *Second Thought*, *Starry Nights* and *Socialite*

*Evenings*. The women of Shobha De reject their husbands because heroines are romantic, sensual and sensitive. Her heroines take their husband as a thing of pleasure.

Shobha De’s heroines find themselves trapped in their marriage. In each of her novels we notice that the heroines establishes extra-marital relationship. At one place, she writes;

“Eventually, every relationship is a power-struggle, either on overt or subliminal level ..., control over the situation is a male prerogative over the centuries. Women’s destinies have been determined largely in that context alone... It is time they were made aware of their own potential and power.”

(Quoted from R.S. Pathak, “Feminist Concerns in Shobha De’s Fiction, Modern Indian Novel in English, N.D. Creative Books 1999, P. – 149)

Shashi Deshpande is an award winning Indian Novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Shiriranga. She was born in 1938 in Karnataka and educated in Bombay and Bangalore. She published her first collection of short stories in 1978 and her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in 1980. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel *That Long Silence*. Her works also include children’s books. Shashi Deshpande’s novels present a social world of many complex relationships. In her novels many men and women living together, journeying across life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. The old tradition bound world consists with the modern, creating unforeseen gaps and disruptions within the family fold. Women’s understanding becomes questionable, as the old patterns of behaviour no longer seem to be acceptable. These struggles become in tense of quests for self-definition, because it would not be possible to relate to others with any degree of conviction unless one is guided by a clarity about one’s own image and role. Shashi Deshpande has presented in her novels modern India women’s search for these definition about the self and society and the relationship that are central to women.

Shashi Deshpande’s heroines belong to the middle class society. They are all modern, educated, conscious and urban. All of them find marriage painful and tormenting like the protagonists of Anita Desai and Shobha De. But like them Deshpande’s heroines do not break away from their marriage-bonds, rather they try to make balance between tradition and modernity. All her heroines are career women. They try to make a balance between their family and career, seeing to it as far as possible, that their profession will not affect their married life.

A Shymla Narayan in her article “Shashi Deshpande” (in *Contemporary Novelists V* ed. 1991) gives the following account of Shashi Deshpande’s works.



Shashi Deshpande's first book was *The Legacy*, a collection of short stories, and since then she has published dozens of stories. The authentic recreation of India, the outstanding feature of her stories, is a distinct feature of her novels also. There is nothing sensational or exotic about her India – no Maharajahs or snake charmers. She does not write about the grinding poverty of the Indian masses; she describes another kind of deprivation – emotional. The woman deprived of love, understanding and companionship is the center of her work. She shows how traditional Indian society is biased against woman, but she recognizes that it is very often women who oppress their sisters, though their values are the result of centuries of indoctrination.

An early short story, "A Liberated Woman," is about a young woman who falls in love with a man of a different caste, and marries him in spite of parental opposition. She is intelligent and hardworking, and becomes a successful doctor, but her marriage breaks up because of her success. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande's first novel, seems to have grown out of this story. Sarita, the heroine, defies her mother to become a doctor, and defies caste restrictions by marrying the man she loves. Her husband Manu is a failure, and resents the fact that his wife is the primary breadwinner. She uses Boozy to advance her career and this further vitiates her relationship with Manu. Sarita goes to her parental home, but she cannot escape her past so easily. She realizes that her children and her patients need her, and finally reaches a certain clarity of thought: "All right, so I'm alone. But so's everyone else."

The next novel, *If I Die Today*, contains elements of detective fiction. The narrator, a young college lecturer, is married to a doctor, and they live on the campus of a big medical college and hospital. The arrival of Guru, a terminal cancer patient, disturbs the lives of the doctors and their families. Old secrets are revealed, two people murdered, but the tensions in the families is resolved after the culprit is unmasked. One of the memorable characters is Mriga, a 14 year old girl. Her father, Dr. Kulkarni, appears modern and westernized, yet he is seized by the Hindu desire for a son and heir, and never forgives Mriga for not being a son; her mother, too, is a sad, suppressed creature, too weak to give Mriga the support and love a child needs to grow up into a well balanced adult.

*Roots and Shadows* describes the break-up of a joint family, held together by the money and authority of an old aunt, a childless widow. When she dies, she leaves her money to the heroine, Indu, a rebel. Indu left home as a teenager to study in the big city, and is now a journalist; she has married the man of her choice. But she realizes that her freedom is illusory; she has exchanged the orthodoxy of the village home for the conventions of the "smart young set" of the city, where material well-being has to be assured by

sacrificing principles, if necessary. Indu returns to the house when her great-aunt dies after more than 12 years absence. As she attempts to take charge of her legacy, she comes to realize the strength and the resilience of the village women she had previously dismissed as weak.

Perhaps Deshpande's best work is her fifth novel, *That Long Silence*. The narrator Jaya, an upper-middle-class housewife with two teenage children, is forced to take stock of her life when her husband is suspected of fraud. They move into a small flat in a poorer locality of Bombay, giving up their luxurious house. The novel reveals the hollowness of modern Indian life, where success is seen as a convenient arranged marriage to an upwardly mobile husband with the children studying in "good" schools. The repetitiveness and sheer drabness of the life of a woman with material comforts is vividly represented, "the glassware that had to be kept spotless and dust-free, and those clothes, God, all those never-ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and ironed, so that they could be worn and washed and ironed once again. We get a glimpse of Hinduism in the numerous fasts observed by women for the well being of husbands, sons or brothers. Jaya's irritation at such sexist rituals is palpable - it is clear that she feels strongly about the ill-treatment of the girl-child in India. The narrow focus of the novel results in an intensity which is almost painful. All the characters, including Mohan, Jaya's husband are fully realized, though none of them, including the narrator Jaya are likable.

Deshpande usually has the heroine as the narrator, and employs a kind of stream-of-consciousness technique. The narrative goes back and forth in time, so the narrator can describe events with the benefit of hindsight. It would not be correct to term her a feminist, because there is nothing doctrinaire about her fiction. She simply portrays, in depth the meaning of meeting of being a woman in modern India. Exemplary of her worldview is *A Matter of Time*, her first novel published in the United States: it is the tale of a woman abandoned by a man. The woman is Sumi, who has three daughters; the man is her husband, a professor named Gopal; and her abandonment forces her to return to the family's home in Bangalore. The issues Sumi faces are not Indian problems; they are universal ones – not just the difficulties in her marriage, but the conflicts within her family as well.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists—Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru in *Dark Holds No Terrors*, Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Urmila in *The Binding Vine*, Savitribai and Leelabai in *Small Remedies*—are all career women. Her career women try to redefine

human relationship in view of the newly acquired professional status.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, there is a reference to woman, who, ill-treated by her in-laws, drowns herself in a well. In another instance, a woman is chained to peg by her in-laws in the cattle shed. Grieved at this, Saru desires to become economically and ideologically independent. Shashi Deshpande's career women are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equality between men and women but want to see that the right to an individual capabilities are realised in their own lives.

Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* becomes a doctor in order to be economically independent. She becomes a successful doctor and gains income and reputation, but ironically her professional success prompts her jealous husband to treat her brutally. On introspection, she realises that she is her own refuge. Her success as a doctor reinforces her feeling of self-esteem. In the end, she realises that her profession is her own and she will decide what to do with it. She is conscious. "my life is my own." She is fully aware that career is an essential part of her life and that she cannot sacrifice it in order to salvage her marriage. In fact, in moments of despair, it is her profession that has given necessary courage to face life and therefore it is indispensable for her. She succeeds in realising her selfhood through her profession. So she goes out to attend a patient. Saru proves that economically independent woman like her can bring change in the society and that women as individuals can have some significant control over their relationships and professions. Thus, Sumitra, Kukreti says in her article:

Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the journey of modern woman towards financial independence, emotional balance and social recognition.<sup>17</sup>

Though Indu (*Roots and Shadows*), Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*), and Jaya (*That Long Silence*) are career conscious, they are all basically traditional in their outlook and therefore face severe problems of adjustment in their families. Urmila of *The Binding Vine* is the most rebellious of Deshpande's protagonists. She works as a lecturer in a college and is financially independent. Self-reliant and highly self confident are the features of her personality. She neither wants to live on her husband's money nor submit before him. Indu, Saru, and Jaya are aware of the inequalities in society but they do not attempt to set right anything. But Urmila takes up cudgels on behalf of Kalpana, the rape victim; she thinks of Mira's predicament and Shakutai's sufferings. This prompts Indira Nityanandam to comment thus: "The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact that though there are Miras and Kalpanas and Shakutais, we have also our Urmilas."<sup>18</sup>

Deshpande's *Small Remedies* discusses the life of two women - one obsessed with the classical music and another devoted to the communist party. Both these

women desert their family lives in order to make an identity in public life. Both these women successfully establish their public identity, outside the family life.

Accordingly all her women protagonists-Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila, and Savitribai and Leelabai succeed in constructing a self through individual professional achievement. They also come to terms with themselves by redefining their relationship, accepting at the same time social constraints and emerge as fully developed individuals doing justice in their domestic as well as professional fields.

In spite of a good number of women novelists, writing excellent novels, one feels a little disillusioned to notice that most of them have been concerned with the educated career women. Few Writers have taken up cudgels to highlight the Woman's Lib movement for the liberation for the millions of Indian Women still being ground under the weight of traditions, patriarchal slavery and dominations.

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