

Space and Identity of Women in Indian English Writings

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Abstract

The women's studies have been receiving increasing academic and disciplinary recognition throughout the globe. The writers are determined to narrate, respond and react to the place of women in society. The purpose of the present paper is to redefine the image of women in post colonial Indian English literature. The post colonial Indian English writers focus on major issues relating to woman such as her awakening to the realization of her individuality, her breaking away with the traditional image. The transformation of the idealized women into an assertive self willed woman, searching and discovering her true self is described by various Indian Writers like Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamla Markandaya, Manju Kapoor and many others have depicted females who are not silent sufferers but have learnt to fight against injustice and humiliation.

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Key Words: Feminine Sensibility, Identity, Physical- Mental Stress, Patriarchy, Rejection, Sacrifice, Redefining, Reconstructing Womanhood.

The term Indian women or 'Bhartiya Nari' is a popular construct of the collective imagination of the public and the print and the mass media. The term Indian becomes meaningful and can be understood only in the context response to the colonial experience. However, doubt has often been expressed about the constitution of this collectivity, as to who it really represents and in whose voice it really speaks. Taking one look at the popular image of the Indian women makes it clear that like the nation the women is also a product of the elite majority, namely the Hindu, middle class and upper class. The Devi is a woman with large 'bindi' on her forehead, wearing a 'saree' and fair in complexion. She is sexually passive, gentle and self sacrificing, monogamous, looking upon the face of the only one man in her life, her husband, and she is the repository of the honour of the family. We have very little information as to whether the concept of womanhood was at all a matter of discourse in the pre- modern era. Very little exist on record, even in literature about the life of ordinary people in India. Most literature of ancient and medieval times were of two types, the oral tradition and the written text appearing as a hand written manuscript. Both these tradition were influenced by the power structure of the society. For example, oral tradition was often carried by the bards who were in the pay roll of royalty. Obviously they would be interested to write about royal personage and praise them. The scribes and Brahmins were also largely state supported.

But during the colonial period, knowledge went public via the print media when started to become literate. In principle the new systems of knowledge were free to be accessed by any and every one irrespective of caste and gender. A number of women also became literate and as early as eighteenth century there was a number of literate women in India who began to use the print media to advocate their views to a broader society. The work

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of these women, mostly of high caste and class, and the issues addressed by them, were pertinent for the elite Hindu women only. The reformist movement taken up by the Indian social reformers too concerned itself with issues of women of upper section and primarily the Hindu women. A number of Indian women became active in this period in the field of education and reform, and journal and writing by women started appearing in the Indian press from the end of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of twentieth century. These were all upper caste women Hindu women, like Swarna Kumari Devi of Bengal, Ramabai Ranade, Pandita Rama Bai, Rameshwari Nehru and the foriener, Anne Besant. The construction of the Indians Women was engendered in the class and caste structure of India that favoured a particular elite point of view. Tara Bai Shinde, a nineteenth Century Maratha women was a feminist of the modern times. O'Hanlon (2000) writes, "Here, then we have older brahmanic construction of feminine nature feeding through directly into colonial print culture and blending very comfortably with its more Victorian themes." Thus Tarabai was critical of brahmanic and male interpretation of the texts such as the Ramayana as also of popular Marati literature of that time. Thus when a model of what was Indian was constructed in print and became knowledge accessed by elite, educated Indian. The text that went into the construction of the ideal women were the 'Dhramshastras' and the law of Manu, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and not of tribal myths, village folklore. The interpretation of these texts were of the 'Brahmanical' variety where folklore was ignored. The 'brahmanic' version highlighted only those characters that were in line with the norms of high caste Hindus.

Hardly any public discourse on women was ever initiated and taken up in any period prior to the colonial period in India. It was only during this time that the question of women became a major issue as the British too had projected the miserable position of Indian women as one of the criteria that justified their rule. Although most Indian would attribute the Devi

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image to be constructed from the traditional past of Hindu India, in reality it was also greatly influenced by the value system of Victorian England and served the patriarchal interest of the elite Hindu men, who having received a very British education were now attempting to resurrect their own women as perfect their own women as foil for their nationalist ideals. The Indian Nationalist men claimed superiority on the basis of the moral and spiritual superiority to the west and it was the women who represented this spiritual ideal of the home. However, it was not enough to present the women as she was then, but she had to be carefully constructed as the ideal women, the epitome of purity and moral virtues. The elite families carefully tutored their women folk, the first step being to separate them from the rustic and the 'lower' women.

The women had also to measure up to the standards of modesty demanded by the western standards. Thus Bengali women who traditionally wore only one sari or a single garment were made to wear a petticoat, a chemise and a blouse. As the name indicates these piece of clothing were borrowed from the dress of British women of that time. In fact in all parts of India, all these garments were absorbed into the wardrobes of women under their original western names. The aim was to raise the standard of Victorian modesty and also the gaze of the British who were required to look upon them as Goddesses. The missionaries played active role in this process of re-crafting. The ideal of virtuous motherhood and wifehood were installed into the upper class women. Thus Indian women dressed modestly, glow with the mark of moral superiority like self sacrifice, devotion and loyalty which symbolizes superior Hindu Culture. But at the ground level what it really achieved was a seclusion of the elite women from her more rustic and underprivileged counter part-the separation of the 'Devi' from the Dasi' .

The upper class women were also carefully taught to become 'mumsahib' or 'Bhadra mahilas' in a way that kept a balance between tradition and modernity that weighed heavily

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in favour of keeping up the patriarchal rule within the family. Thus women learned about hygiene, baby care, to knit, to sew, and also about personal, grooming. But they were not particularly encouraged to step out of the house, to take up paid jobs, to asserts their independence apart from their husbands. They acted like true 'Ardhanginis' (halves of their husband) symbolically represented by their wives of the national leaders, Kastur Ba, Kamla Nehru and others. They also had to maintain their sexual purity and sanctity. The women who were the object of respect, were carefully demarked from those who were the object of lust. This theme is clearly demonstrated in the literature and the mass media of that time. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in his novel 'Charitraheen' in nineteenth Century writes an instance of a young Brahmin boy Satish who belongs to respectable family of upper class, under goes pangs of remorse and self denigration after having caught hold of the end of the servants Savitri saree in a fit of suppressed emotion. The extreme remorse is directed towards the covert content of sexuality in that act, an act for which Satish cannot forgive himself for he respects 'Savitri' as a decent woman. She works as a domestic servant but she is not recognised to belong to servant class. She herself tells Satish repeatedly that he need not bother himself too much with the propriety of his action for she after all is a 'dasi', a servant. But Satish does not accept this because his love is sincere, the object of his veneration cannot possibly be a 'dasi' or a women of low class. This kind of ambivalent attitude towards women was deeply rooted in Indian Society .The object of sexuality were always the women of lower classes.

The men of the upper class consider the women of the lower castes 'explotable' and vulnerable , the lower caste have their own version of the 'virtuous' wife satisfying herself with the lower caste servant, again a theme dealt with in several Indian classic writings. The leader of the Dalit movement in India, Shri Jyoti Phule had decried the position of high caste Hindu women and had taken the miserable position of the high caste Hindu widow as a sign

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of degeneration of caste system. In fact, the two most visible actions taken by Phule for the welfare of society was to open a school for untouchable girls and a home for Brahmin widows in the later part of the nineteenth century. Education of their women was the foremost agenda of the major Dalit leaders of that time, Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar. Even during colonial times, the Dalit women were emphatic that they already enjoyed the kind of rights that the upper caste women desire, like marrying at a later age, treating the husbands as equal and participating in public affairs. The 'dasi' was always more individualistic and self-sufficient than the 'devi'. In India the worship of women power has been a part of its very ancient past, dating back to the earliest civilization known in this part of the world. But over periods of time including the contemporary age of globalisation, the ideal woman is being reconstructed again and again, not as a person in her own right but only as a foil for the perfect man. Even the most modern woman is guided by wish of her husband. If an executive husband wants his wife to have blond hair and be a perfect companion for his executive parties. Besides this she has to be a super mom and an ideal daughter in law as well. The principal of being ideal is to sacrifice own interest for that of men. Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. In an age of development and flux in every field, one cannot easily ignore half the population. Indian writers in English have also come out of their cocoons of "non-attachment" and have started acknowledging the status of the Indian woman in a male-dominated society. The concept of Indian womanhood is as divergent as the country itself and has undergone drastic and dramatic changes from era to era. India has travelled from her glorious past to degeneration; from spiritual ascendancy to communal clashes; from captivity to independence; from agrarian revolution to cyber technology. The role of the Indian woman has also changed from that of deity to devadasi, from shakti to abala, from home-bound creature to a professional.

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The Indo-Anglian fiction presents a consistent picture of the changing social realities during this eventful century. The Indian English Fiction can be divided into two broad categories - the pre- and post-Independence groups of writers. The Post-Independence period in the recent Indian history corresponds suitably with her concept of the "nodal period" when a number of Indian writers of fiction in English try to explore and manifest Indian reality. In these writers we do not find either the commitment of the earlier period or even the amused narration of the trials of the middle class, trying to unite the past traditional outlook with the fast emerging realities of the modern living conditions. In this effort, the writers of the post-Independence phase move inward. They get more and more psychologically intended and try to assess the sociological effect on the psyche of their characters.

Women writers contributed much to the development of the English novels including new themes which resulted in full scenario of female world. This feminine sensibility made them capable to break a new ground in Indian English fiction. These women writers made an approach from the external to the internal world and created their own world as an extraordinary sensitive being. Women writers of Indian English Fiction endeavoured a lot to exhibit the external quest of women characters for meaningful life. Now these women novelist have reached to that destination where concept of 'changed women' can be seen. We have very little information as to whether the concept of womanhood was at all a matter of discourse in the pre- modern era. Very little exist on record, even in literature about the life of ordinary people in India. Most literature of ancient and medieval

The term 'changed women' is used for self awakening of women and for realisation of her place and position in the orbit of her family (and) in the society. The 'changed women' in post colonial Indian English fiction is conscious of her individuality and has been trying to confirm her rights as human being. She seems to be in constant fight for equality to man.

(The earlier Indian fictions have glorified women preferring silent suffering and upholding of

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Indian cultural values has been glorified). Women (is) designed to perform varied roles in her life –the role of a mother, a wife, a sister or a daughter etc. but never has she been thought as an individual far from being merely a cog in the family machine. She is deprived of her own identity or aspiration for self-fulfilment. (In the male dominated patriarchal society, she is pushed behind to the secondary position where all authorities are concentrated to the secondary position where all authorities are concentrated to the eldest male member of the family. They are just a helpless and timid creature.) This phenomenon of male domination resulted in a protest. Women began to cry and rebel under the mental and physical stress and spiritual crisis. Women began to break the ice of restrictions and struggled to set her free from the shackles of traditional position. She felt the need of her own identity, to determine her position in the scheme of family and society. She stopped presenting herself as traditional women like Sita, Savitri, or Ansuja. The British introduced English in India which proved to be boon for Indian English Writers in colonial period who could now spread their feelings to the world through their writing in English. In the postcolonial period woman's liberation from the bondage of ignorance and her time honoured expected role, heralded a dawn of independence especially in the works of women novelists. The 'changed women' resents to be put under the oppressive restriction. Her education and economic independence brought tremendous change in her outlook on conjugal relationship and her attitude towards love, marriage and sex. The men writers also wrote about women subjugation like R.K. Narayan 'The guide' , 'The Dark Lady 'Mulk Raj Anand 'Gauri' , where they describes about women feeble protest and deviation from accepted norms. In Indian women fiction the women writers made her appearance in flesh and blood . This is the reason why women novelists have a deeper probing into woman's psyche, her perplexity, and her response and reactions .They are capable of portraying picture of woman with all her aspiration, hopes and frustration.

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In Shashi Deshpande's novel we find emergence of the new women. Her women character is from the contemporary urban, educated upper class women caught between tradition and modernity. She depicts the reaction of quiet, sensitive and intelligent Indian women victimization and seeks a new balance of power between the sexes. They overcome social stigma asserting their potential in the professional arena. Their concept of freedom is totally different from west. They believe in conformity and compromise for the sake of domestic harmony rather than revolt which might disrupts family relationship. Her women are for balanced relationship between man and woman. She wishes man to understand that women are not just commodities to be possessed. They are not just sexual objects but also a human being as men.

In Shashi Deshpande's 'The Dark Hold No Terrors' Manu becomes a sadist only because his wife Saru was earning 'not only the butter but most of the bread as well' (Deshpande:200:1990). The initial years of their marriage were blissful Manu was Saru's saviour, the romantic hero to rescue her from the clutches of the orthodox society:

I became an instant a physically aroused woman with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved. All the clichés, I discovered were true, kisses were soft and unbearably sweet, embraces hard and passionate, hands caressing and tender and loving, as well as being loved, was an intense joy. It was as if little nerve ends of pleasure had sprung up all over my body. (Deshpande:40: 1990)

Even their dingy room apartment with 'the corridor smelling of urine, the rooms with their dark sealed in odour' (40) was a heaven on earth for her. But soon she woke up from illusion and she realizes that 'He Manu, had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband' (42) Manu's wounded male pride is manifested in sexual sadism. In the day Saru was a doctor, in the night terrified trapped animal. Now they

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shared a relationship based on need and attraction and not on love. She had no more misconceptions about romance:

Love? Romance ? Both, I knew too well, were illusions....And for me, sex was now a dirty word.(133)

The words have lost their significance and meaning in her life. Sashi Deshpande's women have an urge to find themselves to create space for them. They are educated but frustrated, either sexually or professionally. Saru, though achieved economic independence, yet her plight is miserable. In the privacy of their room, Manu does not behave like a husband, but a rapist.

'Silence' is the metaphor in Deshpande's novel to depict the helpless conditions of middle class Indian Women. There is an atmosphere of ever-looming 'silence' in the novel, his silence between Saru's parents, the silence between the mother and Saru, the silence between Saru and Manu, etc. The 'silence' also symbolizes the 'devoicing' of females, to silence the women, man has only one weapon - 'sex'. Deshpande uses 'Sex' as a means of tormenting Saru: "Terror waited for me in our room. I could not escape it." Initially, she equates 'sex' to 'love':

I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of love sex was a triumphant assertion

Of our love. Of 'my' being 'wanted'. (40)

But later this same physical intimacy became a punishment for her and she questions:

But why is happiness so unreal? Why does it always seem an illusion...Happiness is so evanescent, nothing is left. Except sensations and feelings. (40-41)

This is question not just of only disturbed Saru but it reminds us of many such questions in women who live in illusion. Their lives are their lives while truth is something else. They are mere slaves to the patriarchy.. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the Indian middle-class

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women's sufferings, frustrations, social agitations and their stillness as a means of communication.

Her novel "Roots and Shadows" presents the image of new woman. This novel explores the inner struggle of the protagonist, Indu. She tries to learn the truth about herself, deserting all the shadows that she had thought to be her real self. Indu presents a set of modern women, who are educated and very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems of love, marriage, sex, settlement and individuality. The novel deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with the male world and the society in general. Indu, a middle class girl, brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family, headed by Akka (the mother surrogate in the novel) "left home full of hatred for the family, for Akka specially" and she had sworn, "I would never go back" (Deshpande 1983, 20). Indu who had lost her mother at birth, identifies throughout the novel, Akka as the mother-figure. She revolts against Akka, her world, her values and marries Jayant against the wishes of Akka. Akka bursts out at her marriage; "such marriages never work. Different castes, different languages... it's all right for a while. They realize" (74). Indu comes back to her parental home after a long period of eleven years when Akka is in her death bed and on Akka's death, becomes her sole inheritor of her property. Akka, the mother-figure in 'Roots and Shadows' dominated the family and became an emblem of authority. She was a childless widow. She treated almost everyone under her guidance. She approves whatever occurs in the house. Until her death, "she had maintained her power, her authority over everyone," But Indu, a rebel, often wished to be free and unrestrained. Thus, she is presented as a model against the women belonging to the older generation. The novelist has presented two groups of women in Indian set-up. One group is represented by Akka, Narmada, Sumitra Kaki, Kamla Kaki, Atya, Sunanda Atya. Indu represents the other group. The life of traditional women is nothing

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but to go married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren. And the ideal women are one who does not have her own independent identity: "A woman who sheds her 'I' who loses her identity in her husbands (54). Indu presents new generation and reviews everything with reason. She explains the ideal of detachment and liberation and tries to achieve them. She tries only to listen to the voice of her conscience and revolts. But, unfortunately, she fails, in all her efforts, miserably either due to the impact of culture and tradition, or fear of stigma, or timidity, or all these combined together. For Shashi Deshpande, feminism means a balance between the traditional respect for the family as an Institution and the Western idea of self-identity and expression, as working philosophy for the Indian woman. . In doing so, Deshpande belongs not only among the Indian-English novelists but also among the regional writers such as Ashapura Devi, Baiamani Amrta and Ismat Chughtai who have similarly created details of a woman's world with loving care and depicted the nuances of her consciousness with the empathy of an insider while advocating her liberation.

Even in western society male is in central position in the family. Simone de Beauvoir expresses it thus in *The Second Sex*:

“Thus humanity is male and man defines women not in herself but as but as relative to Him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her....He is the subject, he is Absolute. She is the other.”

In Indian society and culture the status of women is even worse since women are dependent on men for almost all their need. They become victim of male deceit, male lust and economic necessity. In our culture too the male dominates the family and women assume a secondary position. If a woman leads independent life she has to face various kinds of problems and is looked down upon and treated as an outcaste by society. Many writers of

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postcolonial India being influenced by the writing of the western writers are trying to reflect this change of 'self', self consciousness in women. Women writers are more successful in voicing the experiences of women. Indian women novelist in her essay, 'Women: Person or possession', castigates those who regard women as 'property' and discourage individuality in them:

When I heard someone remark, "we never allow our daughter to go out" or "I can't do that, my husband would not like it", it sounded a very peculiar, alien jargon. As if, I thought, women were property, not person. (Qtd. by Dass:220)

Nayantara Sahgal is conscious of the fact that women have their existence as an individual who have their own right and wishes. She fights and writes against the timid self of women as well as men's protectoral shell. Sahgal in her novel 'This time of Morning' portrays Rashmi who finds an escape from her shattered matrimonial bond with Dalip by drifting towards Neil. She is hopeful for a better life in future without her husband Dalip."Away from it she was beginning to understand that a part of life, though destroyed, could be rebuilt and then go on, incredibly, as before, at least in bare outline." (Morning: 10). She is a 'new women' who drifts towards another man to fill the empty corner of her soul. She cannot accept the subjugation of her married life with Dalip. Although this new relationship brings her no satisfaction but it gives some solace to her wounded psyche. In 'The Day in Shadow' sensitively projects the suffering of Simrit, who is forced by her circumstances to dissolve her seventeen year old marriage with Som. She cannot continue her life with Som, for in their relationship "intensity depth and devotion were never brought into play at all nor was partnership." (Shadow:4) she felt suffocated in the world of Som. Smirti refuses physical intimacy with Som when she feels that there is no emotional involvement. This hurts Som's ego and expedites their separation. Smirti dares to leave her husband

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although she knows the society does not recognise a woman's identity without her husband. In the novel 'Storm in Chandigarh' Saroj suffers because of the brutishness of an uncompromising and fickle husband, Inder. There is no mutual understanding, internal intimacy and emotional love between them. The works of Nayantara Sahgal invariably point to an inner exhilaration suggesting the beginning of a fresh awakening. Her women strive to overcome their perplexities, sense of isolation, fear and emotional vulnerability and find new horizons of self-esteem and liberation. All the novels of Mrs. Sahgal present one or the other women who pine for individual freedom and recognition of her equal status in society. Both Nita, in 'This time of Morning' and Simrit, in 'The Days in Shadow', revolt against a society that does not allow an independent identity and a free stand to a woman but the nature of their revolt reveals two quite different persons. Nita revolts against the paternal authority which forces upon her fiancé and makes her denounce the idea of getting a job to live independently. Consequently, she develops an unusual relationship with Kalyan Sinha whom she likes and admires because he gives her a way out from rigid patriarchal setup. Simrit revolts as well as her relationship with Raj, on the other hand, are a well-thought and sensible decision of a mature, conscious, intelligent woman. She turns a rebel against the authority of a husband who is neither brutal in the beastly sense of the term nor conservative enough to check the free movement of his wife. But he is not emotionally associated with her. In her effort to escape the brutal divorce settlement and to settle herself into a career, Simrit enters into a new relationship with Raj Garg and gradually proceeds towards wedlock. Nita seems to disapprove Vijay just because she does not want to accept a stranger as her husband. She does not try even to be acquainted with him. Simrit, on the other hand, tries to travel with Som for long but changes her course finding herself unable to move further.

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The works of Nayantara Sahgal invariably point to an inner exhilaration suggesting the beginning of a fresh awakening. Her women strive to overcome their perplexities sense of isolation, fresh and emotional vulnerability and find new horizon of self esteem and liberation. Their concept of freedom is not just confined to the realms of social and economic freedom but they want mental freedom. They demand a right place, recognition and regard so that their existence can be meaningful. Sahgal's novels accompanied by deep passion for women rights, tremendous realization of prevailing social, cultural, political and biological concerns as well as deep moral earnestness, kindle vibrant and fresh ideas about many things, so much so they have played an uphill task to enlarge the boundaries of men's mind and perception. Sahgal's women can be found compatible with Ani Di Franco's views: "My ideas of feminism is self determination, and it's very open ended : "every women has the right to become herself ,and do whatever she needs to do."

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