

Angels Never at Peace, Always in Conflict: Image of Indian (New)

Women in Fiction

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Abstract:

**Man for the field and woman for the hearth,
Man for the sword and for the needle she,
Man to command and woman to obey, 1.**

Tennyson affirms the biological heterogeneity of the sexes in his poem “**The Princess**”. He dramatizes the harsh and relentless oppression of women in the poem. The anti-feminist ideology² of this poem matches Indian man’s psyche and it has troubled the Indian women in every strata of life.

Women always have been seen in the Indian community merely an object and commodity. They are not heard in society, if heard, then ignored, if not ignored, attempts are made to manipulate them. If patriarchy fails to manipulate them, they are viciously exploited, tormented, alienated and abused.

Age old stereotypes have been kept alive by patriarchy to treat women subservient to men since ages and men deployed older generation women to preserve and strengthen stereotypes. Woman becomes a woman’s enemy. This double edged exploitation creates hurdle in their emancipation and liberation. If they succeed and attain liberation from suppression, their liberation will result in a kind of alienation because society bluntly refuses to accept them in their new incarnation and punish them by kicking out from the community.

INTRODUCTION:

An extensive contribution to Indian fiction in English has come from women. Their narrative can be the countenance of a diverse approach of looking at the world. They have painted the inland land of the emancipated women’s susceptibility and her psychosomatic intricacies. Indian female authored texts investigate gender relations and sexual differences and one in which women themselves have been horrendously present.

To portray the real image of Indian women we have divided this paper into four **parts**. The **first** part's titled "**Angels in the house**" is taken from *David Patmore's* poem '*angel in the house*'(1854).³ which commemorates his own wife, so angels here imply Indian women with reference to "Difficult Daughters" and other selected novels in this paper. In **second** part '**Never at Peace**' Anita Desai's "Fasting, Feasting" evaluates how Indian woman is never at peace neither at home nor outdoor? Why she remains in psychological trauma? In **third** part '**Always in Conflict**' Shashi Deshpande's "Small Remedies" examines why woman always remains in conflict to choose between 'self' and 'other'? In the **final** part '**New Women**' discussed with special reference to Shobha De's "Second Thoughts" and comparison also made to discern new women to traditional one. But my anticipated conclusion is that both remains the victim of suppression either by patriarchy or by the consequences of their own actions to revolt against the stereotypes of society. Shobha De describes in her novels how a woman can emerge victorious with courage and self-confidence in society.

I. Angels in the House - Manju Kapur's *Virmati* in "Difficult Daughters":

Difficult Daughters (1998) is *Manju Kapur's* debut novel presents the psychic distress of women through the rebellious character of Viramati. The novel not only refers to the difficult daughter Viramati but several other difficult daughters who live suffocated in their households. The story tells how Viramati is torn between family duties, the desire for education and illicit love affairs with a married professor.

The Viramati's family could talk of nothing but her wedding. But she refused to accept the groom chosen by her family and attempted suicide. Her sister was married off to the groom instead of her.⁴ It is the tradition of the Indian community if one resists to surrender the other less meek woman is made available for subjugation. Viramati expresses her strong urge to pursue higher studies to follow the lines of her cousin Shakuntala. Viramati and Shakuntala, "Difficult Daughters" of the family, represents the evolving consciousness of the modern Indian woman. She wishes to broaden her mental horizon, but succumbed to the professor's bodily temptation and becomes pregnant.

The happiest part of her life when she became headmistress of a girl's school and attained autonomy over her life.⁵ Professor eventually married her. She was ostracized by family to share her husband's love along with his first wife. Thus an angel (Viramati) forced to surrender and compromise in her life.

II. Never at peace - Anita Desai's Uma in "Fasting, feasting"

Uma, the protagonist in Desai's "*Fasting, feasting*" is never at peace in her life. Instead of being offered love, attention and protection at home, she has to suffer twenty four hours at home. She suffers physical, psychological, cultural and economic violence at home.⁶ She suffers the humiliation and psychological torments due to failed attempts made by her parents to get her married, the physical violence by imposing restrictions upon her physical movements to go to other spatial arenas, the cultural violence is to deny her further education and finally, the economic violence of not being allowed to take up a job at the Medical Institute that further deprives her to have financial independence.

Older generation women like mothers and grandmothers see the patriarchal system as a norm and feel proud to preserve it for the next generations without giving a thought that they themselves ill-treat their own daughters as they had been treated in the past. But it is ironic in the Indian community that they prefer traditional roles for women rather than supporting them in their life. As *Fergusson* says:

*'One peculiarity of the images of the women throughout history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes.'*⁷

Uma attempts to resist the restrictions imposed on her. Her spatial movement to the Ashram and Mrs. O'Henry house has given her liberation that she always sought from her parents. But her anguish and frustration of negation remained deeply rooted in her psyche. At Ashram she remains physically liberated but could not erase the torture and ill-treatment at the hand of her parents. Women gain importance and usefulness in the society when they move out of their domestic sphere. Mrs. O'Henry house helps Uma to gain a rise in her social and spiritual status.

She was so much afflicted by the pain of ostracism that she attempts suicide twice by jumping into the river but rescued. The greatest irony of Uma is that her wish for liberation has become synonymous with a death wish. Her own concern for others has not been destroyed by the callous treatment of her parents.⁸

III. Always in conflict - SHASHI DESPANDDE'S TRINITY IN "SMALL REMEDIES"

Shashi Deshpande portrays middle class women either working or housewife. She represents the women's struggle to define and attain an autonomous self. Female quest for identity, inner conflict, parent child relationship, marriage and sex have been remained her favorite themes in her works. In her quest for identity, her protagonist moves from despair to

hope, from self-negation of self-assertion. Her struggle throughout is to attain wholeness, completeness and an authentic self.⁹

“*Small Remedies*” hold a faithful mirror before the women of society. The three main characters in the novel want to establish their identity. **Madhu, Savitribai** and **Leela** are ambitious and courageous enough to prove their strength in writing, music and politics respectively. Their rebellious act transcends personal limitation and goes beyond the boundaries imposed on them in the Indian community.

Madhu grows up in liberal atmosphere and received love and attention from her father. After her father’s death she lives with her aunt Leela and Uncle Joe. Her father’s savings, finances her graduation. She politely refuses Leela’s aid for further education. She aspires for self-dependency. She gets a job of writing and editing a magazine and lives in a rented room. She is truly independent the way **Virginia Woolf** advocates in her work, “**A Room of One’s Own**”. Her marriage fails with Som as he is suspicious of her character. His suspicious attitude gets her angry. She echoes the way Manju the protagonist of Deshpande’s other novel “**If I Die Today**” voices the alienated plight of the married woman:

“A marriage. You start off expecting so many things. And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But.....two people who have shut themselves off in two separate glass jar? Who can see each other but can’t communicate? Is this a marriage?”
10, P24

Madhu and Som’s irreconcilable behavior and the oppressive atmosphere force her son Adit to leave home in a fit of fury and unfortunately he is killed in a bus bomb blast. Madhu blames Som’s male ego, which traumatizes both Adit and her. The opportunity to write biography of Savitribai, gives her a chance to come out of bitter marriage. Through Madhu, writer portrays an image of courageous women who displays confidence to survive in life which is full of difficulties, humiliations and frustration. Women’s decision to get rid of unhappy marriage fuse into them a new confidence and courage as Madhu has shown in this novel. The shackles of age-old traditions are broken to achieve her true self and individuality which kept them entrapped.

Savitribai born in a wealthy Brahmin family, inherits musical talent from her mother. She wanted to be a professional singer, but opposed by grandmother at home. After marriage her ambition compels her to elope with Gulam Saab. To quench the thirst of music she faces a lot of hardships, but never surrenders herself without caring rigid patriarchal bonds. She has not maintained a healthy relationship with her daughter Munni.

Through Bai's character, we have a woman who reveals to prefer her own individuality, aspirations and rejects the traditional roles of an ideal wife and mother. **Amrita Bhalla in her book says, "Bai's story speaks of commitment and dedication to her art, of the courage to step across the threshold and break out of the restrictions of upper caste patriarchal society in search of dream".¹¹**

Leela, other iron willed educated lady who has spent her life working with factory workers in Mumbai. Like Bai she has also attained freedom through her self-realization. Leela rebels for a cross caste alliance and remarriages to Joe.¹² When her first husband died she took up a job and educated her brother-in-law. She believes in Communist ideology as it makes no difference between men and women and declares equal rights and opportunities for both alike. But she finds male chauvinism in a party which ignores women's merit on gender grounds. Thus, in "*Small Remedies*" **trio** always remains in conflict to subvert traditional roles and rules through their rebel and aggression to establish their individuality.

IV. New Women - Shobha De's Maya in "Second Thoughts"

Shobha De's women characters are a replica of today's new generation woman. Their characters design their life, be it housewife, college girl or a career oriented woman. Their woman is an image of "New Woman". According to historian **Ruth Bordin**, the term New Woman was,

Intended by him to characterize who exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting on their own. The term "New Woman" always referred to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic.¹³

Shobha DE's characters fit well into this definition .They are independent inwardly and self-reliant outwardly, bold, determined towards their carrier and mentally strong enough to handle any situation.¹⁴ Her characters have ceased to play conventional subordinate roles.

Shobha De's novels are written with the vision of empowering the woman potential in respect of preparing them to struggle against the hallmarks of silence and solitude. De protests against the traditional image of woman in her novels. Her characters are educated, sexually liberated, free thinking urban women. She is the first female writer who explores the world of city women of a higher social strata. Her novels heralded a new Indian woman who rebel against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of patriarchy.

Maya the protagonist in the novel "**Second Thoughts**" is a textile designer and has ambitions to become a journalist. Her marriage to Ranjan scattered all her dream. She was confined to the house, not allowed to work by her husband. Her husband's marital

disharmony and traditional attitude of negation trapped her into a meaningless life. She was scolded for petty things and her husband never even tried to understand her basic needs let alone to satiate her feelings.

Shobha De's '*New Woman*' always bounce back to resist and fight for their liberty and independence. Consistent humiliation and cold response of her husband forced Maya to be the friend of a college going boy Nikhil in her neighborhood. Due to her husband's suppression she broke the boundaries laid down by society and jump out as a bold lady. She creates alternative female identity where a woman takes the role of man and another takes the role of a '*Free Woman*'. Here, Maya has taken the role of 'Free women' and had turned towards Nikhil. She broke the outer shell in which woman kept suppressing their emotions and feelings. She was sandwiched between unsympathetic, unresponsive, dominated husband and a kind, sympathetic and careful lover .she came out of her passive role to discovering, asserting her individuality and identity. She revolted against the disparity laid upon her. In "Second Thoughts" De exposes the hollowness and hypocrisy of the Indian Marriage system. She again proves that her heroines love to fall in love. Her novels are truly the epitome of '*new women*' and fit well into **Winnifred Harper Cooley's definition:**

The new woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages, has come to stay — if civilization is to endure. The sufferings of the past have but strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her — and she now knows that she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her works.¹⁵

Conclusion:

These women writers questions in their works, why women's identity and individuality have been pitilessly suppressed with tooth and nails and why they have always seen in relation to men's identity in our society? Why they have been forced to live since immemorial as castrated men in Indian community? Why freedom brings isolation for them? Why they have been denied opportunities, even after having potential and capabilities? Why she cannot take charge of her own destiny?

All these have remained core issues in this paper. **Manju Kapur's** *Viramati* struggles for emancipation in her life. She shows rebellion spirit to gain higher education, but it yields nothing to her. Unlike professor's corporeal love she longs for true love and companion in her life but eventually this difficult daughter has to surrender herself.

Anita Desai's, *Uma* long for love, respect and emotional comfort. At the same time there is the ardent desire to be autonomous. Her parents' partial behaviors gives no respite to her in life. Uma is the true embodiment of traditional Indian woman who is considered no less than a bonded slave. It is the greatest irony of our culture that one side, we idealized Sita, Draupadi and Gandhari in epics, but in reality we torment our own daughters, sisters and wives for false pride or for obsolete rules that don't fit at all in present scenario.

Shashi Deshpande presents the Indian woman's sensibility and of certain emotional, aesthetic propensities and predilections. Having played ordained social roles Madhu, Savitribai and Leela in "Small Remedies" move out of their cloistered selves and assert themselves as empowered women. In her fiction Deshpande often subscribes the Indian idea of womanhood, her characters like Madhu get married to men of their choice and find marriage to be an entrapment. Marriage for **Savitribai** becomes a ruin, a wreckage, destroying and disintegrating their feminine selves. She faces blanket boycott from society as she succeeded in her dream of becoming a professional singer by flouting all conventional rules.

Shobha De's 'New Women' **Maya** trends against the wind and blooms in her life with perseverance and self-confidence by defying outmoded rules of society. A questioning attitude has been displayed by her protagonists and they have started questioning their roles, functions, attitudes and even behavior.

Indian women novelists have faithfully and accurately portrayed the picture of subjugated, oppressed, alienated and marginalized women in patriarchal society. They depict Indian woman grapples with the problems and tension generated by home, family and society. It is high time to realize that they need to extricate themselves from centuries of servile adherence to societal norms and pre-ordained roles. Yet they succeeded in doing it within a limited purview of their lives.¹⁶ In *Tennyson's* words,

"Men and women endowed with the same intellectual, moral, imaginative and spiritual capacities and that members of the both the sexes can change and grow together".¹⁷

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