

Women and Shelter: A Critical Perspective

(With special reference to Women characters in selected Indian English Fiction)

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Abstract: *The present paper is an attempt to study the selective fictional works of the Indian writers in English with a purpose to understand the concept of shelter regarding the women folks in India. The objective is to trace the seeds of feminist ideology even in those writers who marked the scene of Indian writing in its very initial stages starting from the pre independence times growing to full bloom in the much radical works of the current writers. This paper focuses on the selective fiction of R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal and Bharati Mukherjee as a sufficient ground for the above argument.*

Keywords: *Shelter, Culture, English, Fiction, Indian, Women*

Language has a remarkable capacity to change people. Language carries with it the stereotypes and values of a culture and the child while learning the language adopts these images and values naturally as he or she grows up. Right since the formation of human society, language has been shaped and ordered as per the male ideology, the condition reflecting the patriarchal set up when the social structure rested strictly and quintessentially on the division of labour and a clear cut separation of the public and private spheres between men and women. This order has continued many centuries later even till today despite the rationalisation and the awareness brought about through the advancement of science and technology. Unfortunately, the healthy and requisite division of labour in the initial stages of human history takes the unjust and ugly form of proving the instrument of constraint and control on women exercised by men, who occupy a relatively advantageous position in the economic, political and social fields of society. In a patriarchal society, hierarchies and polarisation in the men and women's relationship and shelter occur due to the stereotypes or the fixed viewpoints by which they seek to understand themselves as well as others.

Human tendency to rule and control and think in terms of binary parameters of superior/inferior, culture /nature, normal/abnormal etc. attributes the less privileged characteristics to women who exist on the peripheral space of society. Society lays down the patterns of life for a woman much before she takes birth by conceiving fixed identities for her. It confines her existence through binary divisions between the general conception of men and women defining her as feminine as opposite to the masculine, the characteristics marked in the formation of gender by society.

In order to earn respect and shelter in society, it is essential for a woman to belong to the preferred category of wife or an ideal woman and be oriented towards being obedient, devoted, self sacrificing as the mythical figures of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. It is a different matter now that we have learnt to look at the strong aspects of these characters in terms of literature and the resistance posed by them to their domination - thanks to the radical thinkers who have pulled us out of the stereotyped nature of our perspectives and led us to the free and neutral evaluation of the social reality around us.

Indian English Fiction traces its origin with the advent of English education and English language in the pre independence era. It is firmly rooted in Indian cultural background. R. K. Narayan in his novel *The Dark Room* published in 1938, seeks to dismantle the stereotype of a happy house wife in his female protagonist Savitri. Quite sympathetically, Narayan portrays the sufferings of this South Indian middle class house wife who finds herself confined to the cramped environment of unhappy married life that imposes on her the demands of being obedient and submissive. Fed up with the whims and dominance of her unfaithful husband Ramani, she like a rebel, decides to leave the house and attempts to drown herself in the river Sarayu. Her suicide attempt fails as she is saved by a village blacksmith whose wife Pooni gives her shelter and helps her in getting the job of a temple caretaker for the local priest. Her failure to cope with the unfamiliar outer environment and life without her children whom she had left behind, lead Savitri to go back home resignedly and to sulk in the dark room of her house. Thus the plot takes a

realistic turn set in the times when women's mental and physical dependence on men and their family made impossible for them to exit their difficult domestic circumstances and survive on their own.

Notwithstanding his initial attempt, Narayan does succeed in making the house wife escape the futility of married life in his novel titled, *The Guide* published in 1958 incidentally two years after the Indian edition of *The Dark Room*. Set in an urban environment R. K. Narayan, here, deals with the life of an educated talented woman, Rosie who instead of wasting herself and sulking in the company of her indifferent husband Marco is able to seek identity and space for herself through her career in dancing and her romantic relationship with Raju. The portrayal of the unhappy woman also occurs in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Old Woman and the Cow or Gauri* (1960) in which Gauri, a gentle and submissive woman, suffers first in her parental home as a daughter and later in her marital home till she meets a city doctor named Colonel Mahindra who empathises with her and becomes the mouthpiece for the angst and concern of the suffering women like her. She even calls her husband a coward for acting like the mythical Ram who turned Sita out for the sake of the public opinion about the purity of a woman for living out of home in the company of another man.

Kamala Markandya in *A Silence of Desire* (1963) takes up the same issue but with a different focal point and ending. The novel deals with the agony of the female protagonist Sarojini who is seen coping with the male hegemony and patriarchal dominance in her domestic sphere.

Woman as a subject with her own sets of emotions and desires at the conscious as well as the unconscious level still remained less talked till the handling of such issues by Anita Desai. In the same year as the publication of the already discussed novels in 1963, appeared *Cry the Peacock* that brought out, with great sympathy and empathy, the hitherto unexplored space of female psyche- her anger, maladjustments and psychotic disorder. In the novel, *Cry the Peacock*, Maya loses her sanity at the detached and apathetic attitude of her husband. Driven to schizophrenia and the non acknowledgement of her unflinching and excessive love for life depicted through her intense emotional responses to the nature around her, she ends up killing her husband and taking away her own life

In Indian society, where the matrimonial world is the ultimate world promising shelter, happiness and peace for a traditional woman who has cherished this kind of concept since her childhood, an environment of alienation and loneliness, can prove to be disastrous not only for her but for other members as well.

In another novel titled *Fire on the Mountain* (1975) by Anita Desai which won her the Sahitya Academy Award, the author takes a peek into the psyche of her protagonist Nanda Kaul whose muteness at the face of her unfaithful husband and the burden of looking after the great household teaming with children and grand children, finally compels her to search her own values away from the societal obligations as a wife, mother and a grandmother at the family house, Carginano, at Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh.

Shashi Dehpande in her novel titled *The Dark Holds No Terror* makes her female protagonist Saru, a doctor by profession, share her mental agony for the sadistic sexual behaviour of her husband, with her father as she comes to meet him after the death of her mother.

Shashi Deshpande takes up this theme in her novel *Roots and Shadows* where Indu, as she comes to her share her claim over the family house after the death of her great aunt Akka, ponders over the futility of her married life with Jayant that has crushed her individuality. Even in the novel, *That Long Silence*, the questioning of the limiting effect on marriage on women is dealt with through the character of Jaya. The issue of rape within marriage shattering the old belief of the happy and peaceful marital existence of our older generation crops up in the novel *The Binding Vine* where Urmi, the female protagonist comes across the letters of her dead mother -in -law only to reveal the dreadful and repressive nature of her marriage. The issues of silence about female sexuality and woman's right over her body are dealt emphatically by Nayantra Sehgal in many of her novels such as *This time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *The Day in the Shadow* (1971) *A situation in Delhi* (2008)

Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonist Jasmine in the novel by the same name is a Punjabi girl who crosses all barriers-socio, cultural, religious and economic to assimilate with the foreign world and in the process of "rebirth" or the discovery of herself. From Jasmine Vijn in Jalandhar, she becomes Jazzy at Florida, reverts to her real name Jyoti in Flushing, is renamed Jase or Jazzy by her employer in New York, transforms into Jane Ripplemayer as Bud Ripplemayer's partner in Baden and finally becomes Jase again to Taylor and his daughter in her struggle to survive

and provide dignity to herself. In this way, gender based division between the „masculine“ and „feminine“ is narrowed down by the daring, determined, extrovert and caring heroines like Jasmine.

Literature, as a part of culture, revises and rewrites values in consonance with the changing times of society. Unfortunately, despite all the benefits of constitutional rights in our country and scientific and ideological advancement at global and national levels, women still, in large number, occupy peripheral space in the socio cultural and political arena, they still are away from a peaceful shelter. The problem lies in the fixed mind set fuelled by the desire to control and age old beliefs and biases tearing the social fabric of our culture. Fiction, which is the most read and popular of all genres and Indian Fiction in English specifically for the growing love and usage of English, by shattering the stereotypes around women lend a great service in providing space for the real women to grow and utilize their full potentiality.

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