

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the selective fictional works of English-language Indian authors to chart the gradual erosion of the stereotypes constructed around women characters in the literary scene due to the growing awareness of women's issues and causes. The goal is also to identify the origins of feminist ideology in those authors who molded the Indian literary landscape in its earliest stages, beginning in pre-independence times and culminating in the radical works of contemporary authors. My research focuses primarily on the fiction of R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, and Bharati Mukherjee are supported by sufficient evidence. Despite not intending to sound inherently reductionist, the selection of works for analysis follows a particular train of thought in light of the monumental contributions of the literary figures under consideration.

Keywords: Culture, English, Fiction, Stereotypes, Women

Introduction

Language possesses an exceptional capacity to transform and unite individuals. After subjecting reality to the crucible of human imagination and vision, literature uses language as its medium to depict reality. As a child learns a language, he or she instinctively adopts the stereotypes and values of that culture. According to the Kenyan author Ngugiwa Thiong'o, "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and others."

Since the formation of human society, masculine ideology has shaped and ordered language. This condition reflects the patriarchal era when the social structure was solely founded on the division of labor and a clear separation between the public and private spheres of men and women. This order has persisted for centuries, even today, despite the rationalization and awareness brought about by the development of science and technology. In the early stages of human history, the healthy and necessary division of labor took the unjust and ugly form of males occupying relatively advantageous economic, political, and social positions while using women as instruments of constraint and control.

In a patriarchal society, hierarchies and polarization in the relationship between men and women result from individuals' attempts to understand themselves and others through stereotypes or fixed viewpoints. Men allocate marginal space to women because they are at the centre of social organizations and have the upper hand. The human tendency to rule, control, and think in dichotomous terms of superior or inferior, culture or nature, normal or aberrant,

etc., attributes less privileged characteristics to women on the periphery of society. In Foucault's terminology, stereotypes, which are "largely the reflection of culture" and not empirical by nature, assume the form of knowledge. These manifestations of discriminatory attitudes foster negative views of other species. Women are both victims and perpetrators of the subjugation strategy due to the persistence of these conceptions in society through institutions such as family, education, and the media and their incorporation into the socialization process of beings.

By imagining her with fixed identities, society determines a woman's life trajectory long before birth. It limits her existence through dichotomous distinctions between the general conception of men and women, defining her as feminine in contrast to masculine, the characteristics attributed to the social formation of gender. The association of negativity with feminine traits, such as passivity, infantilism, emotionalism, and irrationality, as opposed to masculine traits, such as adventure, decisiveness, and rationality, is also a factor.

Although they are regarded as positive, they substantially impede her self-evaluation and personal growth. In addition, the patriarchal system restricts women's roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers through their private sphere. It facilitates the control of the body by the opposite sex.

By constructing white and black images for the categories of wife or prostitute, ideal woman or sorceress, and mother or temptress, polarization is established as a "natural" order within women. A woman must adhere to the preferred category of wife or ideal woman and strive to be as obedient, devoted, and self-sacrificing as Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi in order to achieve respect in society. It is a different matter now that we have learned to view the substantial aspects of these characters in terms of the resistance they pose to their dominance, thanks to the radical philosophers who have led us to a free and objective assessment of our surrounding social reality.

English literature from India

Indian fiction written in English can be traced back to the pre-independence introduction of English education and the English language. It is deeply entrenched in Indian cultural context and specifics, distinguishing it from English literature. With the development of feminist consciousness in Indian society during the post-colonial era, numerous authors paid a great deal of attention to women's issues. However, these themes and concerns were evident in the works of pre-independence authors, such as R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and subsequently Kamala Markandya and Anita Desai, before culminating in the more overt and even polemical writings of Shashi Deshpande, Nyantara Sehgal, and Bharati Mukherjee, among others.

Through the female protagonist Savitri in his 1938 novel *The Dark Room*, K. Narayan attempts to debunk the stereotype of the cheerful housewife. Narayan depicts the afflictions of this South Indian middle-class housewife within the claustrophobic confines of an unhappy marriage that imposes the demands of obedience and submission. As a form of defiance against her unfaithful

spouse Ramani's caprices and dominance, she abandons the home and commits suicide in the Sarayu River. Her suicide attempt fails because she is rescued by a village blacksmith, whose wife, Pooni, gives her shelter and helps her secure a position as a temple caretaker for the local priest. Savitri's inability to adapt to the unfamiliar outside environment and life without her children, whom she had left behind, prompted her to reluctantly return home and sulk in a gloomy room. Thus, the plot takes a realistic turn, taking place in an era when women's mental and physical dependence on men and their families prevented them from abandoning difficult domestic circumstances and surviving independently. Despite his initial endeavour, in his 1958 novel *The Guide*, published two years after the Indian edition of *The Dark Room*, Narayan succeeds in enabling the housewife to escape the futility of married life. Set in an urban environment, K. Rosie, a well-educated and talented woman, can discover her identity and space through her dancing career and relationship with Raju.

The portrayal of the unhappy woman also appears 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 then in her marital home until she meets a city doctor named Colonel Mahindra, who empathizes with her and becomes the voice for the anguish and concern of the suffering women like her. Gauri evolves from a timid and submissive woman to one with a strong sense of her rights. He kicks her out when she returns to her spouse because he doubts her virginity. What is most important is how Anand affects her response to the situation. Gauri tells her husband, "If I am a curse on you, I will depart..."

She calls her husband a coward for imitating the mythical Ram, who banishes Sita for the sake of public opinion regarding the sanctity of a woman who lives outside the home with another man. By providing the so-called ideal woman of society with a voice and a language, Anand can disprove yet another preconception about women as mute victims.

A Silence of Desire (1963) by Kamala Markandya addresses the same topic but with a different focus and conclusion. The novel *Centres on The Agony* of the novel's *female protagonist, Sarojini*, who is portrayed as struggling against male hegemony and patriarchal dominance in her domestic sphere. Her husband, Dandekar, who works as a clerk in a government office, has values distinct from those of women. A wife is an asset and an unavoidable domestic ornament with no personal needs in his eyes. From Dandekar's perspective, his marital life is a picture of harmony and serenity in the company of a perfect woman who is submissive, uncomplaining, and "an excellent cook, who gives him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage, doing most things placidly," and from this tranquillity emerges the routine that satisfies "the neat and orderly needs of his nature." Dandekar suspects his wife of extramarital affairs and turns to prostitutes to sustain his waning virility while ignoring his children and work. The interaction between Sarojini and the swami revitalizes her faith and restores her optimism. Dandekar realizes his mistake and recognizes his wife's true worth as a subject.

Before Anita Desai's treatment of such topics, women as subjects with their own emotions and desires at the conscious and subliminal levels were rarely discussed. In 1963, the same year as the publication of the previously mentioned novels, *Cry the Peacock* revealed with great sympathy and empathy the previously unexplored space of the female psyche: her anger,

maladjustments, and psychotic disorder, which earlier psychologists, such as Sigmund Freud, attributed to the biological determinism of women.

Maya loses her equanimity in *Cry the Peacock* due to her husband's disinterest and apathy. Due to schizophrenia and her inability to acknowledge her unwavering and excessive love of life, reflected in her intense emotional responses to nature, she murders her husband and commits suicide.

In Indian society, where the matrimonial world is the ultimate world, guaranteeing happiness and solace for a traditional woman who has internalized this concept from childhood, an alienated and lonely environment can be catastrophic for her and other members.

Exploring the unknown and dark recesses of the female self was a triumph in recognizing her subjectivity and individuality and subverting the societal expectations and stereotypes regarding her "otherness."

The fact that she re-establishes contact with her granddaughter Raka, who, like her, is a recluse and freedom-lover and moves in with her after her parent's divorce, demonstrates that Nanda Kaul's isolation from her family does not make her apathetic toward the rest of society. Nanda feels similarly about her long-time companion, Ila Das, a social worker who frequently visits her and whom the villagers later beat and murder for interfering with child marriage. Through Nanda Kaul's refusal to bear the memories of "too many servants, too many visitors, too many children attending different schools and colleges at different times, as well as too many tutors" the novel *Succeeds in Destroying the Stereotype of a Self-Sacrificing and Self-Effacing Woman, Mother, and Wife*. This woman's authentic self is grounded in social reality and has learned to take care of itself; it is neither egocentric nor asocial.

Long-held notions of mother-daughter intimacy, glorifying a woman's tolerance, and her silence on private matters dissolve in subsequent fictional works. Doctor Saru, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terror*, expresses her mental distress over her husband's sadistic sexual behaviour toward her father when she visits him after her mother's death. In contrast to the stereotypical mother-daughter bond, Saru's mother never cherished her daughter. She never forgave her for the incident in which her younger brother drowned in the village reservoir while she was with him. As a daughter, Saru returns home to confront her feelings of remorse, dread, and emotional turmoil.

In addition, the wife of a man named Manu, whose violent night-time behaviour appears to be a projection of his insecurity as a man due to his wife's superior social and professional standing, has been left perplexed and traumatized. The physical distance between Saru and her husband and her sharing her sorrow with her father at her parents' home alleviates her mental and emotional anguish, clarifies her vision, and strengthens her resolve to face life back home.

Society has always regarded the female sexual reserve stereotype ambiguously. An Indian woman's defining characteristics were the ability to control one's sexual desires and the avoidance of overt displays. Paeans have been written and recorded in literature and entertainment media praising such qualities in women. In a relationship with her spouse,

however, the woman's sexual reluctance justifies the husband's deviation because she is unable to please him. Indian literature in English has attempted to rectify these false and oppressive images by depicting real women with natural physical desires; she has the same right as any other free person to express and fulfill them.

Shashi Deshpande explores this theme in her novel *Roots and Shadows*, in which Indu, upon inheriting her share of the family property following the death of her great-aunt Akka, ruminates on the futility of her marriage to Jayant, which has stifled her individuality. She acquires control over her body and desires as she develops a romantic relationship with Naren, a distant relative. In the novel *That Long Silence*, the character Jaya challenges the stifling effect of marriage on women. In *The Binding Vine*, Urmi, the novel's female protagonist, discovers the letters of her late mother-in-law, which disclose the secretive and oppressive nature of her marriage, thus shattering the old belief in our ancestors' happy and peaceful marital existence.

In several of her novels, including *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), and *The Day in the Shadow* (1971), Nayanthara Sehgal addresses the secrecy surrounding female sexuality and a woman's autonomy over her body. A situation in Delhi (2008) In our society, the female body, associated with the concept of honour, becomes a convenient tool for exercising control over her, regardless of her freedom to think, act, move, or choose. In this context, Jasbir Jain writes, "Men want to possess not only their present but also their past, thus feeding the ancient myths of the virgin bride and the virtuous wife" [7]. By imposing double standards of sexual morality, women are made to feel remorse for any pre- and post-marriage transgressions. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Inder punishes Saroj for having an intimate relationship with a man prior to her marriage by humiliating and exposing her to his dominance. The sanctimonious nature of marriage is challenged through the presentation of relationships that, by their emotional involvement, comment on society's denial of carnal desires in women. In *A Situation in Delhi*, the widow Devi develops satisfying relationships outside marriage with Michael and Usman Ali. Therefore, these fictional works avoid pigeonholing a woman into the dichotomous categories of wife and prostitute, or virtuous or evil, as defined by conventional societal norms, and instead, depict her as she exists in society in flesh and blood.

As they inhabit the postmodern diasporic world of fluid selves, where they learn to adapt to various cultures, women are portrayed as dismantling their fixed cultural and gender identities. Jasmine, the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel of the same name, is a Panjabi girl who, in the process of "rebirth" or *self-discovery*, transcends all social, cultural, religious, and economic barriers to assimilate with the distant world.

Jasmine Vih in Jalandhar, Jazzy in Florida, and Jyoti in Flushing, rechristened by her employer in New York as Jase or Jazzy, became Jane in Los Angeles.

During Taylor's struggle to maintain her integrity, Ripple Mayer, as Bud Ripple Mayer's partner in Baden, reappears as Jase to Taylor and his daughter as Ripple Mayer's partner in Baden. Consequently, the distinction based on gender between the

Courageous, determined, outgoing, and compassionate heroines like Jasmine serves to blur the lines between "masculine" and "feminine."

Conclusion

As a component of culture, literature revises and rewrites values in response to society's evolving values. Women remain a minority position in the sociocultural and political arenas despite all the benefits of constitutional rights in our country and scientific and ideological progress at the global and national levels. The social fabric of our culture is being torn apart by a rigid mentality fueled by a desire for control and entrenched beliefs and prejudices. Fiction, the most widely read and most famous of all genres, and Indian fiction in English, written specifically for the growing love and use of English, provide space for real women to develop and realize their full potential by shattering the stereotypes surrounding women.

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