



The Portrayal of Women in Indian English Literature

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Abstract

Since time immemorial the characters of women have been portrayed with broader perspectives ranging from diabolical to pious, naive to sophisticated and posh, submissive and neglected to dominant and liberal. Numerous pages of Indian history are filled with uncountable female characters presented by male as well as female *littérateurs*. The presentation of women in Indian English literature has been done in a much wider aspect. However, with the passage of time, this portrayal has viewed tremendous change — right from being forced to remain trapped within the set boundaries and be shackled by the patriarchy-dominated rigid society and/or community, to being rebellious in order to gain their individual identity and be free from unswerving, compacted shackles of the age-old inflexible boundaries. The following paper highlights the varied range of female characters along with their transformation over time.

Keywords: women, perspectives, *littérateurs*, presentation, aspect, set boundaries

I. Introduction

Various female characters in the literary worlds of fiction and non-fiction have been portrayed in a vast range in different fields and varied roles. Women were often portrayed as powerful and influential figures as visualised in the Vedic Age where they had the privilege to involve themselves in various activities, including social and political, that were usually regarded as male-dominated domains, and were not restricted to the boundaries set by the masculinist society. On the other hand, several negative female characters ranging from evil-minded to prostitute, subservient to rebelliousness, were also put in black and white.

Literature can be considered as the society's mirror characterised in words. Writing can be regarded as a medium that has a strong influence on the creative mind and perception of the public. In a society dominated by patriarchy, the fairer sex are relied upon to be extremely quiet and submissive. They build up particular instances of

life for her much before she propounds or proceeds into the world by forming pragmatic particulars. As evinced by Indian novelist Anita Nair, "Writing has forever been irresolute in its portrayal of ladies. Great ladies as in ones who acknowledged cultural standards were compensated with cheerfully ever later. Indeed, even fiery courageous women in the long run go onto observe content and life's motivation in a decent man's arms, be it Elizabeth Bennett ("Pride and Prejudice") or Jane Eyre ("Jane Eyre")." Throughout history, Indian English literature has been influenced by colonial legacies, cultural shifts, and feminist movements, shaping the portrayal of female characters in profound ways. From early works marked by patriarchal domination, societal norms, and domesticity, to the emergence of feminist discourse challenging the norms and the stereotypes, the trajectory of representation of female characters in Indian English literature is a testament to the changing tides of social consciousness and literary expression.

Keywords: varied roles, submissive, pragmatic, irresolute, feminist discourse, trajectory

Women in Indian English Literature

Women in Indian English literature have been portrayed with varying degrees of complexity, reflecting the diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts of India. Indian English literature has evolved to capture the multifaceted experiences of women. It delves into a range of women's issues, including gender inequality, patriarchy, domestic violence, molestation, and the quest for autonomy. Modern Indian English literature also explores intersectional identities, incorporating aspects of class, caste, religion, and sexuality into the portrayal of the fairer sex. The Indian diaspora literature in English contributes unique perspectives on women's experiences, blending cultural heritage with contemporary challenges.

Early Indian English literature often depicted women in traditional roles, such as dutiful wives, obedient daughters, and nurturing mothers. Authors such as Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand explored these roles in their literary creations,



reflecting the societal norms and expectations of their time. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande, introduced strong female characters grappling with identity, agency, and societal constraints. With the rise of feminist movements globally and in India, literature began to reflect more critical and nuanced portrayals of women. Authors like Uma Narayan and Mahasweta Devi shed light on the experience of marginalised women and their struggles for social justice and recognition. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explore themes of identity, belonging, and cultural assimilation through female protagonists. In a nutshell, women in Indian English literature are depicted as dynamic, resilient, and constantly evolving, embodying a spectrum of emotions, struggles, and aspirations, and struggles that resonate with readers across diverse backgrounds.

Anita Desai's novel "Fire on the Mountain", published in 1977, describes the struggle for identity, to liberate herself from the various roles of women, to attain a state of free and creative individuality. The theme of miscommunication and lack of understanding in marital life dominates this novel. The painful existential problems of Indian women, trapped by the society has been explored in this novel. Another novel of Desai, "Fasting, Feasting", published in 1999, presents woman as an embodiment of sacrifice and a silent sufferer. Here, Desai is trying to raise the voice of some women whose voices either have been silenced, or are too low to be heard by the rest of the nation. The novel inspects the helplessness of women and how they try to resist male ideology but in vain.

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things", published in 1997, paints a gloomy and shadowy world for women. It focuses on the hardships women are still undergoing even in the modern times. This women-centric novel brings out before the readers the state of women in a specific social milieu. The novel depicts how women have struggled to "escape traditional values, patriarchy, and colonial power" (Culde, 2019). Mahasweta Devi conceptualises the women's body, more particularly the breasts in "Breast Stories" (1997), as a symbol subverting the social codes constructed for woman. Devi interweaves the political, social and economic repression of different women in the "Breast Stories". Mulk Raj Anand in "Untouchable" (1935) underlines the marginality of women as she is made to suffer under the prevalent class structure, flourishing on rich - poor disconnect. In this novel, women as "the second

sex" are pushed to the margins in a phallogocentric world and being a Dalit from a poor class creates another layer of oppression.

II. Conclusion

According to author Anita Nair, "Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms were rewarded with happily ever after. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a good man's arms, be it Elizabeth Bennett ("Pride and Prejudice") or Jane Eyre ("Jane Eyre"). Alternatively, they are left to rue their lot with a contrived courage as with Scarlett O'Hara ("Gone with the Wind") or have to take their lives like Anna Karenina or Karuthamma ("Chemmeen") or Emma Bovary ("Madame Bovary").

Author Jaishree Mishra feels if literature is doing its job as a mirror to society then, obviously, the depiction of women in books has changed along with society, from Jane Austen's seemingly demure heroines onto Helen Fielding's openly scatty, mouthy Bridget Jones, a modern-day reworking of "Pride and Prejudice".

Women being portrayed in literature as submissive and docile has been due to the inferior position women have held in male-dominated societies. Times are changing and women are becoming the source of inspiration as well as motivation to several writers in recent times.

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