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## Evolution in the Portrayal of Women Characters (A Select Study of the Novels of Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair)

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### **Abstract:**

*The dissertation is about the evolution in the portrayal of women in Indian English Novels written by women novelists. The thesis aims to show how the women characters portrayed in the novels the past three decades reflect the changes that are taking place in Indian society. There is a lot of differences in the way women portrayed- their desires, their trauma as presented in the earlier novels are different from their desires and trauma as presented in the later novels. It tries to show the gradual change in the outlook of the character as well as the change in the social outlook through the novels of Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair. It gives the changing of scenes and life style of women, trying to contrast it with the pre-independent period and earlier and eventually these writers show how women realize that they have been suppressed and exploited and they register the protest. The struggle to cope up with situations results either in depression or in protest leading to marital disharmony and family integration. It further focuses on desire for freedom results in conflicts within the individual about sticking on to the traditional pattern and fulfilment of one's desires violating some of the traditional forms and the second one being the individual in conflict with the society. The thesis analyses the reactions of the various characters and focuses on their search for identity, there by establishing the change in perception in their outlook.*

**Keywords:** Changing outlook of women's life, violating the pattern, individual conflict, searching for identity

### **1. Introduction**

The paper is about the evolution in the portrayal of Women Indian English Novels written by Women Novelists. The thesis aims to show the women characters portrayed in the novels of the past three decades reflect the changes that are taking place in the Indian society. There is a lot of differences in the way women are portrayed –their desires, their trauma as presented in the earlier novels are different from their desires and trauma as presented in the later novels. This research work attempts to see the causes and consequences of this gradual development. In no country in the world has the worship of the Divine Mother been so deep rooted and ubiquitous as in India. With the rise of feminism across the world, a new generation of Indian feminists has emerged. Women have developed themselves according to the situations and have become advanced in various fields. They have become independent in respect of their reproductive rights. During the course of the nineteenth century, the life style of woman began to change. In reality the concept of the 'Perfect wife' was being redefined. First there were modifications in the appropriate activities for a female at different stages of her life. Second, the appropriate arena for female education was expanded and third there was a new and growing approval of individualism. As a consequence of changes set in motion by the British Conquest of India, by the end of the nineteenth century there were a number of women who were educated, articulate, mobile and increasingly involved in public activities. Like boys of an earlier generation, some of these girls attended educational institutions, social gatherings unrelated to family affairs and new religious ceremonies. These 'New Woman' as they were called were part of a modernizing movement which sought to modify gender relations in the direction of greater equality between men and women. Many of the women were sent to school and their parents waited until their daughters were older before arranging their marriages or occasionally allowed young married women to continue their education. Older brides became mother at a later age and often played a greater role in child-rearing. Often there were opportunities to exercise some choices of their own and consequently their status was far less derivative than had been true for a previous generation. Indians supported female education because they wanted social and religious reform, or social and financial mobility, or both. There was a prolific exchange of ideas about gender construction by women writers like Arundati Roy, Tarbai Shinde. A comparison of men and women' draws links between colonialism and the co-modification of women's bodies. Rokeya Sakhawar Hossain Bengali Muslim writer, was a very popular writer in her time and her 'Sullana's Dream' is a feminist utopia which envisioned a world where women are in charge of the public sphere. Due to historical and cultural specifics of the region, the feminist movement in India had to think in terms of its agendas and strategies. The problems and predicaments peculiar to the Indian women have found artistic expression in the Indian literature in English since 1970's. Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Nayantra Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and others started discussing openly the sexual problems of women and questioning the gender role expectations.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels namely 'The Dark holds no Terrors', 'Roots and Shadows' and 'That long silence, she objectifies new female subjective experiences with a gynocentric vision. "Women's writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century moved towards a medium of modernism in which feminist statements are combined with political message. In contrast to the persistent orientalist construction of the Indian woman as a passive victim, women writer from the sub-continent have written prolifically and movingly of women negotiating and restricting the multiple patriarchy that determine and shape their lives in diverse post-colonial situation." (Buhler:160).

In the 1<sup>st</sup> conference of Indian Writers Association held in Lucknow on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1936, the social responsibility of writers was ascertained and a manifesto was adopted which states that "It is the duty of Indian writers to give full expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and promote scientific and radical outlook and set such critical standards that could adequately combat outdated ideas and beliefs about family, religion, sex war and society." (Akhtar:149).

## 2. Changing Scenario

Anita Desai and Manju Kapur have been writing for more than two decades and have contributed a lot to social awareness about the status of women through their writings. Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair, though belong to the next generation continue the trend along with many other women writers of the age. However, Hariharan's 'Thousand faces of Night' and Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe' have caused ripples because they have been bold enough to portray and unconventional yet true to life protagonists. In *Difficult Daughters* one can listen to *Virmati's Voice*. She could not break out, living at the juncture of two oppression colonialism and patriarchy. *Virmati* remains in constant conflict with tradition, is at loggerheads with her parents and is contemptuous towards the institution of marriage which is considered as the be all and end all for a girl's life especially in India. *Virmati* begins to value education and other higher things in life. She realizes that life's horizons are not only wider, but there are things even beyond the horizons that still remain unconquered. *Virmati* is very much impressed by her cousin's education as she looked vibrant and intelligent. She is inspired by her speech and the style of grooming. She is drawn towards her cousin, whose thinking is beyond marriage. Her thrive to be intellectual and obsession towards the knowledge drives her to relationship with Professor Harish. She believes that she and professor are bound together by the band of intellectual compatibility; it is physical lust that overpowers them. She tried to achieve a level of modernity through education and social mobility, but she finds herself stumbling on traditional values that haunt her efforts to grasp female agency. Her inner conflict is very much the issue of reconciling and tradition. *Nadia Ahmed* says that "*Virmati* is trying to achieve a level of modernity through education and social mobility, but she finds herself stumbling on traditional values that haunt her efforts to grasp female agency. Her inner conflict is very much the issue of reconciling and tradition." (*Ahmed* 21). *Kapur* shows another character *Swarnalata*, whose ideals differ from *Virmati*. She participates in political activity and makes *Virmati* to regret for she is not like those two women who fight for the nation. *Virmati* always felt uncomfortable as she always did when *swarna* started talking about the many things she was involved in. She is a national activist and participated in speeches, Anti-Pakistan conference, the *Arya Bhasha sammelan*, the Urdu conference, the India History conference, the Punjab Azad Christian conference, the All India Sikh league etc. *Virmati* accompanied *Swarna* for the conference even with her worst health condition, when she felt weak *swarna* gave her courage. *Virmati* came across women like *Mohini Datta*, *Sita Rallia*, *Mary Singh*, *Mrs Leela Mehta* who were involved in the National movement. They all appeared so remote from her. She begins to contemplate.

- "I am not like these women. They are using their minds organizing, participating in conference, politically active, while my time is being spent in love, but then how come I have never have a moment for anything else? *Swarna* does. And she even has a 'friend' who lives in the city." (DD:142)

And as these newly awakened women carried out research projects, wrote and spoke about the problems and attempted to institute new programs, they too faced challenges. Their own institutions and families were less supportive than expected and recipients of this attention were always grateful even then they echoed for the nation and fought for the revolution, participated in the organizations and conferences and they remain clear headed about their decision and what needed to be done. Education made them articulate for their freedom and overwhelmingly leads them to participate for the nation's freedom. Their deviant behaviour has become acceptable due to their knowledge and redefined them. *Kapur* speaks about another sort of women *Kasturi* and *Ganga*, where *Kasturi's* education made her enter into a decent family whereas *Ganga's* ignorance of not being educated made her to share the life with *Virmati*. *Kasturi* and *Ganga*, remain within the conventions designed by numerous cultural traditions. There are vivid portrayals of the changing scenes in *Difficult Daughter*. The reasons for educating a girl may be to get a bridegroom but men are prepared to send them to school are no more interested in child marriages.

*Manju Kapur* shows *Kasturi's Virmati's* mother who got education through *Arya Samaj* only to enter into the decent family, which made her marriage whereas *Ganga* uneducated *Harish's* wife lost her life due to her state and *Virmati* in search of education and intelligent fell into the life where she finally desolate of her own state. Finally, she achieved intelligence through her education and freedom through her Job. *Manju Kapur* initiated the idea of how woman were meted out of their system through education.

When we go to *Anita Desai* she portrays the subtle way of how women are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu, by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents in "Fasting Feasting." She mentions that how freedom remains as an abstract idea and identity an elusive concept, that's how when sudden deluge of ideas hit them and they order their eldest daughter, *Uma* to carry them out without delay. *Uma* is suppressed, repressed and imprisoned at home and she was trapped with the responsibility in taking care of her brother. She can't even liberate herself through education as she is the poor performer. *Kapur* has illustrated the changes incurred in the daughters due to education, whereas *Anita Desai* shows the concept of education as the way to get into marriage and here too woman succumbs, fights and is over ruled by the environment they belong to. The elder daughter *Uma*

fails and restricted by the parents whereas Aruna the younger daughter over powers through the confidence attained through education and tackles the situation and even protest against her parents to live the life as she wishes. Aruna's life and her problem are different from that of Uma and Anamika. When Anamika and Uma lost their identity to seek freedom, Aruna achieves it in a different way. Aruna is bright and pretty and exists because of the way she could handle the problems. Desai project Anamika cousin of Uma and Aruna is intelligent and beautiful. Her excellence in education does not provide a happy life. She was brilliant enough to get scholarship for her studies and her parents did not send her abroad instead they kept the scholarship letter as the matter of pride to show it to the bridegroom.

- “The scholarship was one of the qualifications they were able to offer when they started searching for a husband for her, and it was what won her a husband who was considered an equal to this prize of the family.” (FF:70)

With all these elegances and qualifications, she has been tortured by her in-laws and finally murdered by her mother-in-law. Her education didn't give courage to face the family. Instead she had become submissive in her ways and finally murdered by the family. Desai portrays the two types of women who without education and poised elegance with utter ignorance lost her marriage life and another one with all these qualities loser her life and burnt to ashes. Desai's portrayal of Aruna differs from Uma and Anamika who wins her life, by having control over life. In these two writers the characters tried to attain the fullness through education. Virmati sternly persist to get education but at the same time she gets admiration towards intelligence which leads to destruct her personal life. Anita Desai's character reveals that education along with the assertiveness lead woman to the harmony in marital life.

Githa Hariharan focuses on how an educated woman looking for companionship is thwarted by her husband and pictures psychological traumas of the frustrated house wife. In Githa Hariharan's **Thousand faces of Night** the protagonist Devi, her mother Sita, her grandmother and Mayamma, the retainer in Devi's Father-in-law's house are all protestors of sort. Often their protest is silent and subtle after being subdued to torture. The age of Hariharan is undisputedly the most complex phase of the cultural history of India. There were quick transitions and subtle and unpredictable changes that redefined the identity of individual in general and of a woman in particular. The transition of cultural phase has been forcefully accelerated as the spread of education is also a factor of great significance in the life of the woman. The spread of education was confined to make people literate but it had new functions of perform. Education and employment redefined the women to become the integral part of this wave. The protagonist Devi succumbed to this marital pressure even after obtaining a degree from the USA and she returns only to fall prey to the chaffing pressures imposed upon her by the old existing order. She was asked to obey the customs of marriage.

- “So they were looking for an accomplished bride, a young woman who would talk intelligently to her scientist husband's friends, but who would also be, as all the matrimonial ads in the Sunday papers demanded, fair, beautiful, home –loving and prepared to adjust.” (TFN:17)

After frequent visits, stranger called Mahesh regional manager was accepted as her partner as he fulfilled her mother's expectations. Her marriage got over and she wished to share feelings with her husband but he was detached and did not participate in her sentiments but alas only telling about himself. Devi gets tired and feels that she has only been listening to his stories and achievement.

- “I find I can barely suppress my increasing longing to say, yes we have said enough about your work, your tours, your company. A marriage cannot be forced into suddenly being there, it must grow gradually, like a delicate but promising sapling.” (TFN:49).

These thoughts of sharing and a desire to be understood arise because of her education. When Mahesh was away for his office accomplishments she spends her time with her father-in-law and listened to his music and collection of records. She is interested in learning Sanskrit and expressed her wish to her husband and immediately gets the reply that it is useless. “Don't be foolish”, he said. The English translations are good enough. And what will you do with all this highbrow knowledge.” (TFN:52). She felt she was striped by the stranger, who snaps his fingers and demanded a smiling handmaiden. She felt her education had left her unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of her womanhood. Her loneliness made her to apply for the post of a research assistant but she was stopped by her husband. Even though she was educated, she could not get the information about her husband's profile and when she asked about his job he stopped her saying that she would not understand and that it was necessary for her.

- “There is a lot of paper work of course, letters, reports, plans of action and targets. Then we have to know what the market wants. More important, some of us have to tell the market what it wants.” (TFN:71).

Devi belongs to the bandwagon of awakened woman who want more. She is not a hard-core feminist who protests instantly but of a milder variety who first work towards an amicable solution. She is bold enough to take risk as she has seen life from close quarters and wants to live. In her search for care, concern and commitment she walks out of wedlock courageously. Devi's education and knowledge does not allow her life to accept the practical approach in her life and she takes the extreme step. Her education doesn't allow her to accept the norms in the social life as she has already been disturbed by the grandmother's stories. She is not a passive acceptor of what life could offer, she has an inbuilt sense of revolt-a trait which she inherits from her father-in-law. Her grandmother's stories have a profound influence on her mind. She does not accept her grandmother's versions of Amba, Gandhari and Damayanti, the puranic women. In fact, she transforms herself into an active participant; viewing them as a source of over rich, ‘unadulterated nourishment’ the stories fill her mental canvas and act as a tool of empowerment. Though she does not fully agree with her grandmother's stories, she does not fully agree with her grandmother's stories, she feels desolate when her grandmother dies. Her final union with her mother can be seen as frantic attempts of an alienated woman trying to seek a haven of shelter and security. In Devi the reader can see a modern girl who has her roots in the Hindu Tradition, the mythical stories and legends and bold enough to take her freedom.

In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* there are five different women and their struggle to search for identity and gives her writing a sharpness and immediacy that lifts it above the common place. Five women travelling in a ladies' compartment share their personal life. Among them is Akhila, single, mid-forties, and her family's sole bread winner. One day she seized by a nameless desire to get on to train and travel to the farthest point on the map of India. After completion of responsibilities and duties, she finds that she reached to the age of forty and finds no one in the family thinks of Akhila's needs, as she lives a lonely life and then finds a male companion. Anita Nair projects almost other characters like Margaret Paulraj, Janaki, Prabha Devi, Marikolunthu and Sheela. Nair pictures Margaret Paulraj a chemistry teacher who reduces everything into combination of acids, alkalines and gases. She explains to Akhila that Prabha Devi and Janaki were women who need support to live in the life as the climber needs support to grow and tender and soft creature to respond to their desire and willingness. "They are nice women but they are kind who don't feel complete without man. They might say otherwise but I know them and women like them. Deep in their hearts, they think the world has no use for single woman." (LC:95).

She identified her husband with narcissistic qualities after marriage and transformed herself as water, the Universal solvent and took the power to dissolve his kingdom. Education or knowledge has nothing to do here, she was quiet and admissible for his ways as she loved him and was trying to accept the things happening around as she was advised by her family that she should listen and never should hurt him. She started to feed his ravenous prey with the spicy food and blotted him with the flesh to retire him from the feelings and made him a fragile creature to handle easily as the puppet.

- "If ebe had weakness, it was food. He loved eating the richer food, fatty bacon, roe filled, sardines, chicken liver, the globs of fat that butchers threw in to make up for the bones when selling mutton, double-yoked eggs, mangoes with cream and ripe sapodillas, puris, fritters, chips-heavy with oil." (LC:123)

She recognized his need, made him blur, blunted his razor edge tantalized his appetite for food and sex and after winning herself she made him imperative earlier to self reverted the love, tender, affection with butterfly kisses. Oil of vitriol with universal solvent splutters at first, but loses its strength, loses its bits. She doesn't wait for the society to teach her things instead learnt tactics and trickery, to hate and fear in silence, to learn to thwart him, to deceive him and finally she fulfils her desire in maternity, and through the child she found realization sexually and socially, she attains her purpose.

In Akhila's life education does not prevail to change her mind or life, but her job and independence gave her security. She waited for the approval of the society or the freedom to make her life complete, to fight the loneliness is the question that we have and the answer appears to be that she is hesitant to take a bold step. Mere economic independence is not enough to break the bondage. Akhila's transition to the higher stage of her evolution occurs when she decides to call off her relationship with Hari. In other sense Akhila's decision to call off her relationship with Hari marks yet another important milestone in her evolution as an autonomous woman who is in search of 'Self'. Education and employment have thus empowered woman to take individual decisions boldly. These novelists have direct contact with the middle class, so they have depicted and explored their world with full confidence and launched upon various problematic areas to bring forth change and improvement in the existing conditions of the society.

### 3. Consequences of Evolution

Historical circumstances and values in India have caused feminists to develop feminism that differs from Western feminism. In the changing scenario of post colonial Indian Society that observed cross currents of traditional ideals and newly imported ones and Indian women writers were burdened with the task of giving the women characters' specific roles that would fit in the socio-cultural modes and values of the changed society. The new generation of women emerged, embracing the changed values according to which women have a voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. These women, who have the capacity to make free choice and need not therefore depend on the choice of the male, are portrayed in the novels of the new generation women novelists. "Breaking off, from the traditional male-dominated works that focused on public subjects and public space." (Gupta, 19). A change has been taking place, in a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas, marital bliss and the women's role at home has been the central focus.

In *Difficult Daughters*, the second protagonist of third generation, Ida revolts against the ways and follies of her mother Virmati. She embarks on her search to know her mother's legacy after she dies.

- "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I started at the fire that rose from her shrivelled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half-dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept." (DD:1)

When Virmati revolts against patriarchal values, her mother takes it to be a revolt against patriarchal values, her mother takes it to be a revolt against her own self. There is an unresolved dichotomy in the character portrayal of Virmati the female protagonist. While she is strong willed to resist all kind of social and family pressure, she is not strong to stay from professor's influence. Whereas professor's wife has to accept the betrayal of her husband due to her uneducated state and remains within conventions. In the same novel we have women fought for freedom, women who enjoy their independence got through education by taking part in Independence movement. Shakuntala and Swarnalata are representatives of a certain female type that recurs in Indian literature. In Desai's novel the protagonist is conditioned to think that it is important to please others. Hence in spite of being conscious of what she wants, she does not fight for it and hence does not get it. Aruna being conscious and demanding gets it, Anita Desai portrays that during this transitional period, freedom was not given that easily. Only people who had the strength could liberate themselves. Anita Desai voices her opinion about how women struggle hard to create their space in one of her interview:

- "Men don't worry how women are depicted as they have a sense of security of their space, personal rights and self-esteem envelops them and is born out of deep-rooted traditions. This makes them less afraid of being depicted wrongly, but a woman is still trying hard to fight for her space that it makes her extra sensitive." (Desai: 20)

Githa Hariharan protagonist Devi turns herself into avenging heroine, a conflict that demands female sacrifice in order to resolve her state like Gandhari, the woman who decides to live blindfolded because her husband was blind, the woman breast feeds her snake child, and though her sacrifices reverses her husband's metamorphosis, like Mayamma the house-keeper insulted, beaten up left to starve by her mother-in-law and even raped by her husband. Her own mother forced to give up playing veena. These and other episodes multiply the images of Knives, cutting and bleeding in a word, the point of sacrifice. She thinks all these consequences and sacrifices of the woman and slowly drifts from the role of dutiful wife. Devi turns out to be unconventional and her mother unlike other mothers of the earlier decades is prepared to face the society. Anita Nair's protagonist Akhila's decision to call off her relationship with Hari marks yet another important milestone in her evolution as an autonomous woman.

There is a gradual acquisition of new values and ideologies related to liberty, equality, nationalism, a rational outlook and a zeal for social justice. Unlike the previous generation which accepted a secondary position submissively they look for companions and support. These women writers try to show the changes during the last four decades by portraying their protagonists' diversities in their attitude in searching for their identity within themselves. All these writers recorded the marital disharmony and family disintegration that are the consequences of the changing outlook in women. An attempt has been made in this research work to portray the changes that have come about in society through the writings of Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair.

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