



# Indian Women Writers: Feminist Perspective

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## Abstract

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. As a political term it is a twentieth century invention and from 1960 it is a familiar part of everyday language. Feminism is invariably linked to the women's movement and attempt to advance the social role of women. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote the first major feminist text - A vindication of the rights of women (1792) in this book she stressed the equal rights of women especially in education on the basis of the personhood. The U.S. feminist Betty Friedan attacked the cultural myths. Simone de Beauvoir the French novelist, social theorist criticised the patriarchal culture. These feminist activists influenced the world and when our country was looking forward in creating its own identity in literature writing. Prominent Indian writers wrote about Indian society and culture. As a social movement, feminism largely focuses on limiting or eradicating gender inequality, promoting women's rights, interests, and other related issues of women in society. In this paper I will discuss some of the prominent Indian feminist writers who focussed on the issues of women in their renowned novels.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Women, Movement, Eradicate, Rights, Vindication

**DOI Number:** 10.48047/nq.2017.15.2.1074

**NeuroQuantology 2017; 15(2): 284-291**

## Introduction

Indian women writers are being recognised as major contemporary writers in the world. Anita Desai have won world wide acclaim for the quality of their writings and their imaginative use of literary work. Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. The factors contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women writers have observed no domestic space. The Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. Indian Women Writers are victims of a second prejudice vis-a-vis their regional counterpart's. Proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intelligent, affluent and educated classes. Writer's works are often therefore, belong to high social strata and cut off from the reality of Indian life. As, Chaman Nahal writes about feminism in India: "Both the awareness of woman's position in society as one of disadvantage or in generality compared with

is advantages."

The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. This subject matter is often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women. Indian writing in English is now gaining ground rapidly. In the realm of fiction, it has heralded a new era and has earned many laurels both at home and abroad. Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination.

They are no longer puppets in the hands of man. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively and are showing it even today without any hurdle. Today, the works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers.

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**Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest



A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centred approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. As Patricia Meyer Specks remarks, "There seems to be something that we call a women's point of view on outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the countries." Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. The theme is from childhood to womanhood-developed society respecting women in general. Santha Rama Rau's 'Remember for the House,' (1956), Ruth Pravar]habvala's first novel 'To whom she will', 1955 and her later novel 'Heat and Dust' (1975)', Kamla Markandya's 'Two Virgins'(1994), Rama Mehta's 'Inside the Haveli' (1977), and Geeta Hariharan 'The Thousand Faces of Night (1992)' are some of the leading women writers writing in India.

The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus. displacement. Women's presentation is more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past is.

### **Prominent Feminist Women writers in India**

The last three decade has seen the emergence of prominent Feminist in Indian Literature to begin with Shashi Deshpande.

### **Shashi Deshpande's Writings**

Shashi Deshpande is the second daughter of the famous Kannada dramatist in Karnataka and Sanskrit Scholar Shriranga. She did a graduation in Journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Mumbai and worked for a

couple of months as a journalist for the magazine 'On Looker'. Her first novel 'The Dark Holds No Terror' was published in June 1999. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akadami award, for her novel 'That long silence'. Her third famous novel is 'Roots and Shadows'. She has projected objectively a new female face with subjective experiences with a geocentric vision. She reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. Her writings are rooted in the culture in which she lives. Her remarks are sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences and give an artistic expression to something that is simple and mundane. Her feminism is particularly Indian in the sense that it is borne out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities. The women characters are with traditional approaches trying to tie family and profession to maintain the virtues of Indian culture.

Shashi Deshpande's novel 'A Matter of time' is a continuation of her exploration into the many facets of the feminine experience in writing. In this novel, she has displayed the themes of silence, gender differences, passive sufferings and familiar relationships into much deeper realms. It is a story encompassing three generations of women coming to terms with their life in and all female worlds. The relation women characters share with their men is home red with silence, absence or indifference. The pain of disintegration of the family troubles Aru, who consider herself for her father's action and sets out to undo it. It is in this stifling atmosphere the characters evolve and come to a newer understanding of their lives. The role of fury and destiny are playing as main themes around which Deshpande weaves her tale. Deshpande explains role of fury in her words, "I thought of Puradars's line, the hour strikes and I was terrified. I stopped believing in the life I was leading suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I know I could not go on."

Deshpande's simple yet powerful prose reads like a grandmother's tale that pierces the deep into heart and settles. At one point, the use of omniscient narration teases the reader as the speaker forces events but is not to share until time and plot unfolds it. Deshpande's 'A Matter



of Time and Salman Rushdie's' Fury 'both novels spun around theme of existential fury. Deshpande brings Rushdie's novel out from howling New York City to a calm and mediating Karnataka and his hills in the gaps a reader might have had left craves for. The underlying theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels is human relationships especially the ones that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife, between mother and daughter. In all relationships, the women occupy the central stage and significantly, the narration shifts through her feminine consciousness. In her novels, three types of suffering women characters reoccur with subtle changes. The first type belongs to the protagonist's mother or the mother figure, the traditional woman, who believes that her place is with her husband and family.

The second type of woman is bolder more self-reliant and rebellious. She cannot confirm to mythological, submissive and surrender vision of womanhood. As radical feminist, ideology expressed, for example, Sarah's friend Nathan in the 'Dark Holds No Terror'.

The third, type of women characters, are the women in between neither traditional nor radical in their ideas and practice. For Example, Indu in 'Roots and Shadows', leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home. Being a woman herself, she sympathises with women. As Shashi Deshpande clarifies in one of the interviews about feminist approach in her writing, "If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world."

### **Manju Kapur's Writings:**

The other, noted novelist under the study is Manju Kapur: a professor of English at Miranda House in Delhi. Her first Novel 'Difficult Daughters' received the Common Wealth Award for the Eurasian region. Her novel 'A married woman' is a seductive story of a love at a time of political and religious upheaval, and is told with sympathy and intelligence.' A Married woman' is the story of an artist whose canvas challenges

the constraints of middle class existence. Manju Kapur describes through her protagonist (Asha), "A woman should be aware of self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense."

Asha like to have a break from dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses a threat to Hemant and his male superiority. However, she finds herself trapped between the pressures of the modern developing society and shackles of the ancient biases. She sets out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship. She canonizes and commemorates her insulted feminine sensibility raising the male tantrum to social transformation in the society. Manju Kapur in 'Difficult Daughters' presents the image of suffering women. In post-colonial era, partition has ever been the most prolific and prominent area for creative writers. During this phase, number of novels were written on the theme of the destruction. It brings the plight and provides a sad telling commentary on the breakdown on human values.

In her writings, Manju Kapur has emphasised on the issues in the context of patriarchy; inter-religious marriage; family bond, male-female bond, co-existence of past and present. She has narrated her women protagonists as a victim of biology, gender, domestic violence, and circumstances. Kapur thinks that, "There is a man within every woman and a woman in every man. When, manhood is questioned womanhood is fragmented." A major pre-occupation in recent Indian women's writings has been a delineation of Inner life and subtle relationships. In a culture where, individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the women's role at home is the central focus. It is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural diversion.

### **Anita Desai's Writings**

Anita Desai, the other great novelist of the



Indian English fiction was born in 1937. Anita Desai is unquestionably one of the celebrated Indian-English fiction writers. She holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelists of India. She has to her credit a large number of creative works and a coherently growing readership throughout the world. She has published ten novels and other literary works of immense value. Anita Desai's women characters in her novels rebel against patriarchal community in order to explore their own potential or to live on their own terms, regardless of the consequences that such a rebellion may have on their lives. They take the position of outsiders to fight and criticize those cultural ideologies that come in their way of becoming free individuals, self-chosen withdrawal, for these women, takes on the form a weapon for survival in a patriarchal community. Desai's women, thus, want freedom within the community of men and women, as it is the only way that will succeed in fulfilling them. In fact, Desai's model of an emancipated woman Bimala in the novel *Clear Light Of Day*, is an unmarried woman.

Her married women characters like Maya in *Cry, a Peacock*, *Monishain*, *The City*, *Nanda in Fire in the Mountain*, and *Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer?* become depressed, violent or self-destructive. They either lose their sanity or kill others, or they kill or destroy themselves. The nemesis of these women is not a private one but an outgrowth of the complex social context, immediate family environments and the relationships with their men. Many of Desai's protagonists are portrayed as single women. Desai does not neglect the institution of marriage or support alienation from society. Some of her women characters, like Tara in '*Clear Light of Day*', do achieve fulfilment in their marriages. Instead, through Bimala, Desai points to a kind of feminist emancipation that lies in not limiting women to their traditional roles but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities. Their kind of life, apart from being invigorating, also frees them from dependence on men. Bimala, through her individual freedom, exemplifies Simon De Beauvoir's description of an independent woman in her book. *The Second Sex*, where she

asserts that, "Ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumble; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator."

As Anita Desai says, "I don't think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging." Anita Desai's first novel, '*Cry, The Peacock*' is concerned with its chief protagonist Maya's psychological problems. As a young sensitive woman, Maya wish to love and to live. She makes up the mind of her father, Gautama who is much older than she is. Maya is haunted constantly by the rationalistic approach of her husband to the affairs of life. Maya loves Gautama passionately and desires to be loved in return; but Gautama's coldness disappoints her. The root of the entire novel lies in the prophecy of albino astrologer, who creates a fear psychosis in Maya's mind, "The astrologer, that creeping sly magician of my hallucinations, no of course they were not hallucinations. Arjun had proved them to me and yet said they be real? Had never said anything to suggest that it was I who has to die, unnatural and violently for years after my marriage, nothing to suggest that he even thought that."

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This prophecy becomes troublesome to her unconscious mind. Anita Desai works on revealing the varying mental states, psychic observations, inner motives and existential pursuits of man. She succeeds fully in breaking non-grounds for her fictional art among her contemporary while dealing with the predicament of man and his social and moral dilemmas. Desai like Kafka unfolds the existential traits of man in society. She analyses a man in action in order to reveal his hidden motives behind the facial reality of conscious mind.

### **Ashapura Devi's Writings**

Ashapura Devi has focus on the revival of a reformed traditional womanhood that would accommodate women's need for self-expression. Like Desai and Bhandari, she considers education of women to be of utmost importance. She does so because she sees women, and not just men, as agents of female



oppression. Therefore, she is more critical of women than she is of men, who she feels are able to dominate women because dependent and insecure older women like mothers and mothers-in-law help them to do so. In her Trilogy, 'Pratham Pratishruti', Subarnalata and Bakul Katha. Ashapura Devi traces the progression of the feminist movement from colonial to post-colonial periods in India. She finds that the contemporary, educated and economically independent women, like Bakul in Bakul Katha, the last part of her trilogy, have become more self-centred than, the women of earlier generations, like Satyvasi and Subarnalata in Pratham Pratishruti and Subarnalata respectively.

More importantly and ironically, Ashapura Devi finds that their freedom has not brought them closer to other women. Ashapura Devi advocates a re-vision of traditional community where the relations between men and women and between older and younger women are not based on the subservience of one to the other, but where women enjoy the same rights and privileges as men in an affirmation of human values. To get peace at home Ashapura Devi wants women to break the walls of psychological imprisonment located inside them. The community, for Ashapura Devi, should become the foundation that would free women by providing them the solid ground to stand firmly. She shows how the individual or smaller self finds liberation from pain and isolation.

### **Ismat Chugtai's Writings**

Ismat Chugtai, the other prominent writer attracts our attention with her novel 'The Hearts Breaks Free', brings the story of oppressed people like Bua. Here, Chugtai shows the youthful, vital, nonchalant and exuberant Bua is in trouble, physically and in spirit, when she submits to the so-called reforming control of the traditional family. In contrast, rebellious Qudsia and Shabir, by isolating themselves from the traditional community, are able to find a new, fulfilling life. Chugtai has vision of feminist utopia, which preserves the identity and happiness of the oppressed subjects. It is not conspicuously transformative as far as the patriarchal structure is concerned. What Shabir and

Qudsia are able to achieve is a blissful separatist retreat from the world, an individualistic and subjective feminist utopia that does not offer any synthesis of sociality and individuality within the normative community.

Chugtai's novel openly reveals and reinforces the revolutionary and reconstructive features of their utopian community to the society. So that it can see how the outsiders' community function as a family in an extended sense, but it is different from the traditional Indian family where the men's and elders authority quickly takes over, and women are forced to earn merit by sacrifice. Some critics have raised concerns regarding the viability of such feminist utopias. In her article, 'The Ideal community and the politics of Difference', Iris Young argues utopian societies by negating the existing social structures negate the concept of social change or evolution and thereby become static, functioning outside time or history."

### **Chhaya Dattar's Writings**

Chhaya Dattar and Popati Hiranandani try to create self-authenticating reflective spaces that liberate by disconnecting their women characters from their patriarchal constructed socialities. Chhaya Dattar, in her autobiographical story 'In Search of me', describes her experiences as a social worker in the tribal world. While recording, the unionized activities of the farm labours, who are mostly, women. These women are cut off temporarily from her own feminist problems. Attar experiences an inexplicable contentment that comes through the connection with one's self, symbolised in the story by the author's uninvited communion with tribal landscape that frees her, for those few days, from her social fears and uncertainties.

Dattar's response to her surroundings possesses a poetic and dramatic intensity that articulates her newly found energy and creativity and she begins to reconstitute herself by looking at what has constituted her. The act of analysing this discovery First part, strengthens her to exert her own agency over her controlling family members. Apart from the contemplative spaces, Dattar finds empowerment from watching the tribal



women unveil their individuality, by using their voices to assert their concerns. Their individual invisibility begins to shatter as they try to make visible collective solidarity. The transformed spectacle, of the otherwise yielding tribal women into loud voices, clearly articulating their right to decent and respectful human hood, empowers the author to plan her own escape from the confinement of objectification.

Dattar, thus, shows that the individual spaces of feminist liberation are hinged on the interdependence of women. The collective solidarity of women, in Dattar's vision, punctuates the growth. It is unique and personal because power is derived from the collective vocal and active marginality. Dattar asserts that, "it is the women's community that can enable each woman to claim with authority the unique identity and freedom that has been denied to her by the patriarchal community. 'Dattar's vision of feminist liberation provide avenues of becoming in the world as the registering of women's experiences, in her story, is framed by an engagement with their denial of dependence and self-sacrifice. Freedom, in the writings of both the authors, is primarily a mental phenomenon....where women think to prepare for a transformation of consciousness. Dattar provides images of feminist subjects, actively creating their own destinies and these images 'stand in contrast to the iconic figure of the female as passive, culturally fixed in an objective relationship in which she is always the inferior.

### **Bharti Mukherjee's writings**

Bharti Mukherjee, the other post-colonial writer was born on July 27, 1940 at Calcutta she has done her M.A. in English and Ancient Indian culture from the Baroda University and her Doctor of Philosophy, in English and cognitive literature in 1969, From Iowa, university, United States. Mukherjee's works focusses on the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expectation as well as an Indian women and their struggle. Her own struggle with identity first as an immigrant from India then an Indian expatriate in Canada and finally as an immigrant in the United States has led to her

current contentment of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants.

Her important works are 'The Tiger's Daughter 1972' and 'Days and Nights'. The Tiger's Daughter is a story about a young girl named 'Tara' who ventures back to India after many years of being away to return to poverty and turmoil. The second phase of her writing encompasses works such as 'Wife', 'An invisible woman' (Essay), 'The Sorrow and the Terror'. In 'Wife', (1975) Mukherjee writes about a woman named Simple who has been suppressed by such man and attempts to be the ideal Bengali wife. Out of fear and personal inability she murders her husband and eventually commits suicide. In her third phase, She wrote 'Leave it to me (1997)' Where she tells the story of a young woman named Debby Di Martino who seeks revenge on parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents. The novel also looks at the conflict between eastern and western worlds and at mother-daughter relationships through the political and emotional topics by the main character in her quote for the revenge.

### **Kamala Markandya's Writings**

Another renowned novelist of the modern Indian fiction is Kamala Markandaya born in 1924. She was a graduate of Madras University. She moved to Britain after India's Independence and is known for writing about cultural clashes between Indian urban and rural societies. Markandya has published her first novel, 'Nectar in a Sieve' (1955). Her other works are 'Some Inner Fun (1965)', A Silence of Desire (1961), Possession (1963), A handful of Rice (1966), The nowhere man (1972), The Rising (1973), The Golden Honey Comb (1977) and Pleasure City (1982). Kamala's 'Nectar in a Sieve' is about a strong hero, character by the name of Rukmani. As she narrates her story, the readers are involved in her pain. Losing sons and seeing her daughter became a prostitute, Rukmani still stands strong. Rukmani the main character and her daughter Ira display suffering through the novel. Rukmani works hard and is devoted to her gentle husband. Rukmani has faced Poverty, famine, and divorce of her barren daughter, the deaths of her sons, her daughter's



prostitution and finally her husband's death.

### **Kiran Desai's Writings**

Kiran Desai born in 1971 is an Indian author who is citizen of India and a permanent resident of the USA. Her novel 'The Inheritance of loss' won the 2006 Booker prize and the National Book Critics Circle fiction award. Her first novel 'Hullabaloo' published in 1998, won 'Betty Trask Award', a prize given by the society of Authors for the new novels by citizens of the Commonwealth of nations under the age of 35. 'The Inheritance of Loss' opens with a teenage Indian girl, an orphan called Sai, living with her Cambridge educated Anglophile grandfather, a retired judge, in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. Sai is romantically involved with her maths tutor, Gyan, the Descendant of a Nepali Ghurkha mercenary, but he eventually recalls from her obvious privilege and falls in with a group of Ethnic Nepalese insurgents. .

Kiran Desai has handled several major issues of modern civilisation in her second novel. The concept of globalisation is multisided. It has economic, political, social, cultural and educational aspects. It may create an opportunity or a danger, because of Globalisation, situations have changed, new concepts have emerged and people have stepped out their areas of confinement to find company and competency among their counter parts. Dr. Shubha Mukherjee remarks "Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' presents the picture of globalised India. The characters like Jamubhai Patel, Mrs and Mr Mistry, Sai, Biju Nonita and Lolita are affected by Globalisation. As intelligent writer and careful observer of human behaviour, Kiran Desai fulfils the responsibility of writing about current sensational issues." At Such moments, Desai seems far from writers like Zadie Smith and Hari Kudzu whose fiction takes a generally optimistic view of what Salman Rushdie has called, "Hybridity, impurity, inter mingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, and songs."

### **Conclusion**

Female identity is a very complicated concept

in the contemporary era. In addition to that, it becomes more complicated when discussed in reference to gender socialisation, violence, and exploitation. Identity is the convergence between self and subjectivity. The selected novels portray the characters who suffer in their situation. Women characters are lurking between tradition and modernity. Thus, they get humiliated with a situation that is 'to do or not to do'. In this situation, they want to empower their self but the patriarchal ideologies subjugate them.

In conclusion, the investigation demonstrates feminism is a battle for equality of women, a push to cause women to end up like men. The agonistic meaning of feminism considers it to be the battle against all types of man centric and hottest animosity. This examination uncovers the development of Indian Feminism and its advancement. Indian women scholars have put the issues of Indian women in general and they have demonstrated their place in the universal literature.

A great part of the early changes for Indian women were directed by men. Be that as it may, by the late nineteenth century they were joined in their endeavours by their spouses, sisters, relatives and different people legitimately influenced by battles, for example, those completed for women's training. By the late twentieth century women got more prominent self-governance through autonomous women's associations. Women's interest in the battle for opportunity built up their basic attention to their job what's more, rights in autonomous India.

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