
A Critical Analysis of a Few Indian Women's Fictions

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Abstract

This essay aims to shed light on how traditional women become New Women in a selection of works by Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Easterine Kire. It demonstrates how the female characters in these works give readers a voice and a sense of individual identity both within the family and in society. How today's New Women reject prevailing customs and societal structures, grow more aware of their emotional needs, and pursue self-fulfillment. Through the main characters of the chosen story, we can observe how they overcame the traditional setting of marriage and lived their entire lives without being married. This essay has made an effort to illustrate how women in chosen works of fiction by eminent Indian writers have fought for their freedom, self-identity, and representation.

Keywords- *New Woman, Identity, Self-fulfillment, Freedom, Individuality.*

Introduction

The word 'New Woman' was coined by Sarah Grand in 1894. According to Dr. Andrzej Diniejko, the 'New woman' was a cultural phenomenon striving for self-fulfillment and autonomy rather than sacrifice, prefers to be single than victimized by the conventional marriage set up. The term indicated intelligent, independent, educated and emancipated woman defying the stereotypical image of a woman. It was a voice raised against male supremacy and an attempt to re-demarcate gender role. The 'new women' in their quest for identity, liberty and individuality act and react in radical ways to the set conventional construct.

The second half of the 20th century witnessed numbers of women writers producing works that showcased the changing position of women in society. Women writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee, Bharati Mukherjee and Easterine Kire from North-east India dealt with the theme of diaspora, immigration like an identity crisis, cultural conflict, assimilation and multiculturalism in their

works. These writers also started to write for the women's welfare by projecting light on the women's issue and female subjugation and their writing give a new identity to the women of modern times.

Discussion

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the prolific Indian English writers who in her works presented modern Indian woman's search for identity to create her own place in society. Her new woman is conscious of her identity and right in the society and make a place for herself in the patriarchal society. Sahgal's novel *The Day in Shadow* is the story of a woman's attempt to establish her personhood. Simrit, novel's main protagonist is an educated woman and yet she allows her self-image to be battered by her patriarchal domination. At last, she gathers up the courage to live him only when he himself refuses to continue with a failed marriage. The novel examines and stresses the urban, affluent class milieu in a metropolitan situation, only to bring home an equally grim reality of Indian women's plight. The protagonist of the novel rejects the existing traditions and social set-up, rather she becomes more conscious of her emotions and self-fulfillment. She tries to attain her individuality within the framework of society. Simrit, in the novel emerges as a new woman who does not want to compromise with her uniqueness and identity. Another novel by Sahgal, *A Time to Be Happy* in which she advocates the need for women's individual freedom and her journey towards the reach of her own selfhood. It is the story of the protagonist Maya and her struggle to free from marital bondage and takes refuge in an extra marital relationship. Her marriage was doomed from the beginning itself because of her and her husband Harish's diverse nature and different upbringings. The novel portrays the male dominance where woman abides by the words and orders of her male partner without any question being raised. Though Maya is fated and forced to live such scenario, she has the courage and perseverance to come out of it and attempts to enlighten the victimized women like her in the society to be aware of attaining the selfhood, individuality and identity in the society.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the significant writers of Indian diaspora who has emerged on the global literary scene with her remarkable writing. Her novel *The Lowland* is about family relations. It delineates the tender fraternal bond between Subhash and Udayan and how it gets affected by the various paths they chose in their lives. In the novel, Lahiri explores Gauri's expression of identity, her struggle with love, Bela's choice for individuality and pragmatism in life has turned the novel into a unique narrative. In her novel Jhumpa Lahiri gives a realistic image of the 'New Woman' through the major women characters who have a strong conviction for life and identity. Her novel *The Lowland*, devalue the patriarchal setup and the female protagonists are shown as breaking stereotyping norms of womanhood and motherhood. They compromise family ties to assert their position in society, independence and self-identity.

Another significant novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, into America over thirty years; the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their America born children in different ways; the cultural, spatial and emotional dislocations suffered

by them in their efforts to settle “home” in the new land. In this novel, woman character Ashima Ganguli, young- Bengali- American immigrant gives birth to, both culturally and physically her son Gogol. As the novel progresses, Ashima’s maternity, individual, familial and communal, only throughout the novel as Gogol and his intellectual identity develop. In the novel, Ashima begins a new chapter of her life after her husband’s death, in which she plans to travel, splitting her remaining years between Calcutta and America. Through the character of Ashima Ganguli, Lahiri tried to show how a woman from traditional Indian society adopted the new modern society in America and assimilates with them. Ashima is a woman who form her own identity as a mother and later as an individual in the alien land.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of diaspora, who has achieved position within a comparatively short creative span. Her writing is a celebration of freedom and Mukherjee through her writing presents struggle for identity, humiliation and the exile. Her novel *Miss New India*, which was published in 2011, revolves around nineteen years old girl named Anjali Bose. She belongs to a society where female sexuality is not seen as a personal or private matter, but a family concern. Through the novel’s story, Mukherjee realistically pictures the Indian society where life of a girl is directly linked with the honor of the family. Mukherjee has delineated the miserable position of traditional woman through the character of Sonali, but in contrast she portrays Anjali is a representative of modern Indian woman with her own individual voice. Mukherjee views Anjali as a symbol of resistance against complacency and full of dynamism and vigor and is in frequent quest for new prospects in modern twenty century India.

Jasmine published in 1989, is another novel of Bharati Mukherjee which stresses on the women empowerment through the character of Jasmine. Through the character of Jasmine Mukherjee portrays new age of woman or new woman who adopts the new lifestyle in an alien country. After her husband’s death, Jasmine tries to come out of her old identity as a widow and gives her a new identity of an American with resolutions. In the novel, Jasmine displays courage and the ability to survive in her various identities. She, in the novel, approaches life in a positive tone and leads a successful life.

North-eastern writers in their writings have always tried to represent the multi-ethnic cultural reality of the region and give a voice to the problems of political unrest and rampant violence that is fallout of the post-colonial nation building process. These North-eastern writers have taken up writing to reclaim and rewrite their history, to analyze gendered roles, whereas some have taken to writing to understand the supernatural. Women writers address the issue of marginalization, displacement and conflict suffered by the people of their regions through various fictions. Their writing represents coherent response to a changing social landscape and intercedes between the individual story and the history of community. Among such writer is Easterine Kire, one of the most prolific writers hailing from Nagaland, who has brought to the fore the traumatic experience of common Nga people living in the midst of violence.

Kire’s *A Respectable Woman*, published in 2019 is a novel which traces the aftermath of World War II and

its impact on the lives of people of her land. Kire's unconventional way of writing fiction through the memory of lived realities can also be seen in this particular novel. Unlike her earlier novels, which deals with the theme of trauma and displacement caused by the common people of her land during and after the Japanese invasion and World War, this novel *A Respectable Woman*, talks about two women's journey in different times but the same region. The narrative unravels through the memory of Azuo who was a child when Japanese invade Kohima in 1944 and traces the trajectory of her daughter Kevinuo's life in a changed Nagaland in modern times.

In the novel, *A Respectable Woman*, through the narrator Kevinuo, Kire presents us the new woman who is aware of her self- fulfillment and identity and breaks the stereotype of marriage and did not get married for the rest of her life. Kevinuo exposes many issues faced by them in the Nagaland of her day. The early days of alcoholism, depicted in the book, is of a far more benign nature, and she portrays the real account of how government of Nagaland passed the Nagaland Liquor Prohibition Act in 1989, that diminished the rampant violence against women and other alcohol related violence. In the present day of the novel, Kevinuo is seen challenging old customs, and holding a different opinion about marriage. She remained single and bread earner of her family. The novel brings to the forefront the receded history of the Nagas. Kire successfully fleshes out the emotions of her character, the trials and tribulations of the Naga Women. The novel, *A Respectable Woman*, redefines the defamation of respectability for all women in the process, and she is successful in making their silent history heard. Kire, through Kevinuo presents the new woman of contemporary time who defies the patriarchal notion of marriage and customs and able to achieve her own identity at the same time the narrative and the story of Kevinuo helps in formation of a collective Naga identity. Kire's novel layed out is the formation of own identities and assuming it with absolute pride.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the novels by these writer advocate 'New woman' that breaks the barrier of the notion of traditional Indian women who have been suppressed by patriarchal dominance for centuries and remained voiceless. In these selected novels we explore women's self-fulfillment, individuality and quest for their identity and how these things established the new feminine idea called 'new woman' in this modern society. These women characters in the selected novels try to defy the old customs and conventions set by previous generations where women were always treated as 'other' and placed them in lower positions. But these writers through their fictions created the female characters who rejected the notion and raised voice against how this male dominated society objectify women and suppressed their voices. The emergence of new womanhood and their self-fulfillment and identity helps to create and awareness among women from different social class and race to raise their voices against the oppression of patriarchal norms. It gives a voice to the voiceless and become aware of her needs and fulfillment to get an equal opportunity with men. The above writers have aptly presents through the characters of their fictions and making women aware of

their individuality and self- identity.

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