

# Ethics and Aesthetics of English Novels by Indian Women

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India's ambience for women has been varying with a lot of distinctiveness and peculiarities. Hence, it has met numerous ups and downs and enumerative upheavals time and again. Indian women are subjected to multifarious treatments under different situations and contexts. They are supposed to "secure a complete equality with men in the enjoyment of all human rights—moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so on" (Barche 127).

Our epics and mythology delineate women as mother of the universe; they are recognized and worshipped as Lakshmi—the goddess of wealth, Saraswati—the goddess of learning, Usha—the goddess of dawn and Shakti—the goddess of strength and prowess. Women, in the Vedic period, were allowed to have education. They were given liberty to choose their husbands, to participate in all the religious rites and ceremonies. Women of the post-Vedic era also enjoyed opportunities of intellectual as well as spiritual development. The status of men and women was at par. Great women disciples of Buddha like Goutami, Kshema and Ambapali attained the highest religious pedestal. The Guptas and Mauryas of ancient India used to adore women and grant them a huge amount of freedom and rights. They were also engaged as spies for the personal security and safety of the king.

The status of women got a rude shock with the advent of the medieval period. It was during this period that Islam gained a strong foothold on the Indian soil. Islam had its own injunctions for the betterment of women. Women were supposed to have shares in property, right to inherit and allowed divorce and remarriage. But in reality there was a striking contrast. Madhu Jha annotates, "The purdah system began to be introduced and women's education and freedom were curtailed. Evils such as polygamy, sati, prevention of widow remarriage and child marriages considerably lowered the status" (27).

Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi proved her mettle in the Indian Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 by taking on the British troops gallantly, though her effort ended in a heroic death. The eventful life has immortalized her in the pages of history. Women like Rani Laxmi Bai from royal families in the medieval period were compelled by the situation, to act and prove their competence not only on battlefield but also in administration. But, the common womenfolk were crippled and confined to numerous limitations and consequently, hobbled to be ignorant and illiterate.

The Indian sensibility was infested and infused by the British culture, religion and most significantly by the language which was introduced as the medium of education. As a whole,

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British language, culture and administration had a tremendous and extensive impact on our national character. Sundry movements for social, cultural and religious reforms began to sprout and were pioneered by the gallant band of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and women like Mrs. Annie Besant, Ramabai Ranade, Lady Bose, Bhikaji Cama, Swarnakumari Devi and many others. They rendered a yeoman's service to promote an avenue of opportunities for women. A great awakening was created among women who tried to outdo the unrelenting traditional modes and paradigms and come forward to claim their legitimate rights.

The principal aims and objectives of the movements were to abolish the abominable Sati system, to advocate widow marriage, to restrain female infanticide, to bring down the system of child marriage, to make education and all types of profession accessible to women, and henceforth, to create an atmosphere of equality. The freedom movement of India went through a lot of commotions and permutations. Women were invariably inspired to render active participation under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. He made them realize that they possessed virtues which made them superior to men in a non-violent fight where infinite patience was required. Spurred by the spirit of unity, integrity and patriotism, thousands of women came forward to participate in the freedom struggle. Women became extensively optimistic. They hoped to enjoy liberties and facilities at par with men. Being a secular and democratic nation, India has resolved to guarantee the equality of opportunity and to prohibit any sort of discrimination on the basis of sex, religion, class or creed.

The present status of women in India can be ascertained by going through various determinable indicators like sex ratio, literacy rate, work participation rate and crimes of different categories against them. Except for a privileged few, women in India largely have been leading a substandard life. The Indian women novelists in English have been articulating the factors responsible for victimization of women and demonstrating the ways for their emancipation till they gain equal status with their male-counterparts.

The remarkable trait of today's Indian English Literature is the rise of a galaxy of women writers who have been anchoring many facets of women's creativity. They have not only brought the important aspects of our individual and social life into the limelight, but also developed a trend with a purport and proposition. Moreover, they have acquired national as well as international acclaim and distinction through various reputed awards and honours.

It has been a tradition of Indian English writing to exhibit many-sided images of Indian woman. She is, occasionally, elated and elevated to the position of all powerful—*Shakti*, and at others, dragged and despaired as the underdog. But Indian women writers disclaim these traditional images nowadays. They strive to sketch a completely different picture. Veena Singh aptly remarks, "However, in recent years' writers particularly Indian women writers writing in English repudiate these images. In their works, woman emerges as an individual challenging her

existential survival....Their major concern has been the Indian woman's search for identity by setting her against her milieu" (36).

Women, as it is commonly held, have been deprived of their rights and robbed of the opportunities that their male partners have been enjoying freely. They have always been the victims of male domination and conquest. Reviewing women's position in India where it is traditionally regarded as a male-dominated society, Ashok Kumar states, "Consequently, in such a set-up, a purely social, platonic or intellectual relationship between man and woman becomes nearly impossible. A woman's individual self has very little recognition and self-effacements in her normal way of life. Indian woman too, as a part of that set-up, has accepted it and lived with it for ages" (09).

Litterateurs of this era in general and women novelists in particular are showing their unflinching inclination to propagate variety of social and political issues, cultural and emotional factors responsible for the continuity of male-dominated patriarchal society. They try to demonstrate, with all their disinterested endeavour and altruism, the victimization of women under various contexts and situations. Their focus is on the trauma and tribulations inflicted on women which are neither palpable nor palatable to a civilized society. Assessing the themes of women writers, K. Sandhya views, "Their main revolt is against male-chauvinism, patriarchy and their hue and cry is for identity, equality and a democratic way of life where they are treated like human beings on par with men" (26).

A host of women novelists are piloting the trend of making women as well as society conscious regarding the innumerable man-made cancers by which women are being thrust into the drab and drudgery of exploitation. They are R. P. Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamla Markandaya, Anita Desai, Indira Goswami, Santha Rama Rau, Gita Mehta, Rama Mehta, Bharti Mukherjee, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Sobha De, Getha Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai and Shashi Deshpande.

However, their sole motto is to ameliorate the plight of their sex. Shubha Tiwari points out, "Indian women novelists can be said to be highly conscious of the women's liberation movement. By and large, they have portrayed women and their stories with consciousness of the injustice being meted out to women by society" (19-20). The fictional works of these novelists, with their form, technique and theme, generally allow us a peep into their inner world and psyche to make us aware of their anger and anguish. Appraising women novelists in Indian writing in English, Amar Nath Prasad affirms, "In most of their writings they have tried their best to free the female mentality from the age long control of male domination" (16). They take cognizance of women's deteriorated condition due to certain determinate norms and conventions which promote gender discrimination and male-domination. Anita Ghosh propounds, "In their writings, postcolonial Indian women authors have not only exhorted an exposition of the patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive tendencies toward feminist growth and expression, but have also envisioned ways of counteracting those attitudes" (250).

Undoubtedly, the Indian woman has already started her journey to establish herself as a full-fledged individual equipped with self-identity and economic freedom. It is discernibly assessed by Veena Singh, Indian woman today is trying to break away from the ideals of Indian woman-hood. She does not want to be Sita, Savitri, Damayanti or Gandhari, hers is the condition of essential woman emerging in today's world. She gets exposed to the concept of liberation and she understands clearly about her journey of transformation from the timid, dependent and dumb person to a self-respecting, self-confident individual. Indian woman has recreated herself "to bestir herself to shake off the sloth of centuries which thwarts her personality. In this quest she wants to enjoy economic freedom which is very necessary to her independence" (37). Indian women novelists in English have intensely voiced their feelings against the inhuman treatment meted out to women and put all efforts on record to make them conscious about their rights and freedom by eradicating the imposed ignominy.

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