

Third World Women's Writing: An Overview

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(Literature: African and Indian/Commonwealth/Third World/Postcolonial)

Abstract

Women's writing in the present world have made a deep impact on the social and cultural ambience. It is perceived as an individual entity, making women's consciousness, experiences and values primary in the act of reading. The struggles of women and the difficulties they face in the oppressive mechanical society are well reflected in the literary writings, especially in the writings of women authors. Emergence of women's literature is an outcry of a group of people who have remained suppressed, disregarded and abandoned under patriarchy and vested political groups. Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. In an age of development and flux in every field, one cannot easily ignore half the population. In a post-colonial context, whether African, Caribbean or South Asian, English language carries with it a whole history of patriarchal myths and symbols whether originally instituted by the colonial power or later by primarily male-dominated movements towards nationalism and independence. There are obviously parallels between the experiences of women's oppression in previously colonized territories or the Third World countries and women's oppression worldwide. Contemporary women writers through their fiction have chosen to talk back, moving from silence into speech and standing for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. The focus of this paper is on the comparative study of Third World Women's Writing in an attempt to examine

the female condition of women in fictional works of Third World countries especially African literature and Indian literature.

Key words: Women's consciousness, Post-colonial context, Patriarchal myths, Gesture of defiance

Objectives:

1. As the topic chosen for the analysis is a comparative study of Third World women's writings, the main objective is to understand the role of patriarchy in the life of women from Third World countries as depicted in African and Indian women's writing.
2. To identify sustained efforts of women writers in crafting possibilities of liberating women's future from hegemonic power in Third World societies.

Introduction

Third World women's writing represents diverse female narratives and voices through different themes and styles. Shared concerns involve a commitment to portray women's narratives of oppression as structured by various powers, given that the female experiences represented in women's literature are functional in Third World feminism, which attempts to deconstruct the global sisterhood model and the figure of the "universal woman" in order to acknowledge women's heterogeneity in theoretical and literary discourses. It depicts women from several developing cultures adopting reconstructive methodologies in order to theorise and challenge oppression. Female liberation and social change can be located in the discourse of Third World women's writing which links socio-political practices and local identities to issues of female specificity and writing. The Third World feminists seek cross-cultural solidarity and a framework that focuses on issues of grounding the local and the universal, on women's roles in redefining their identities, and on differences as a way of promoting solidarity. The significance of this study is to further the research for comparative study in depiction of women's status and representation in the fictional works of African literature and Indian literature with the advent of feminism and tremendous change in the trend of stereotypical portrayal of marginalised, invisible, submissive women characters in the shackles of exploitation and oppression to 'individualised, asserted and awakened New Women' characters.

Paradigm Shift in Portrayal and Representation of Women

The general image of woman in Third World women's writing is that a symbol of sex traditionally oppressed and relegated to the position of a congenial 'other' who endorses her own subjugation. The image of 'physically and psychologically abused and suspended woman' and the image of woman who is torn by contrary instincts but a 'part of mainstream' are the recurrent prototypes in early writings of African women, whereas the image of 'the new woman awakened by political force' emerges in contemporary women writing. African women writers attempt to liberate African women from the age-old enslavement and total dependency on male. By challenging the norms set by male writers in their fiction, African women writers are redefining the role of women.

In her essay "The Female Writer and her commitment," Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie exhorts the African woman writer to be aware of her art as she seeks to give it her all. She expects the writer to "be committed to her vision," but most importantly, to "tell her own truth, and to write what she wishes to write" (1994: 63). The call follows what Ogundipe-Leslie calls the "mystification" of the African woman found in mostly male writers' works of art where the African woman falls in two categories – the sophisticated city girl and the rural woman. Ogundipe-Leslie explains that both these figures are "often shallow, exaggerated and false" (59). In addition, she implores women writers to take into "consideration the various social predicaments in their societies and situate the awareness and solutions to the African woman's predicament in the larger global context of imperialism and neo-colonialism" (65). African women writers construct the story of the African woman as a "negotiation" that embraces the loss of self as both tragic and liberating, reinforcing Trinh T. Minh-ha's view that women should reconstitute themselves so as to escape external definitions. While discussing how women have been "defined" and "dehumanized," Trinh in *Women, Native, Other* contends:

You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-re-education-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your reality, your voice – you know. And often you cannot say it. You try to keep on to unsay it, but please – we must say it – they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said. (1989: 80)

Trinh is speaking of the very issues that the African women writers are concerned with – how to effectively position the African woman in relation to patriarchy so that she is not externally defined. The writers are acutely aware of the need for the women to speak their own truths and realities, because if they fail, the dominant system will speak for them.

In an effort Flora Nwapa, the first Nigerian Woman writer to publish her novels in English, tries to free her protagonist from the psychological damage of culture, while Mariama Ba employs the written word to re-write her heroine back into culture. Writing from a parallel position of marginality, that of a war traumatized country, Yvonne Vera figures a different narrative of “monstrous” mothers with its twisted sense of transformation in the hopes of restoring loss. All this is accomplished against a background of extreme pain meted on the maternal body. For Calixthe Beyala (1989), bodies are remade through embodied subjectivities with emphasis placed on the act of female bonding that records the secret transformations and reinventions of identities.

Because the privileging of man in African societies has involved an erasure of identities and subjectivities of many women, it invariably follows that reconstituting this cultural erasure is a hard and tenuous journey. When women try to claim status as individuals, cultural expectations such as their maternal roles act as constant bottlenecks to return them back to their prescribed roles as subordinate beings. There’s always a reminder that a woman’s place is to be found in the domestic sphere and her voice is not to be heard.

Seeing the necessity of freeing women from the tyranny of the inscribed body with its perceived duality of presence/absence, Beyala seeks to restore to the African woman, or to her fictional counterpart, not only an imagined reality, but also a human nature that is capable of bonding and finding comfort with other women. As the writers interrupt the hegemonic definitions of the women’s lives, they suggest that the act of transgressing the patriarchal law can be both a place for “radical openness and possibility” as hooks proposes (*Yearning* 149) and at the same time a place for pain and alienation. The narratives show that accounts of how women in African societies alter the dynamics of power involving sustained efforts in crafting possibilities of

redemption in spaces created in and disseminated by social practice. Through the various subversive strategies, the writers encourage their readers to re-examine both the patriarchal and postcolonial gendered ideologies. Their novels affirm a continuous challenge and resistance to the hegemonic power discourse in postcolonial Africa, particularly when they

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display liberating tools like “safe spaces” that empower women to speak and listen to each other. In that sense, the African women writers are seen forging new paths as they recollect a distorted woman’s past and commit to articulating and sharing a liberating women’s future.

The disturbing picture of woman in women’s writing is not something new or unique only to Nigeria, Senegal or Cameroon but it is the predicament of women all over the world. Like Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Indian woman writers like, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Bharathi Mukherjee, Gita Hariharan delineate with keen perception and sensitivity the problems and suffering of women in marriage who feel entrapped, oppressed and doomed to the care of husband and home, and these writers show their own reactions in their novels. Most of their women are aware of the injustice done to them in marriage. As they go out of their homes, their quest starts for freedom. These writers seek to interpret the rigid concept of virtue and chastity through their women characters who have a kind of untouched innocence and integrity. In a way, Sehgal shows the need for a new morality in which a woman is treated as man’s equal. Dealing with the problems of women in their married life Shashi Deshpande describes the pathetic life styles of Indian women and also suggests measures for amelioration. Dealing with the sensitivity of immigrant women, Bharathi Mukherjee articulates the frantic desire of women for an authentic communication with their own selves as well with the society. Sense of alienation and loneliness are the basic themes of the most of the Indian women writers, but among them, Gita Hariharan portrays the present day intellectual women as existentialists and very much aware of their ephemeral existence.

An attempt has been done for comparative study of African and Indian women writings, certain new perspectives on female sensibilities and sexuality are surfaced based on which, this study tries to formulate the reasons for women’s oppression and subjugation in the societies of India and Africa respectively. This study reveals that the women in their respective societies are trying hard to redefine man-woman relationship and carrying out their joint responsibilities towards self, family, children and nation building process. They have displayed a strong sense of social commitment to bring about social and intellectual awakening in their respective ways. The approach of Third World Women writers towards problems faced by women in their respective societies is more holistic and humane than their own men who doubt their intentions and resent their progress.

Indian Women writing in English is being recognised as major contemporary current in English Literature. 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 and their subject matters often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women. However, the Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. Nonetheless, Indian women writers in English are victims of a second prejudice vis-à-vis their regional counterparts. The majority of the novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated home makers and question the prominent old patriarchal domination, implicitly showing they are no longer puppets in the hands of man. 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 recognisable through the countries" (1975: 91).

Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. Their writings explored the themes like life from childhood to womanhood, developed society respecting women in general. 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; their characters are no longer characterised and defined simply in terms of the 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 an alien idea and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is central focus, it is interesting to note the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural 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.

Shashi Deshpande's major concern is to depict the anguish and conflict of the modern educated Indian woman caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality and independence for the women on the other. Her fiction explores www.ijellh.com

the search of the women to fulfil herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as a daughter, wife and mother. She has examined a variety of common domestic crisis, which trigger off the search. Deshpande's concern and sympathy are primarily for the women. While revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity for herself, the author subtly bares the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression experienced by women in Indian society. She has created authentic female characters—flesh-and-blood characters with recognizable credentials. She presents a plausible story of authentic characters and not shadowy abstractions. She believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be. There are a number of Indian novels that deal with woman's problems. But the treatment is often peripheral and the novels end up glorifying the stereotypical virtues of the Indian woman, like patience, devotion and abject acceptance of whatever is meted out to her. The heroines of Shashi Deshpande are totally different in the sense that they explode the myth of man's superiority and the myth of woman being the paragon of all virtues. Every novel starts with people. Female character occupies a pivotal position in her novels. She creates live characters out of day-to-day life and very carefully avoided creating wooden characters to fulfil her dream. As a woman writer she excels in the portrayal of women characters, but she is against the character of superwoman or idealizing them. Her heroines are intelligent and understanding women. Unlike the mythical figures as that of Sita and Savitri, they recognise the new roles which they want to perform in the new world. She deconstructs the myths like Sita as a perfect woman, or as a self-sacrificing woman since she believed that all these myths have been created by men. She created a new woman who is capable of self-analysis. While acting as a wife, mother, daughter etc. she tries to discover for herself new ways of living and also new ways of functioning. All her women are liberated selves since liberation to Deshpande does not mean doing without the family or breaking off the family ties. Thus she defines "liberation means you refuse to be oppressed, you refuse to give up your individuality, you refuse to do things which go against your conscience. You realize the potential you know what you are worth of. You know what is your value. You take that into account, and this is liberation." (Interview Sree, 147).

On the other hand, Anita Desai's works point 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 Anita Desai conveys the inner urges of her female protagonists through interior monologue, the diary writing and the depiction of

a situation, which echoes of situation where feelings are revealed suddenly with dramatic impacts. Such techniques help her to delve deeper into the inner world of the women and delineated their psycho emotional reality in totality. What is more significant about her technique is that she never tries to justify the actions of the women protagonists in her fictional world but grants freedom to act in their own ways. In this way, she has made sincere endeavour to contribute to the Indian fiction with a feminist concern, though she has carefully avoided associating herself with any feminist movement. Declaring her concern with individual man and women, she makes her novels revolve around some men and woman of exception, often round incompatible couples and strives to explore the feminine psyche of her female characters in varied moods and nuances.

Implicitly Anita Desai's novels are the manifesto of female predicament. Her preoccupation with the woman's inner world, frustration and storm raging inside her mind intensify her predicament. Desai's concern with the emancipation of woman is found page after page in her novels. In each of her novels, one could sense the novelists urge for a way of living, which would respond to the inner most yearning of the India women for self-emancipation and self-dignity. As Anita Desai is interested in the exploration of female psyche dealing with thoughts, emotions she explores the world of women where their dignity and self-respect is under the attack of psychological dissatisfaction. Sometimes, they are treated as performing animals, as treated by their keepers. She wants to convey through their portrayals that the spirits of companionship based on mutual understanding give meanings to life. In the Indian society where patriarchy prevails as the dominating force, women lead lives of dependency a completely parasitic existence, in loneliness, contented with their husband's unreciprocated emotionality. Anita Desai's women have been adorned with revolting consciousness to fight against their exploitation, thus she implicitly gave a voice to the new Indian woman.

Indian culture and heritage, individualism, quest for identity, protests and concepts of rebelliousness have often remained alien ideas, as far as women were concerned. Women were not supposed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice or question the already existing beliefs, customs, rituals and superstitions. They have to merely exist subjected to the patriarchal system. Women have to be obedient, quiet, submissive, and passive not claiming any of their rights neither as women nor as human beings. Manju Kapur, a noted Indian woman writer works in this direction and presents the longing struggle of

women to establish an identity in her novels. She has tried to make a space that women have to occupy in domestic relationships. In depicting the inner subtlety of a woman's mind, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche. Most of all, Kapur manages to blend the personal with the external. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. Manju Kapur, being a novelist primarily concerned with the problems of the newly emerging urban middle class, shows her protagonists protest against male domination and the marginalization of woman. She supports the idea that a woman is never regarded as a being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position in our society. Deshpande, Desai and Manju Kapur are among the urban intelligentsia, and they write fiction rather than feminist analysis as such. Their perspectives, however, can offer valuable insights into the dynamics and complexities of human relationships, and their feminist concerns can be placed within historical and theoretical frameworks. Their representations of marriage and sexuality, for instance, implicitly critique ideologies of women as property, which can lead to (male) abuses of power within the family and in the wider society.

Discussion

The portrayal of woman in Third World women's writing as a silent victim and upholder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. The contemporary women writers from many African nations and Indian women writers are striving against the age old slavery and suppression. We see the emergence of new women in the novels of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Yovanna Vera, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Bharathi Mukherjee, Anita Nair and many more writers from various Third World countries. They represent their heroines defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire self-reliance through education. These New Women in their novels nurture the desire of being independent and lead lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband

and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented. One thing is notable here is that, these writers sometimes have shown their heroines caught within the strong holds of patriarchy, either compromised themselves or adapted themselves to the needs of men in their life. They are forced to submit to the necessity of conforming to the extremely imposed requirements of their masculine societies – like the one we find in the character of Nnu Ego, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who yearns for liberation and for fulfilment as a woman, while still respecting the traditional concept of manliness. Living in bondage to men, but desiring to live freely and fully, they are bewildered by, or seethe with inner rage at their servitude to a structure of values matched to the needs of others. Some of these women characters like the wives of Okonkwo in *The Bride Price*, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in an attempt to enlarge their lives, become ‘active agents and collaborators of patriarchy’ and abusively treat their co-wives. Some characters’ resist, but in doing so could not overcome the pull of traditionalism as the character of Akunna (*The Bride Price*), who though educated, could not overcome the superstitious beliefs about paying the bride price, becomes a victim and dies. She becomes a schizophrenic, and her personality fragments by her desire both to accept and to reject her condition. With the exception of the few like Adaku (*The Joys of Motherhood*), Kehinde (*Kehinde*); who through ingenuity and great courage triumph in their struggle out of patriarchy’s shallow grave; are sacrificial victims. Though they are the New Age Women in the world of African letters, the ingenuous African society does not accept them as epitomes of African Womanhood. The third generation Nigerian writer Adichie in her novel, *Purple Hibiscus* shows women with contradictory behavior about African customs and traditions. Mama Beatrice and her sister-in-law, Ifeoma are the antithesis to each other. Adichie portrays Beatrice as conforming to the patriarchal dictates of their society that place value on male children. Despite the violence her husband, Eugene, inflicts on her body and psyche, she praises Eugene for not listening to the members of his *umunna* (extended family) who wanted him to have more male children. Adichie further portrays Beatrice as conforming to the dictates of a patriarchal society that affords a woman respect only when she is married. Beatrice internalizes the patriarchal dictates of her society, which views women without husbands as inadequate or incomplete. Ifeoma a widow, though contributes to the society as a university lecturer, her achievements are undermined based on her gender. Bewildered and failing to understand the idea of a woman achieving personhood without a man, Beatrice is obviously appalled by the idea that

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a woman can even think of existing without a husband because culturally that is unacceptable and unheard of. In other words, what Beatrice means is that it does not matter even if a woman is being abused in her marriage. As long as she has a “husband to crown her life” (*Purple Hibiscus* 2005: 75), she has to endure all the pains and confines of that marriage. Beatrice, whose social and economic existence is tied to her abusive husband, is trapped in a patriarchal order which does not give her economic and social empowerment to break away from her oppressed status in life. Eugene’s behaviour is a good example of male domination reinforced by patriarchy. She sees futility in breaking away from Eugene because of over depending on her husband in everything, whether economic or social. She is also afraid of losing respect as a married woman and also for leaving her prominent husband. Beatrice’s fear of starting afresh on her own reminds us of Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* (1981), who refuses to leave the husband who neglects her after taking a second wife. Similar dilemma also disturbs Indian women, which makes them to live a life of self-negations, compromises and adjustments. Focussing on the themes of silence, gender differences, passive suffering, and familial relationships, Shashi Deshpande explores the man and woman relationship in four generations of women in her novel, *A Matter of Time* (1996). This novel traces the transformation of the ideology from the stage of the internalization of patriarchal values through awareness of the value of female bonding and self-identity to assertion of women’s rights. *A Matter of Time* is a story of urban middle class family of Gopal and Sumi and their three daughters – Aru, Chara, Seema and opens with Mohan walking out his marriage with Sumi causing trauma to their children. Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru belong to four generations of the same family, each representing a specific mode of experience. Manorama is a typical product of patriarchal value system, for she resented the birth of Kalyani, her daughter, as she wanted a son. She forces a marriage between two unwilling partners, her daughter Kalyani and her younger brother Shripati and she even holds Kalyani responsible for her sorrows and calls her an enemy. But it is Kalyani who represents the survival power of women in patriarchal system. She maintains a stoic silence becomes a powerful tool of resistance when it is practiced with lack of participation in the social power relations. This novel tries to penetrate and analyze the very predicament of human existence and solve the paradox of life.

This study not only reflects the diversity of women’s realities in Third World today, but identifies similarities of experience and yearning among the women of Third World

countries. Thus writing has created for them a “space freer than speech” as opined by Veran (Opening Space, 1999: 46) by pushing at the limits of conventional expectations, moving beyond interstitial positions into arenas for new actions, relations and power shifts.

Conclusion

To reach the present state depicting woman as ‘New Woman’ the women writers of Third World have gone through many tribulations in their writing career. They are often faced with humiliating hardships and implicitly presented their heroines in vacillations compromising as their free spirits are curbed. The contemporary women writers of Third World countries explore the rapid evolution of the New Woman and their works reflect, trace, and capture the rapid social and cultural changes which have been taking place in urban areas as a result of swift economic development and expansion. Their work addresses the very dilemma of women having to choose between modernity and convention, which aptly described as “alternative narratives of women’s experience”. This study concludes that Third World women writers have moved away from traditional conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterised and defined simply in terms of their victim status. Their works chronicle lives of assertive women who defy marriage and motherhood in their efforts to realise a meaningful life on par with men.

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