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SUPPRESSION TO IDENTITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

In terms of literature, gender and sexuality have become prominent themes in the last decades of twentieth century. Literary traditions in most postcolonial nations have focused on writings by males. Women's narratives are either not included, or included as 'domestic fiction', there by relegating them to a less-privileged space and ensuring that these narratives' political opinions are never taken seriously. Women's fiction foregrounds issue of female identity and its constructions. One should not immediately assume that such writing ignores social and political problems in favour of psychological explorations of the woman's condition. In women's writing, many of these themes are presented in greater detail- given the larger canvas of the novel and the literary- aesthetic potential of social realism. Themes related to women can be studied under the following title: Gendered nations, Marriage and family, Body, desire, sexuality.

In terms of literature, gender and sexuality have become prominent themes in the last decades of twentieth century. Gender and role of women in India has been the focus in the writing of Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Suniti Namjoshi, Nawal El Saadawi and Buchi Emecheta. Literary traditions in most postcolonial nations have focused on writings by males for instance revisionist Ngugi does not include a single woman author when speaking of expanding the canon. The canon, as several feminist critics have demonstrated, is a male bastion. As a result, women's narratives are either not included, or included as 'domestic fiction', there by relegating them to a less-privileged space and ensuring that these narratives' political opinions are never taken seriously. However, as EllekeBoehmer points out, gender has been "intrinsic to national imagining" (qtd in Nayar 117).

Research in the social sciences has focused on the status of women, taking particular care to see how class, caste and other factors such as political

empowerment, economy, and literacy have contributed to the condition of women in India. Women's literary texts have increased awareness of women's role in the creation of social, communal, national identities. The construction of the woman protagonist as a person in her own right is at once indicative of the author's insertion of women's aspirations as well as preclusion of traditional norms. Women's fiction foregrounds issue of female identity and its constructions. One should not immediately assume that such writing ignores social and political problems in favour of psychological explorations of the woman's condition. Pramod K. Nayar writes that "almost every women writer from Asia, Africa and other previously colonized countries presents trenchant critiques of political economy, the larger social context, and institutions such as the law, effect women's lives" (Nayar 118). In India, plays like Theatre Union's *Om Swaha*(dealing with the theme of dowry in Hindu marriages) and *Dafa 180* (dealing with rape and the legislation for the

rights of women in custody) were successful attempts to move beyond elite literature into mass media. GaribDongariSanghatana's *Social Trap* and MuktiSangathana's *The Girl is Born* dealt with abused or abandoned women and oppressive situations. Nayantara Sahgal, India's leading political novelist, highlights the conditions of women workers in *Rich Like Us*. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, Sahgal speaks of urban poverty and the life of women in the slums that mushroom outside Delhi. In women's writing, many of these themes are presented in greater detail- given the larger canvas of the novel and the literary- aesthetic potential of social realism. Themes related to women can be studied under the following title: Gendered nations, Marriage and family, Body, desire, sexuality.

One of the salient characteristic of gender discourse, as Nayar points out, is the fact that nations are gendered. Nayar observes, "...once political independence has been gained, women, who had fought the same nationalist battle with and alongside the men, are sent into the kitchens. Their feminine duties must be resumed in the new nation-state...the nation and gender is interlinked social phenomena. Women are 'involved' or rather delegated the responsibility for, the 'biological' and cultural production of the nation" (122). The history of the nationalism is closely aligned with the history of manliness and manhood. Terms such as honour, patriotism and duty are masculinized. In an innovative reading, EllegeBeohmer inscribes that

male roles in the national 'family Drama' may be seen as metonymic (where the male is part of the national community or contiguous with it) while the figure of the women functions as a metaphor (in the representative maternal form), a role authorized by her sons. She stands for the national territory and values. She stands for national territory and value. (qtd in Nayar 122)

During the anti- colonial struggle in India, writers such as BankimchandraChatterjee (*Anandamath*) and Rabindranath Tagore (*The Home and the world*) portrayed the woman as an icon of Indian tradition. The image of 'Mother India' – something which survives to this day- is perhaps the most visible form

of gendering the nation. "This iconography has always imaged women in terms of symbols of primal origin: birth, hearth, home, roots and others. In fact such an iconography of the unchanging, 'essential' Indian women is integral to nationalist discourses" (122).

In the nineteenth century India, PanditaRamabai critiqued the British government for not paying enough attention to the plight of Indian women. "Thus nationalism is a gendered ideology where the nation of 'motherland' does not automatically mean either 'source' or 'home' for women" (Nayar 123). BhartiMuherjee's *Darkness* describes Gandhi as "the enemy of women" because "he had hurt our women. The man who could sleep between virgins and feel no throb of virility had despoiled the women of our country" (4). NayantaraSahal's *Mistaken identity* makes a satirical comment on Gandhi's vision of India, an India where specific aspects of human life like sex will be completely removed:

The India of Bhajji's dreams is a country of vegetarian capitalists and rural handicrafts. A few machines such as sewing machines that won't corrupt the economy or the moral fiber will be welcomed. They'll make way for leisure but not much of it. Some wool and cotton will be spun in cottages. Citizens will abstain from sex and turn the other cheek. Independence will be a dawn of era washed clean of drink and lust. (69)

Manju relationship of family, nation and women. This prototype idea of woman who is associated with cultural identity and as a defining characteristic of race and nationality has been changed a little even in Postcolonial times. In her other novels like - *A Married Woman, Home and The Immigrant*, women are trying to build lives for themselves within or outside the conventional family life. Of all the contemporary Indian novelists writing in English of the 1990's decade, she is, perhaps, the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life, traumas, predicaments, especially that of young Indian women of the present generation. Nayar observes, "In postcolonial times, in the contest between tradition and modernity, the woman is held to be the repository of all that is 'good' in the

culture's traditions, even as Colonial/Postcolonial modernity and tradition seek to power over the familial and domestic space. When everything else in Postcolonial culture is in a state of flux and transformation, its woman needs to be projected as stable and safe" (123). As writer, C.S Lakshmi puts in: "The 'notion' of a unbroken tradition is constant and attempts are made to write this notion of tradition on the body of the woman to dictate its movement, needs, aspirations and sphere of existence even while the body is moving along time, space and history" (Nayar 123). In *Clear Light of Day*, Desai makes the connection between gender and roles and the iconography of nationalism explicit. Bakul, who wishes to marry Tara, come to Bimala to ask for her permission. Bimala says "I don't think you need to ask anyone- except Tara. Modern times, Modern India, Independent India"(81). Desai expresses the stresses of an Indian woman's dual identities in Bimla. She herself becomes a marker of modern India: She teaches in a college and has even refused marriage. She is trapped in the ideological sentiments instilled in her through her education and the Hindu system of values in which she raised up. Westernized, Independent Bimala thus becomes the icon of Hindu womanhood's self-sacrifice. Her recourse to the past and her mother advocates the overarching theme of nation-as-mother and nation-as-family. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* breaks the *Sitaimage* and breaking all bonds escapes to another space namely Manori Island. But that is only for a while. She has to come back to her husband's home as she fails to revel in the 'magical space' and her need for protection and her concern for children's comfort drag her home back. This theme of self-sacrifice of Indian woman is also seen in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. Desai's Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* does not even think of leaving as long as the husband is alive because she had got used to his aggressive ways and also to her own submissive ones. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, however, breaks the good-girl syndrome; her obsession with her father and her pampered life before marriage drives her to an alien world. She kills her husband Gautama and still she does not lose the sympathy of the reader. But Maya commits suicide, showing the novelist's serious concern for

the societal do's and don'ts. The problem of maladjustment may be seen in Desai's novels in its various dimensions. Her women have an extremely sensitive nature and face a conflict between their parental culture and that of the in-laws, as also between their original protected surroundings and the adopted urban culture. Women in Desai are not satisfied with their feminine space but they do not have the courage to do much about it. Even Maya has to kill her as she dares to deviate from the societal norms. Sita does break the spatial norms only to adhere to it again. Outside world is still not considered a feminine domain, hence Sita returns to her original space. R.S. Pathak's comment aptly sums up for Desai's women:

Anita Desai has conveyed her women characters' fundamental dependence on men through her lexicon and tropes of mastery, command and domination. Her women sometimes do attempt to assert their independence and self-sufficiency, but their quest for identity is thwarted at significant junctures . . . No woman in Anita Desai's novels. . . has been fortunate enough to free herself from the shackles of femininity. (20)

Sunny Singh's novel, *Nani's Book of Suicides*, has left effective hallmarks on Post Modern Indian English literature. The novel explores the cultural identity of a young Indian woman, through a fund of myths, family lore and contemporary reality. ShobhaDe's protagonists are enterprising, bold, innovative and ready to accept challenges. In her novels like *Sisters*, *Strange*, *Obsession*, *Sultry Days*, *Snapshots*, *Second Thoughts*, She is critique of a patriarchy besides economic globalization and subterranean complexity. She is a writer of social consciousness, and her women are vulnerable to exploitation in the context of tradition and culture, which appears very disastrous for the cozy atmosphere of the society. Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* is a projection of NayantaraSahgal herself and her search for identity runs parallel to Sahgal's search for self assertion. Devi in *A Situation in New Delhi* is an exception not only amongst Sahgal's women but also majority of women around us in India. In the portrayal of Devi, Sahgal has drawn immensely from her association

with women who belong to privileged class. Sonali in *Rich Like Us* is a fine Indian specimen of the new woman. An IAS officer, Sonali dares to defy the accepted norms and challenges her political bosses even in such crucial times as Emergency. In some ways Sonali is a continuation of Devi but even stronger than her. Devi has political powers whereas Sonali is only a beurocrat ruled by political powers, yet she dares to stand her grounds.

Numerous Indian writers suggest that marriage does not guarantee the safety of home or clear identity for the women. In the Hindu context, notions of chastity, service to the husband, and motherhood work toward a deletion of woman's needs, desires and even identity. Governed by the regulating framework of self-sacrifice, the woman puts up with several miseries and abuses within marriage. The ways in which a woman is controlled by the institution of marriage becomes a central theme in many writers. In Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda is disillusioned with the idea of care-giving, "a vocation that one day went dull and drought- struck as though its life spring had dried up" (30). ShashiDeshpande's Urmi in *The Binding vine* is unequivocal about the care-giver role: 'Sometimes I think ...they brainwash us into this motherhood think. They make it seem so mystical and emotional when the truth is that it's all just a myth'(76). In ShashiDeshpande's fiction, marriage destroys the woman completely. Marriage signals the end of independence "Urmi: Tell me, is getting married so important to a woman? . . . One always hopes one's children will get more out of life than one has . . . Security. You're safe from other men. . ." (88). "In discovering other women, I have discovered myself," says ShashiDeshpande. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has nightmares after nightmares when her husband chooses to vent his frustrations on her by indulging in a sadist pleasure. Even before marriage Sarita's plight may be compared with the privileged position of her brother Dhruv. While Dhruv is the apple of all eyes, Sarita does not exist as a person in her own right; she is merely a playmate and a governess to Dhruv. So complete is the discrimination that even in his death, Sarita does not find any respite. The simple rule is that as a girl she had no right to survive the ordeal that claimed her

brother. This rule applies even after marriage when she becomes more successful than her husband. She is punished because she has no right to supersede a man. The writer uses the metaphor of silence in many of her novels to justify the circular movement of her women who move on only to come back from where they started. In embracing this space, they adhere to the feminine aesthetics. Homecoming runs through the entire corpus of Deshpande's fiction. The ambivalent stance of women writers can be seen in the construction of all protagonists of Deshpande. Sarita wonders: "Why do we travel, not in straight lines but in circles? Do we come to the same point again and again?" (22). Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, projects the predicaments that a married woman faces in her husband's house. The central character Geeta, a girl born in Mumbai, exemplifies the feminist move. Geeta is married into a Rajasthani family and as she enters the haveli, the door is banged upon her by the orthodox family members. Geeta through patience and understanding passes the ordeal and brings the change in that custom-ridden haveli.

The woman's education, ambitions, and desires are far less important than her role as mother, daughter-in-law, and wife. Writers like Markandaya reveals how women have been deliberately kept illiterate. In *Nectar in a Sieve* Rukmani's mother asks: What use . . . that girl should be learned! Much good will it do her when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after. Look at me, am I any worse that cannot spell my name, so long as I know it? (16). She admitted that "I am sure it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was...(17). GithaHariharan's, another dominant women novelist. Her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, had aroused waves in the literary world. The novel forwards the female bond and attempts to create new paradigms for the recreation of woman's identity. The novel is the story of Devi's quest for self image. In a patriarchal setup, mother daughter relationship is 'deformed' and motherhood has restricted meaning. According to Accad, "In postcolonial women's writing the silence around the theme of sexuality is usually focused around three sub-themes: the woman's body, the woman's

personal relationships, and her sexual identity” (Nayar 240). In India, subjects like body’s diseases, sexual pleasure, and sexual attractions are taboo, especially for women. “In India, sexuality is coded as morality: to be moral is to be monogamous, reticent about one’s sexuality / sexual preferences or even being a sexual” (241). Among Indian writers, Kamala Das was one of the first to move towards a feminist mode. In a conservative and patriarchal society, she dared to discuss sexuality. Her autobiographical work, *My Story*, showcased the conditions under which a girl grows up, experiences her sexuality. In *small Remedies* and *Moving On*, Deshpande has discussed extra-marital affairs, women leaving their homes and professional women who pursue their interests. Nayantara Sahgal’s women protagonists are high class and educated. In Sahgal’s novels women do not think twice before searching for satisfaction outside marriage when life becomes a burden inside it. Asha Choubey’s comments in this regard may be seen:

Sahgal’s women are not hostile to men, but they would certainly not settle for a subordinate position. They are not ready to compromise though they do not hesitate to adjust. Sahgal tries to make plainly clear that no relation is good or bad in itself; it has to be free from all labels. Even extra marital and pre-marital relations are not entirely immoral, if they tend to fulfill the person as individual. That which saps individuals of their individuality is immoral and that which saves them of all frustrations is wholesome and ethical (14).

Sahgal’s most defiant character is the Rani of Vijaygarh in *Mistaken Identity*. From being a purdah clad woman the rani emerges as a strong person who refuses to bow down to her husband’s demands and does not think twice before leaving her home finding the love of comrade Yusuf with whom she experiences the bliss of complete compatibility. While all the other women of Sahgal look for compatibility, the rani openly asserts her sexuality. Sahgal’s women refuse to fit into the mold of the ‘perfect lady’; but their revolt is more cathartic than defeatist. Instead of seeking to burn the social order her women strive to carve a niche, a respectable and

equal place for them within the social order”(16). Rani Dharker’s *The Virgin Syndrome* is among few novels in English by an Indian woman writer that boldly deals with issues of female sexuality. Dharker’s concern with female sexuality prevents her from giving a complete picture of any character other than the heroine. Uma Vasudev’s *Shreya of Sonagarh* deals with the theme of sex in relation to woman’s relationship with her husband as well as with her paramour. Shreya is an introverted and ambitious teenager. The novel depicts Shreya’s sexual odyssey, her journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from rejection to acceptance.

The struggle for existence characteristic of these first generation libertines is reflected in their fictional creations. Feminine aesthetics lends a female voice to the novels and works towards women’s self-will and effacement of “all qualities conducive to conformity” (30). Women writers do not entertain moral aesthetics at the cost of the feminine. The important question is not whether these women kept their virtues but whether they are honest to themselves and whether they work towards getting what they wanted. Whatever their standpoint, all women writers have clearly striven to place women at the centre of their narratives. Anees Jung rightly comments:

In this complex pantheon of diversities the Indian woman remains the point of unity, unveiling through each single experience a collective consciousness prized by a society that is locked in mortal combat with the power and weakness of age and time. She remains the still centre, like the centre in a potter’s wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration. (41)

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