

Article

A Critical Appraisal of Indian Women Novelists in English

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Women novelists of the period form a sizeable and important school, as they did earlier. Among the senior Women novelists, a few have fallen silent. Santha Rama Rau, Nergis Dalal, Zeenath Futehally, Attia Hosain, Kamala Das [whose rather lurid *Alphabet of Lust* had appeared in 1976] Rama Mehta whom death claimed a few years ago and Shouri Daniels – have written no fiction after 1980. Fortunately, some senior women novelists have continued to be active. Kamala Markandaya, author of nine novels earlier, has now added only one to her repertoire: *Pleasure City* [1982]. In which she returns to two of her stock themes: traditions versus modernity and the East-West nexus, in a new context – the coming up of a holiday resort in a small village. And breaking a long silence after her first novel, *Temporary Answers* [1974], Jai Nimbkar published her *Come Rain* in 1993. This is the story of the difficulties faced by an Indian who has lived too long in the USA and his American wife, when the couple returns to India.

R.P. Jhabvala's progress has been in the reverse direction. Some years ago she had declared, 'I would love to live much more in the West, going back to India sometimes, but not as much as before.' This strategy has not helped and none of her four novels published during the last two decades adds much to her reputation: *In Search of Love and Beauty* [1981], *Three Continents* [1987], *Poet and Dancer* [1991] and *Shards of Memory* [1995]. The characters are mostly Americans and European, and among the few Indians, there is the customary Guru who is a fake. Jhabvala is seen to have no new insight to offer now, comparable to her acute and sensitive presentation of middle class life in India in her earlier work.

India or separation from it – indeed seems to affect creative talent in strange ways. Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* [1999] written after her migration to the USA in the nineties betrays a curious uncertainty of touch when she posits the contrast between a dull, submissive Indian girl and her neurotic American counterpart. On the other hand, Desai's three earlier novels reveal her usual subtle treatment and acuteness of perceptions. In *Clear Light of Day* [1980] both Vimla, an elderly spinster living in a decaying house and her uncomfortable company come to life in a way in a *Fasting, Feasting* does not. In her *Journey to Ithaca* [1995] Desai falls back upon the hoary motif of the fake Guru into whose clutches Matteo, a young Italian has fallen. Desai, who has been so reticent about such matters now shocks us by throwing in juicy bits of lesbianism, incest and juvenile sexuality. In fact, Desai's novels of the eighties are far superior to those she wrote after her migration to the USA. *In Custody* [1984] shows that her perceptions are still delicate. The protagonist Deven, a young college teacher of Hindi feels suffocated in a society which considers money and worldly success far more important than literature or music. In *Baumgartener's Bombay* [1988] Desai again portrays her characteristic protagonist: the lonely, shrinking, terrified soul in a 'world I never made.' The only difference is that the hero is not an Indian, but a German Jew, his own fondness for stray cats which he collects is a symbol of his own plight in a strange country.

Unlike Desai, whose stress is primarily on the life of the mind, Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps our best exponent of the political novel, though she does not always succeed in combining the two worlds of political developments and private

dilemmas in a unifying manner. Set against the background of the nefarious Emergency of 1975, *Rich Like Us* [1985] brings out effectively the horror of those traumatic days, when hunger for personal power induced Indira Gandhi to stifle Democracy. Sahgal goes back to the Raj days in her next two novels which are not equally successful. In *Plans for Departure* [1985], Anita, a Danish woman, marries a British diplomat, and finally finds that her 'plans for Departure' from India, made earlier have to be cancelled. Her son too marries an Indian woman. The protagonist in *Mistaken Identity* [1988] is Bhushan Singh, who hails from a princely family. A playboy, he is wrongly suspected of being a communist and jailed. The political developments in the nineteen twenties – one of the most eventful periods in Indian history – are outlined, but again, Sahgal's old weakness of failure in dovetailing political and personal histories is betrayed once again.

The 'new' women novelists naturally share most of the pre-occupations of their male counterparts, though in spite of what feminists would claim, they do have 'a room of their own' in the fictional mansion, in terms of certain pressing concerns and their attitude towards them. Suniti Namjoshi [b. 1941] effectively played the part of Rushdie in ushering in Magic Realism in Women's fiction, though she relies more on allegory and symbol exclusively. In her *The Conversations of Cow* [1985], the protagonist, an Indian academic one day finds her guru appearing to her in the form of cow. *The Mothers of MayaDiip* [1989] is a more substantial work. This is a description of a Feminist Utopia in which boys are milked for sperms when they attain puberty and then terminated. But though the Evil called Man is eliminated, the evil called Human Nature still persists, as back-biting and intrigue, jealousy and vanity make Maya Diip [literally, 'Island of Illusion'] less than a paradise.

St. Sumiti and the Dragon [1994] has an experimental structure, typical of Magic Realism. The freewheeling narrative is a heady mix of dialogue, monologue, diary extracts, prayers, songs etc. while angels rub shoulders with dragons, including Gwendel's mother in *Beowulf*. An even

more experimental venture, *Building Babel* [1997] gives a foretaste of what shape modern fiction may take in an age of I.T., Computers and e mail. Several kinds of myths, legends and fairy tales are mixed together, and we encounter both the ancient Greek Kronos and the fairy tale "Snow White."

Nina Sibal's *Yatra* [1987] has obviously taken its cue from Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Her protagonist Krishna is evidently sister to Rushdie's Saleem Sinai being gifted with miraculous powers. In her case it is a magical skin, which changes colour in response to experience. It is equally significant that she is conceived in August, the eventful month which saw both the birth of the Indian nation and the dismemberment of the Indian sub-continent.

The protagonist in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* [1997] is shipwrecked on a remote island peopled only by women. Here she learns magic from a mysterious crone, who specializes in the power of spices, which are more than culinary. Magic Realism is again to the fore in Rani Dharkar's *The Virgin Syndrome* [1997], where the narrative is punctuated with a retelling of traditional tales, and the protagonist's family can only produce daughters owing to a strange curse. Young Leela's curious obsession with smell in Radhika Jha's *Smell* [1999] is also of such stuff as Magic Realism is made of. She has a strange notion that she herself reeks of obnoxious odours. It is no wonder then that she goes on drifting from lover to lover. As Shyamala Narayan aptly suggests, smell 'becomes a metaphor for cultural differences' here (Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan).

Sunny Singh's *Nani's Book of Suicide* [2000] is another study in obsession, though of a different kind. Young Mini has been brought up by a domineering grandmother who is reportedly gifted with magical powers. The young woman runs away, goes to America, and tries to find release in drink, drugs and sex, but she still continues to hear the steady drone of the old woman's diabolical voice ringing persistently in her ears. Kiran Desai provides the only example so far in Indian English fiction of a daughter following in footsteps of a novelist mother. But her talent seems to be in a totally

different direction. Not for her Anita's Desai's delicate inwardness. The dummer she bears beats to a boisterous rhythm. Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard* [1998] is a comic extravaganza built around a fake sadhu who lives perched on a guava tree.

But though they have sufficiently shown their adequacy in handling the technique of Magic Realism, it is clear that the Women novelists are in their element in writing social fiction. Here again, women from various regions of India have written evocatively about their plot of ground and the men and women who people it. It is also natural that many of them have tried to articulate 'that long silence' which Indian society imposes upon its women.

The most outstanding woman novelist of the period is Shashi Deshpande [b. 1938], the overarching theme in whose work is a woman's quest for fulfillment and the way she is thwarted at every stage by the forces of custom and tradition. Sarita's sin in *The Dark Holds No Terror* [1980] is that she is supposed to be responsible for the death of her younger brother, though actually she is not. She later marries out of her caste, shocking her mother. In *Roots and Shadows* [1983] young Indu rebels against rural orthodoxy, hoping to find in city life the freedom she longs for; but she finds that urban heterodoxy can be as restrictive in its own way, as rural orthodoxy.

That Long Silence [1988] is easily one of Deshpande's finest novels. Jaya, a middle-aged married woman is forced into intensive introspection, when family stability is threatened, as her husband is charged with fraud. She suddenly realizes that a middle class Indian wife's life is mainly a chronicle of boredom, and silent suffering. The narratives in *The Binding Vine* [1993] and *A Matter of Time* [1996] however, are not properly focused, though the recurring motifs are again the perennial tribulations of Woman-loss of a baby, rape, both of the usual variety and 'rape in marriage' – and the all-pervasive 'smell of hopelessness' of which an Indian Woman reeks. In *Small Remedies* [2000], Deshpande returns to the assured mastery of *That Long Silence*. The narrator,

Madhu, trying to recover from the death of a young son in a Bombay riot, finds strange solace in the contemplation of the lives of two women rebels: one who defies her family to run away with a Muslim musician, and the other who dares to marry a Christian.

Deshpande's setting is mostly urban Maharashtra and north Karnataka. Women writers from several regions of India have written evocatively about their society and the way it treats its women. The South in general makes the most impressive contribution here, with Kerala's share being the largest.

The best-known of the Kerala women novelists is Arundhanti Roy, a Keralite who married a Bengali. Her only novel so far, *The God of Small Things* [1997] is set in a Kerala village, *The God of Small Things* is Vellutha, an untouchable who commits the sins of falling in love with a high-caste Christian woman, and pays the inevitable penalty. In Suma Josson's *Circumferences* [1994], young Sarala's ambition to become a painter is hardly appreciated by her parents, who want her to marry and have children. Elizabeth in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* [1995] has no objection to marriage, but can't get married, because her parents cannot pay the high dowry demanded. Set in Tamil Nadu, Indira Ganesan's *The Journey* [1990] bristles with many inaccuracies of detail, and gives the impression that it belongs to those machine-made expatriate efforts to sell India to the foreign reader, of which there is no dearth in Indian writing in English. Far more authentic is Lakshmi Kannan's *Going Home* [1999], which stresses how Indian tradition is weighted against women in the matter of sharing ancestral property.

Coorg, one of the most picturesque regions of Karnataka comes to life in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* [1996]. And perhaps the sole notable representative of Andhra Pradesh is Meena Alexander's *Nampalli House*, set in Hyderabad.

There is probably no noteworthy fiction by women in Maharashtra and Gujarat, with the exception of Sohaila Abdulla's *The Madwoman of Jogare* [1998] which has the foothills of Maharashtra as its setting. However, there is

nothing comparable to Venu Chitzle's earlier excellent period-piece, *In Transit* [1950], describing life in Pune between the two World Wars. The Punjab has three prominent representatives: Belinder Dhanoa [*Waiting For Winter*, 1991]; Manju Kapur [*Difficult Daughters*, 1998]; and Shauna Singh Baldwin [*What the Body Remembers*, 1999]. All three emphasize the plight of young Punjabi girls chafing under the tight control exercised by tyrannical fathers and traditional society.

Metropolitan society and life have not received much attention, except in Namita Gokhale's *Paro*, *Dreams of Passion* [1984] and Sagarika Ghose's *The Gin Drinkers* [2000], both of which portray the cocktail party circles in Delhi. And there is an evocative picture of life in a middle class joint family in Bengal in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* [1999].

The ethnic variety of the Indian sub-continent is once again stressed in the fiction of the women. In her *Tara Lane* [1993], Shama Futehally presents the difficulties faced by Tahera, brought up in a cozy aristocratic Muslim home and then launched out into the bewilderingly modern world. Dina Mehta's *And Some Take a Lover* [1992] is the story of a Parsi girl in Bombay who loves a young Gandhian. The proverbial dilemma of the Eurasian, the Trishanku of modern India is the subject of Manoramn Mathai's *Mulligatawny Soup* [1993] which suffers terribly when compared to Allan Sealy's massive *Trotternama*, noted earlier. And Esther David's *The Walled City*, [1997] is perhaps unique in the annals of Indian English fiction in dealing with life in a Jewish family in Ahmedabad.

The East-West nexus is a favourite theme for the Women novelists, especially those who have lived in the West for brief or long periods. Senior-most of these is Bharati Mukerji, who has declared that she is not an Indian writer but an American author [the response of American critics to this is not known]. Her *Jasmine* [1989] is a melodramatic tale of a Punjabi girl's sexual escapades, after she has entered the U.S.A. as an illegal immigrant. In Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* [1992] a young Bengali girl marries an Englishman who is visiting

Calcutta, but discovers that he is unfaithful to her when she goes to England with him. And 'Search for Love' could be an ideal title for Gupta's second novel, *The Glassblower's Breath* [1993] where the scene shifts from Calcutta to London and New York. Meena Alexander's presentation of the problems of Indian immigrants in the USA in *Manhattan Music* [1997] is more straightforward and appealing. Atima Srivastava's chief concern is the generation gap between the old and new immigrants in England, in her *Transmission* [1992] and *Looking For Maya* [1999]. Meera Syal's protagonist in her *Anita and Me* [1996] is a nine year old Punjabi girl – an immigrant, trying to adjust to her new surroundings.

History & Politics do not seem to interest the 'New' novelists much. Nina Sibal's *Yatra* [1987] covers a century and half of the Punjab's troubled history; and the even more troubled saga of three decades of life in Kashmir is the subject of *The Dogs of Justice* [1998]. Shona Ramaya's *Flute* [1989] is a very unusual Raj novel, in which an aristocratic-Englishman who plays on the flute superbly is taken to be an avatar of Krishna. The fantasy lacks credibility, even by the loose standards of Magic Realism. Bharati Mukerjee's *The Holder of the World* fails for another reason. There are far too many historical inaccuracies in it to make the story real. Achala Moulik's forays into history include *The Conquerors* [1996], dealing with the Ruthven family and its exploits in India over a number of years; and *Earth is But a Star* [1997], the subject of which is the Spanish empire in the fifteenth century. But as Shyamala Narayan notes, the level of Moulik's fiction is only as good [or bad] as that of M.K. Kaye's gaudy melodramas (Naik and Narayan).

Finally, notice must be taken of the fiction of Shobha De, perhaps the most popular of the 'new' women writer. Her numerous narratives beginning with *Starry Nights* (1991) must be called 'entertainments' rather than novels proper. Sagas of bed-hopping, chronicles of high society and low ethicality, of drawing room manners and barn-door morals, 'Spare-Rib-Aldry' or 'function' to (use Farrukh Dhony's expressive term) would perhaps be an apt description of them. De's narratives do offer

occasional glimpses of what she could have achieved, had she set herself higher literary aims; but then low aim is apparently a far better fame-winner, social gainer and money-spinner, whatever the musty old proverb may say. One can only hope that someday Ms De will come to realize the final futility of settling for easy and instant popular acclaim, won in metropolitan cocktail circles, which babble gaily about 'Books of the Hour,' and set herself resolutely on the road to hard-won, lasting achievement (Naik).

Authors like Kamala Markandaya, [Shashi Deshpande](#) and Anita Desai have chosen the problems and issues faced by the women in today's male dominated world as the main theme of their books. For instance, some of the novels of Anita Desai like *Voices in the City* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* she has portrayed the complexities between a man and woman relationship. She has tried to explore the psychological aspects of the lead protagonists. The women novelists try to create awareness that this is the time to proclaim with definite precision. In India, the women writers are doing very well and their contribution is immense.

Indian English writing started with authors like Sarojini Naidu. This great poetess charmed the readers with her writings. Feminist themes have also been used by authors like Nayantara Sahgal and Rama Mehta. Regional fiction theme has been aptly used by [Kamala Das](#), Anita Nair and Susan Viswanathan. Novelists like Kamala Mrkandaya and Anita Desai captured the spirit of Indian culture and its traditional values. During the 1990's India became a popular literary nation as a number of women authors made their debut in this era. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi and Anuradha Marwah Roy used realism as main theme of their novels. The list of Indian women novelists also comprises popular names such as Bharati Mukherjee, Nergis Dalal, Krishna Sobti, Dina Mehta, Indira Goswami, Malati Chendur, Gauri Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Ruth Jhabvala, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, [Jhumpa Lahiri](#) and many more. They are known for the contemporary approach in their novels. The novels of authors like Namita Gokhale

or Shobha De are really out-spoken. Most of these female novelists are known for their bold views that are reflected in their novels. Basically, these are the novels of protest and an outburst of reservations and contaminations. Unlike the past, where the works of women novelists were given less priority and were actually undervalued, classification of feministic or male writings hardly makes any sense today.

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