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## **INDIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS IN ENGLISH: THE FEMALE VOICE OF PROTEST AGAINST PATRIARCHY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Indian English Fiction reflects Indian life with its various aspects. It mirrors Indianness in one way or the other. It is no more than a realistic projection of Indian life, society and culture. A true story of Indian English novel began with the writings of 'The Trio of Indian English Fiction' - Raj Rao, R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand who used 'novel' as a medium to portray India and Indian life with its strengths and weaknesses, issues and problems, ills and evils. Bhabani Bhattacharya, another big name from the field of English fiction, was sensitive about the issues and problems prevalent in a contemporary Indian society. However, a true revolutionary change in Indian English fiction came with the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel, Midnight's Children which realistically describes a generation of Indians born at midnight on August 15, 1947. Since the publication of this novel, Indian English fiction has witnessed a lot of change and growth owing to the writings of the eminent writers like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shobha De, V. S. Naipaul, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Sheth, Khushwant Singh, Amit Chaudhari, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Swaroop, Anil Menon, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga, Manju Kapoor, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and many others. The present article intends to give a brief review of Indian women novelists in English and their significant contribution to the growth of Indian English Fiction.*

**Key Words:** *chutnification contemporary, exploitation, Indianness, patriarchy, revolutionary.*

Indian English Fiction reflects Indian life, society and culture with its various aspects and features. It mirrors Indianness, an umbrella term which includes everything that is Indian, in one way or the other. It is a realistic projection of Indian psyche, consciousness, sensibility, customs, conventions, traditions, rites and rituals, norms values, beliefs superstitions, mythology and philosophy. It is deeply rooted in Indian society which has

been going through many changes, developments and transformations in different fields of life. A fast-changing and growing India has been a major source of inspiration for Indian novelists in English who have been portraying Indian life with its strengths and weaknesses, issues and problems. A true story of Indian English novel began with the writings of 'The Trio of Indian English Fiction' - Raj Rao, R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand who dealt with various social ills and evils such as caste-system, class disparity, inequality, gender-discrimination, untouchability, poverty prevalent in a contemporary India. They were the founders of Indian English novel in the true sense of the term. They were under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi with his thoughts, principles and philosophy which they expressed consciously or unconsciously through their writings. In addition to the 'Big Three', their younger contemporaries like Balchandra Rajan, Manohar Malgaonkar, G. V. Desani, Khushwant Singh, K. A. Abbas, Arun Joshi, Chaman Nahal, Victor Anant, Ahmed Ali and many others have significantly contributed to the growth of Indian English Fiction. Bhabani Bhattacharya, one of the major Indian novelists in English, has been sensitive about the issues and problems prevalent in a contemporary Indian society. His novels explore the causes of human sorrows and sufferings with their possible solutions and remedies.

A true revolutionary change in the perception of Indian English Fiction came with the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* which won him the Booker Prize in 1981. This path-breaking novel, published in 1980, saw a renaissance of Indian literature in English. Rushdie describes a generation of Indians born at midnight on August 15, 1947. The significance of the novel lies in the fact that it received international success and recognition immediately on its publication. It inspired and motivated young Indian English novelists to follow his footsteps by writing novels and making a mark on the world of literature. Paranjpe opines: The novel broke taboos and inhibitions, encouraging Indians to experiment anew with both form and the content of fiction . . . another thing that *Midnight's Children* did was to renew the dying market for Indian English fiction in Britain and America". (Paranjpe 1998). In a sense, the novel gave a new boost, energy and direction to Indian novels written in English. It heralded a new era in the history of Indian English fiction. Since an artist is made by the moment, the race and the milieu, Rushdie, too, has been shaped and influenced by religious, social, cultural and political forces of the time. Though a Muslim by faith, he himself admits in an interview: "My writings and thought have been as deeply influenced by Hindu myths and attitudes as Muslim ones". (Rushdie 104).

Indian English Fiction, today, has established itself in the field of world literature. The novelists like V. S. Naipaul, the Nobel Laureate, Vikram Seth, Khushwant Singh, Amit Chaudhari, Amitav Ghosh, a winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, Vikram Swaroop, Anil Menon, Upamanya Chatterjee, Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, Shashi Tharoor, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra and many more including Indian women novelists in English like Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal,

Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande and many others have made a significant contribution to the growth of Indian English Fiction. Their novels, primarily, deal with current events, issues and problems prevalent in a contemporary Indian context. They have portrayed India with its glory, customs, conventions, traditions, myths, rites and rituals, heritage, civilization, philosophy and culture in their novels. They have given a prestigious place, status, dimension and height to Indian English novel in the world. Indian English novel, today, is not restricted and confined to India only; it has now become a part of the world literature.

Many significant literary awards have been won by Indian English novelists. The first Booker Prize goes to V. S. Naipaul, the novelist of Indian origin, in 1971 for his significant novel *In A Free State*. Ruth Praver Jhabvala won the Booker Prize for her novel, *Heat and Dust*, in 1975. The first novel written by Rama Mehta, *Inside the Haveli* published in 1977, won her the Sahitya Academy Award in 1979. Shashi Deshpande's novel, *That Long Silence*, published in the U. K. in 1988 and in India in 1989, won her the Sahitya Academy Award and Nanjangad Thirumlamaba Award. She was also awarded Padma Shri in 2009 for her significant contribution to the field of Indian English fiction. Indian English fiction has won three more Booker Awards: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in 1997, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006, and Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* in 2008. Githa Hariharan's *Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) and Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) have won them the Commonwealth Award for the best first book. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* won her the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2000. Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best book, the Governor General's Award and the W. H. Smith's Books in Canada First Novel Award in 1991. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best book and the W. H. Smith Award in 1994.

Indian women writers in English have been struggling to achieve a status and distinction of being regarded as equal to men in the field of literature. According to Gorge H. Lewes, literature produced by women writers has been "too much a literature of imitation. To write as men is the besetting sin of women; to write as women are the real task they have to perform". (Lewes 3). Though there is some truth in Lewes's statement, Indian women novelists in English have started to think, speak and write for themselves. They don't need men to speak and write for them. Indian women writers in English like Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and others have explored the aura of women's cause from the feminist's perspective in their novels. They have dealt with the plight and predicament, sorrows and sufferings, pain and agony, suppression and oppression, subjugation and exploitation of Indian women, victimized creatures, caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. The present article intends to highlight the place of Indian women novelists in English

with their voice of protest against Indian patriarchy in the field of Indian English Fiction and their contribution to its growth and enrichment.

Women novelists in India have been writing fiction in English since 1890s. The study of Indian women novelists in English begins with Toru Dutt, who in her novels, *Binaca* or *The Young Spanish Maiden* (1878) and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d' Arvers*, deals with her personal experiences as a woman. She is concerned with the projection of the essentials of feminine sensibility such as affection, love, sincerity, purity, adjustability, silence, patience, tolerance and sacrifice. Cornelia Sorabji, another significant Indian woman novelist known for her novel, *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901), uses novel as an instrument to satirize social evils like hypocrisy, pretence, affectation, male-ego, male-domination, patriarchal attitude and gender-discrimination prevalent in a contemporary society. She wants women not be treated as the objects of pleasure and entertainment, but as the representatives and custodians of good values and virtues. Sevantibai's *Ratanbai* (1895) and Ela Sen's *Darkening Days* (1940) are the novels which deal with a miserable life of a woman.

Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala gave a new height and direction to Indian English novels after the Second World War. Kamala Markandaya's first novel, entitled *Nectar in a Sieve*, realistically deals with the life of Indian villagers with their customs and conventions, rites and rituals, culture and philosophy. Her second novel, *Some Inner Fury*, projects the emotions, feelings, passions and ecstasies of Mira, the woman protagonist. Her third novel, entitled *A Silence of Desire*, unfolds the layers of spiritual reality and mystic vision of India. Her other novels include: *The coffee Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*, *A Handful of Rice*, *Two Virgins*, *The Golden Honeycomb* and *Possession*. All her novels mirror life of an Indian woman with all its aspects. She portrays the inner conflict of an Indian woman who is caught between her desire to assert herself as a human being and her duty and responsibility as a daughter, a wife and a mother. Her women protagonists don't adore or worship their husbands though they respect and love them. Though victims of fate and adverse forces, they never submit completely. Their strength lies in their inherent capacity for compassion, sacrifice and tolerance.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novels deal with Indianness and Indian life in its totality. She doesn't consider herself an Indian writer, but "as one of those European writers who have written about India". (Agrawal 1974). She writes about India through a European perspective. Her novels deal with an urban middle-class Indian life with its common domestic problems. She has a very close observation of and deep insight into Indian urban life. The bitter and sordid realities of dirt in Indian cities, the frustrations and agonies of the urban Indians have been realistically depicted in her novels. *To Whom She Will* depicts a picture of Indian society with all its rites and rituals, customs and conventions, taste and temperament. Her novel, *The Nature of Passion*, is a story of a modern

young girl who shows courage and confidence to rebel against age-old rites and customs, myths and traditions and fights for liberation. Her novels, *Esmond in India* and *A Backward Place*, deal with a conflict between the East and the West. *The House Holder* is yet another novel written by her which moves around the eternal conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law prevalent in Indian society. Her novel, entitled *Heat and Dust*, which won her Booker Prize in 1975, deals with a pathetic story of two English women who visited India and became the victims of this country.

Nayantara Sahgal, an Indian woman novelist in English, proves herself a charming story teller in her novels. She is a leading practitioner of the political novel in India. She, in her novel entitled, *Rich Like Us* (1985), deals with the theme of the woman's struggle for liberation and identity and her emerging as a 'new' woman. The novel won her the Sinclair Prize for Fiction in 1985. Her novel, *A Time to Be Happy* (1963), which is based on the philosophy of *Karma*, moves around Indian politics and humanistic values of Indian traditions. Her other novels, *Plan for Departure* (1986), *Mistaken Identity* (1988), *The Day in Shadow* (1973), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1988) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977), reflect contemporary Indian political concerns and themes. Her major concerns are traditional socio-cultural values and people's attitude towards politics and personal relationships.

Anita Desai is a psychological novelist interested in the inner psyche, consciousness and life of her women protagonists. She projects the image of a suffering woman with her pain, agony, anguish, failures, frustrations, sorrows, sufferings, plight and predicament in a male-dominated society. Her novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, is a tragic story of Maya who is haunted by the prediction of the death either of husband or of wife. Her novel, *The Voices in the City*, projects a marital life of Monisha and Jiban. It is a story of unbearable tyranny and injustice, insult and abuse Monisha has to face in Indian patriarchal set-up ultimately leading her to committing suicide. Her novel, *Bye-Bye Black Bird*, presents a clash between the East and the West. Her novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, is a novel which shows Sita's inner tragic reality with special focus on cruelty and callousness an Indian urban woman has to face in her life. Her novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, depicts the inner psychology of two women. The beauty of her novel, entitled *The Clear Light of Day*, lies in a poetic and psychological portrayal of the hidden depth of Vimla, the woman protagonist who is haunted by the memories of her past life.

Desai's women protagonists are highly intelligent and sensitive women who, unfortunately, end up exhausted almost on the verge of mental conflict in their attempt to manage their home, husband and children and to find emotional fulfillment. They lose their mental balance because of confinement, restrictions and constraints imposed on them, lack of freedom, isolation and loneliness. They try to raise a cry of protest against injustice done to them but in vain. They, the victims of circumstances, are born and destined only to suffer. They accept

their destiny quietly and ungrudgingly and live like the dumb-driven cattle. They accept insults, humiliations, injustices, exploitations, sorrows, sufferings and miseries silently. No woman in her novels is fortunate enough to free herself from her tragic lot. Her woman fails not merely as a wife, as a mother, but also as a human being.

Vimla Raina is known for her historical novel, *Ambapali*, which narrates the story of Vaishali, the first woman to be admitted to the fold of Lord Budhha. Rama Mehta's novel, *Inside the Haveli*, published in 1977, deals with the clash between culture and civilization, between the city life and the village life. She highlights the issue of a traditional Indian culture with special focus on need and importance of female education. Shobha De is a popular novelist who is concerned with sexual mania of the modern commercial world. She, too, like Anita Desai, explores the depth of women psychology. Her novels include: *Socialite Evening*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters*, *Sultry Days*, *Strange Obsession*, *Snapshots*, *Second Thought*, *Shooting from the Hips*, *Small Betrayals*, *Surviving Men* and *Speed Post*. Most of her novels move around the theme of sex, which, she believes, plays a vital role in human life. She analyses sex in its various aspects in her novels. Instead of using a novel merely as a medium of entertainment, she gives a critical analysis of the marital life and marital relationships in India. Most of her middle-class urban women protagonists find themselves trapped in their marriage, which, in their opinion, is dull and stifling, painful and tormenting. She once said: "I write with great deal of empathy towards women. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about woman's situation". (De 3). Her female protagonists are 'new' women in the sense that they challenge and attempt to shatter the traditional patriarchal set-up responsible for their sorrows and sufferings. They are far more assertive, domineering and bold in comparison with their male counterparts.

Deshpande, a well-known name in the field of Indian novels written in English, started her literary career with the publication of her first short story in 1970. Her collection of short stories was published in 1978 whereas her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, that brought her a lot of praise and admiration, came out in 1980. It is a story of a man's unquestionable ego, dominance and superiority, and of the inner psyche and consciousness of a middle-class Indian woman, a victim of Indian patriarchy. Her novel, *That Long Silence*, published in the U. K. in 1988, and India in 1989, won her the *Sahitya Academy Award* and *Nanjangad Thirumlamaba Award*. It is an exploration of a typical Indian woman with her silence, endurance, tolerance and sacrifice, and her relations as a daughter, wife, a mother, and most importantly as a human being with others in a male-centric Indian society. Her other novels are: *If I Die Today*, a detective story dealing with issues such as gender-discrimination and a male-female imbalance. *Come Up and Be Dead*, a psychological mystery thriller, and *Roots and Shadows*, a story of a typical Indian woman with her plight and predicament, failures and frustrations, pain and agony, dreams and aspirations, ultimately emerging as a 'new' woman.

Her novel, *The Binding Vine*, an exploration of the redemptive powers of love, is a story of a middle-class woman with her sorrows and sufferings and her struggle and urge to free herself from male-ego, male-domination and marital-violence. *Small Remedies* is a story of a middle-class woman, a victim of Indian patriarchy, trapped between traditions and modernity. *A Matter of Time* is a multi-generational tale dealing with issues related to womanhood, motherhood, human relationships, marriage, and a joint-family system. *Moving on* is an exploration of the journey of a middle-class Indian woman from meekness, submissiveness, patience, silence, tolerance towards self-discovery, self-realization, self-reliance and self-assertion. *In the Country of Deceit* deals with the theme of extra-marital love and affairs. Her latest novel, *Strangers to Ourselves*, set in the city of Mumbai, narrates a story of an unlikely love between two unusual people – Aparna, an oncologist and Hari, a rising star in the world of music. As a popular woman novelist, she is basically concerned with the theme of human relationships and the woman's struggle for self-assertion and self-realization in a callous and malignant male-dominated society. She, an Indian feminist, wants her women to emerge as 'new' women ready to live their life on their own.

Mahasweta Devi's novel, *Mother of 1084*, won her Jnanpith and Magassasay Awards. It is a portrayal of a psychological and emotional crisis of a mother. She doesn't want her woman to be passive and submissive, but rather she wants her to realize her inner strength and be strong, confident and determined. Manju Kapoor's novel, *Difficult Daughters*, won her Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Eurasia region. It deals with the theme of marriage, which, for the woman, is the end of the journey of her life. Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for Literature for her novel, *The God of Small Things*. The novel, which is autobiographical in nature, depicts a patriarchal society with its rites and rituals, customs and conventions, beliefs and superstitions. It deals with the theme of a forbidden cross-caste love and the plight of the untouchables.

Jai Nimbkar began her career with her novel, *Temporary Answers*, in 1974. Her novel, *Come Rain* (1993), deals with the theme of the clash between the East and the West. Uma Yadav is known for her novels, *The Song of Anasuya* (1978) and *Shreya of Sonagarh* (1993). Raji Narasimhan, who is known for her book reviews, translations and literary criticism, has published five novels before the 1980s. Prema Nandakumar, a literary critic and a translator, has written a novel *Atom and the serpent* (1982) which depicts a picture of an Indian University where the faculty is busy with internal conflicts rather than in education and research activities. Namita Gokhale's first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passions*, (1984) deals with a contemporary urban Indian society where her characters do not hesitate to change their sexual partners. Her second novel, *Gods, Graves and Grandmothers*

(1994), moves around the theme of social realism. Her novel, *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), deals with the lives of lovers who are from Gokhale's native region.

Indira Mahindra's novel, *The Club* (1984), moves around Lucy and her step-mother who belong to the upper-class Indian society with its issues and problems. Her novel, *The End Play* (1994), is an exposure of personal relationships and the power struggle that goes on in an Indian joint family. Suniti Namjoshi uses fantasy and surrealism in her novels, *The Conversations of Cow* (1985) and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989). Nina Saibal's *Yatra* (1987) is a political novel that moves around the political agitations of the 1920s in Punjab. Gita Mehta's *Raj* (1989) depicts the dawn of Indian Independence and also deals with emancipation of the woman protagonist. Indu K. Mullah expresses her concerns about the problems of 'Sati', in India. Belinder Dhano's novel, *Waiting for Winter* (1991), depicts a dark picture of a girl who is trained and prepared as a presentable material for an arranged marriage, the only goal of her mother. Githa Hariharan's novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), won her the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Novel in the Eurasian region. It is a multi-generational story that moves around a dull life of an Indian woman. Kavery Bhatt presents a vivid picture of the life of a young student from a medical college in *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* (1991).

Mrinal Pande's *Daughter's Daughter* (1993), like many other Indian English novels, focuses on the issue of gender-discrimination prevalent in a contemporary society. It is a story of Tinu, a girl who grows up at her maternal grandfather's home where her cousin Kukki, being the boy, is given preference to her in all respects. Dina Mehta's only novel, *And Some Take a Lover*, gives us a deep insight into Parsi life represented by a young girl. Zai Whitker's first novel, *Up the Ghat* (1992), was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in the Best First Book category of the Eurasian region in 1993. Shama Futehally's novel, *Tara Lane* (1993), is a projection of a protected, aristocratic childhood of Tahera. Anita Nair's novel, *The Better Man* (1999), is perhaps the only novel written by a woman which is not about the Indian woman. It is a simple story set in a small village in the state of Kerala. Sohaila Abdulani has written a novel, *The Mad women of Jogre* (1996), the protagonist of which is an unusual character who leads a free life moving around the countryside alone interacting with the poor workers. Anjana Appachana's novel, *Listening Now* (1998), deals with social evils such as gender-discrimination, silence, endurance and tolerance of an Indian woman and a lack of communication prevalent in a contemporary India.

Suma Josson's *Circumference* (1994), Kamalini Sengupta's *A Seasoned Couple* (1994), Nirmala Arvind's *A Video, Friedge and a Bridge* (1995), Neelam Sharam Gour's *Speaking of '62* (1995), Bulbul Sharma's *Banana*, dealing with victimization of a woman, Shakuntala Bharvani's *Lost Directions* (1996), Ester David's *The Walled*



*City* (1997), Rani Dharkar's *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997), Nirmala Moorthy's *Maya* (1997), dealing with a traditional concept of marriage, Radhika Jha's *Smell* (1999), Anuradha Marvgh-Roy's *Idol Love* (1999), Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* (2000) which is a moving story of a young mother with her mentally retarded baby, Lakshmi Kannan's *Going Home* (1999), Sagarika Ghose's *The Gin Drinkers* (2000), a comedy of manners, Sunny Singh's *Nani's Book of Suicides* (2000), an exploration of the stream of consciousness of a young, educated, urban westernized Indian woman, Shona Ramaya's *Flute* (1989), Indira Ganesan's *The Journey* (1990) and *Inheritance* (1997) are a few of the significant novels contributing to the growth and enrichment of Indian English fiction. These novels project quite effectively a true image of Indian society and a woman's place in it.

Since its inception, Indian English novel has been portraying Indian women as long-suffering wives and mothers trapped in Indian patriarchy. It moves around an Indian woman's place, position, status and existence in a patriarchal society and her struggle for equality, justice and liberation. Major Indian women novelists in English like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shobha De and Shashi Deshpande have dealt with sorrows and sufferings, issues and problems faced by Indian women in a male-dominated society. They express their discontent with the plight and predicament of women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy with its evils such as gender-distinction, patriarchal attitude to women, urge to have a male child, child-marriage, dowry, caste-system, marital violence, sexual harassment and so on. They raise their voice of protest against their exploitation, subjugation, oppression and suppression in Indian patriarchal set-up. They intend to free Indian women from male-ego and male-domination denying them equality, justice and freedom.

Indian women novelists in English are not happy with a tragic and pathetic lot of Indian women, victimized creatures caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. They don't want their women to be enduring, meek, submissive, silent, obedient, self-sacrificing traditional creatures, but to be emotionally and mentally strong and sound. They want them to search for their identity, to exhibit vigour and courage, to revolt against unjust patriarchy, to defy orthodox restrictions and constraints imposed on them, to find their own means to solve their problems, to realize their hidden strength, to assert themselves, to emerge as 'new' women to live their life on their own and to move forward with courage, confidence and determination. In a sense, they have written their novels to serve a social purpose, a purpose of improving the lot of women. Mahatma Gandhi's vision of 'swaraj' doesn't simply mean freedom from outside bondage but freedom from social ills and evils prevalent in our society as well. If an Indian woman realizes her inner strength, if she exhibits courage, confidence and determination to protest against social ills and evils, if she changes her attitude to herself and to her life, she can certainly change her lot; and once she becomes strong and emerges as a 'new' woman ready to fight her battle, India will be a

strong and developed country in the true sense of the term. It is true that strength of the country depends on the strength of the woman. Indian women have a significant role to play in the progress and development of India.

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