
“The portrayal of female identity and existential travails by diasporic women writers”

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Abstract:

Using the framework of Western feminist thought is central to the concept that underpins Indian women's experiences. At the same time, one must uphold the effort and battle against the male-dominated society to bring about equal status for women in all sectors. This is because betrayal and leaving the endeavor would be a big failure. Yet, the women of the Third World countries don't appear to be able to conform to the individualistic attitudes and pessimistic outlook that feminists have regarding marriage, motherhood, family, and the duty of children. Diasporic women writers have female protagonists who epitomize women's essential and existential struggles in alien settings. This paper tries to present some of them.

Keywords: feminine mystique, identity crisis, and existential dilemma

There is no question that fiction written in English by women authors holds a prominent place in contemporary Indian writing in English. They used

writing to exhibit their own voices in the works they produced and provide us with insights into the world that their women inhabited. In a male-chauvinist Indian society, a woman is still considered a "second person," She is subject to male hegemony as well as atrocities such as murder, rape, moral policing, and other such practices. This is the case everywhere else as well. As a result, we need to investigate the extent to which works of literature of this kind could serve as a remedy for the form mentioned above of social ill will. It has opened up a wide range of possibilities for women as a distinct field of research known as "Women's Studies."

The inclusion of Women's Studies in the curriculum of educational institutions is a step in the right direction because it requires the writing of literature that deals with women's issues and their voices directly or impliedly, leading to their improvement and general enlightenment. This is a step in the right direction because it is a step in the right direction. In light of this, investigating the roles played by the female protagonists in the imaginary universes created by these two female authors may prove more pertinent and fruitful. In older works of

Indian fiction, female characters were typically penned by men, who tended to portray women in a manner that was more symbolic than human.

The works of male authors portrayed an idealized vision of women from the perspective of manhood and social morality. Therefore, most of the female characters in the fiction never came close to approximating the real women of the time and did not play a significant role because the male authors focused solely on the public lives of these women rather than on their private lives. This is because male writers were more interested in advancing their careers. The male writers perpetuate the stereotype that women are feeble and have restricted capabilities in the workplace. Their inherent inability to take the initiative placed women in a subordinate position in life and pushed them deeper into the archetypal roles that male authors had envisioned for them. The mere essence of their passivity gave them a secondary place. Yet, modernism became increasingly prevalent in women writers' work as time went on.

Women writers such as Anita Desai Bharati Mukherjee, CB Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri, who belong to the recent generation of women writers in post-independence India, started writing on women's issues in their works after they gained an understanding of the challenges that women face. Anita Desai is interested in investigating individual and communal life's psychological and

sociological stresses. She is intensely interested in exploring and portraying human interactions, particularly those within the context of families. Bharati Mukherjee preoccupies herself mostly with cultural matters and issues of identity, both of which can result in feelings of alienation and loneliness. The fundamental roles that these female authors play center on feminism and the feminist identity.

Both psychological and sociological perspectives connect identity to an individual's sense of who they are in connection to the community, nation, or culture to which they belong. Identity is "the condition of being oneself or itself and not another; the condition of character that differentiates a person or an object; individually" in Webster's Dictionary. Similarly, the Encyclopedia Americana defines the term "identity" as "the state of remaining the same and the idea of a continuity underpinning the notion of human identity". It appears that the majority of the female characters in their novels suffer from some psychological trauma that ultimately leads to isolation. The female heroines of these books by diasporic women authors spend the entirety of their stories looking for their unique sense of femininity. Their isolation plagues them, disappointing them in all aspects of their existence.

The primary cause of the horrific problems that the female heroines face in their books may be a lack of understanding between the partners in

their relationships. The requirements and necessities of the global women's movement have played a significant role in the development of feminist literary theory. The work "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Woolf is regarded as a watershed moment in the development of feminist ideology in the 20th century. This ideology advocates for the equal rights and economic autonomy of women. The radical feminist theory of Kate Millet is referred to as "Sexual Politics." This theory examines the sexual power politics present in the works of DH Lawrence, Miller, and Norman Mailer, all of which indicate the predominance of the male. She contends that the only way the patriarchy can be abolished is by implementing a sexual revolution.

Focusing on female characters written by female authors usually entails working within the theoretical framework of feminism, even if the selected authors are not necessarily "feminists." One cannot have a singular ideology of Indian feminism because of the country's numerous varied regions, religions, castes, and other aspects of its culture. When we discuss feminism in India, we have to necessarily position it within the greater context of Western feminism to grasp the degree to which it is comparable to, or different from, Western feminism. Nonetheless, the idea of feminism in Western societies has always been broad and diverse, with concepts ranging from calls for significant societal upheaval to calls for more moderate social change.

This diversity and complexity can be seen in the idea of feminism.

The empowerment and protection of women are the primary focus of feminism. Various subcategories fall under the umbrella term "feminist." Including but not limited to liberal, Marxist, radical, social, equitable, and cyber. In her work "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," which is considered a classic of feminist thinking, Mary Wollstonecraft, who is sometimes referred to as the "first feminist" or the "mother of feminism," emphasizes the right of women to receive an education. The subjection of women is the topic that is addressed in Simone de Beauvoir's book "The Second Sex," which was published quite a few years after the beginning of the feminist movement. Beauvoir observes that man has defined himself as the ultimate, whereas the typical woman has described herself as the "other."

The book "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan was the catalyst that sped up the speed of feminism. In it, Friedan observed that women were dissatisfied and suffering from a condition that had no name at the time—perhaps a problem of "housewife's tiredness" or "boredom." On the other hand, one gets the impression that Western ideologies, with their liberal and radical perspectives that reject marriage and motherhood, might not be appropriate for women in the setting of Indian society. Despite this, everyone makes choices based on their assumptions or views

regarding the world. These formal, mainstream (or "male-stream") approaches to theorizing are currently being challenged by various groups of women who have taken multiple approaches. These women are putting their distinctive points of view to bear on problems that are relevant to their day-to-day lives.

By applying these fresh viewpoints, women have dismantled conventional knowledge structures and developed novel ones. This kind of knowledge reconstruction has led to policy and conduct changes affecting women's lives. The theoretical approach that is concentrated on men has resulted in specific perspectives on a variety of issues, including those that are relevant to women. These perspectives are founded on a set of andocentric assumptions. One example of this assumption is that their biology determines women's roles in the workforce. As a result, their job is or should be confined to caring for children and completing housework. Such presumptions serve as the foundation for hypotheses, such as the one presented here, which states that the waged workforce is often comprised primarily of male workers, while women tend to work at home.

The feminist movement in the Western world was a segregationist movement of women fighting for their rights. On the other hand, the Indian women's movement was not separatist but rather a campaign launched by males and

later joined by women. Men were the ones who initiated the action. In contrast to women in the West, Indian women did not view it as necessary to fight for equal rights because the Constitution of India already guaranteed those rights. Within the framework of Indian culture, the idea of "feminism" is singular, and it is impossible to relate it straightforwardly to the concept of feminism in Western culture. Even the social condition in the West is quite different from how things are here in India. In addition, in contrast to the Western culture, Indian society is not a right-oriented society but rather a duty-oriented society that places a traditional premium on dharma and excels at performing obligations by dharma. To survive, Indian women must navigate a complex variety of repressive patriarchal familial institutions. The structure of the Hindu family can, to varied degrees, extend outward towards the ever-expanding concentric rings of relationships.

Using the framework of Western feminist thought is central to the concept that underpins Indian women's experiences. At the same time, one must uphold the effort and battle against the male-dominated society to bring about equal status for women in all sectors. This is because betrayal and leaving the endeavor would be a big failure. Yet, the women of the Third World countries don't appear to be able to conform to the individualistic attitudes and pessimistic outlook that feminists have regarding

marriage, motherhood, family, and the duty of children.

Maya from *Cry the Peacock* (1963), Uma from *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), and Sita from *Where Will We Go This Summer?* (1975) are just a few examples of Anita Desai's female heroines that are inherently lonely and fighting against the forces of life in her novels. Most of Anita Desai's work is preoccupied with the tribulations that befall women, and the female heroine strongly prefers residing in her own head.

Notably, many of Bharati Mukherjee's critics have focused on a single aspect of her works, such as feminist discourse, cultural construct, or immigrant sensibility. This has been the case with many of the reviewers. This is the first time anyone has attempted to investigate how characters' identities shift during the various phases of the existential issues they confront while transitioning to unfamiliar and less familiar societies outside of their home countries. The researcher believes that there is a requirement for a more in-depth study in which her fictional characters transition from an expatriate and wistful yearning to an effort for acculturation in and integration with the culture of America. This kind of comprehensive investigation would shed new light on her accomplishments.

The record set by Desai is a significant one in the history of Indian English fiction. She works with his inner

consciousness, which is a woman. Her status as "a writer with an original voice" was revealed by G. RaiRamesh. "Anita Desai has emerged as a highly serious, skilled, and promising novelist in India today," K Srivastava adds, and he is correct about this (Srivastava, 1984). 1

Novelist Anita Desai has a distinctive writing style that is at the same time earnest and engaging. She has established a significant position for herself in Indian fiction written in English. She is an influential figure because she has written several books and has been nominated for the Booker Prize three times. The novels by Anita Desai capture both the interior monologues of the individuals she creates and the sensibility of India. She is a modern writer whose work focuses on the struggles and dilemmas that women, in particular, find themselves in today's society. In her books, she discusses the efforts that come with searching for one's sense of femininity.

Most of the topics explored in Anita Desai's works are related to women's lives. She brings to life the many distinct female characters, such as Maya in "Cry the Peacock," who are going through various struggles. As a result of her inability to carry a kid to term, she is going through some unpleasant experiences. Sita is portrayed by the author of *Where Shall We Go This Summer* as being too immature to adjust to the lifestyle of a city dweller. Uma is looking for her identity outside of the

world, and her fasting is a clear representation of the inner agony that she is experiencing. It's worth noting that Anita Desai has also shown the mental state of women who don't wish to have children, which is a fascinating aspect of her work.

Bharati Mukherjee has vociferously proclaimed that she is not an Indian author. Yet, she makes rehashed references to the social custom of Calcutta and her loved snapshots of sentimentality or images of bafflement in experiences with the unaffected Calcutta. However, she views herself as an American, yet the social references that she involves in her composing challenge her own assertion "Desirable Daughters" and "The Tree Bride" make her an Indian writer and at heart very much a Bengali writer. Probably, these novels are her discovery or realization that she stated in "Days and Nights in Calcutta". While changing citizenship is simple, it isn't. Calcutta, the city she grew up in, is known for her progenitors and continues introducing itself in her works. She personally concedes that "the city will stay a propensity with me" Her way to deal with life and its concerns are profoundly secured in her Indian childhood. (Carb, Massachusetts, 650). 2

Maya Manju Sharma alludes to this part of her imaginative character: "In her fiction, Mukherjee handles Western themes and settings as well as westernized or bi-cultural characters. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her

imagination is essentially Hindu and moral." (Sharma, Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives, p.18). 3

The subject of assimilation and change by an outsider culture, the trials and hardships, and the quakes and injuries that distress migrants on foreign soil have been adroitly outlined by Bharati Mukherjee as she continually attempts to break up the diasporic limits. Her books "Jasmine" and "The Tiger's Daughter" manage the endeavor of the female characters to handle the issue of the deficiency of culture and their undertaking to expect another character in the U.S. Her original Jasmine shows the chance of redoing oneself in the New World. She depicts the worker experience of the West as thrilling and full of potential outcomes.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author and poet. She began her writings only after expatriating to America. Life in America gave her several experiences she tried to explore as the immigrant's sensibility. Mahasweta Devi, Anita Desai, and Maxine Hong Kingston are the writers who have inspired her to write. In an interview with the magazine Atlantic Monthly, in response to Katie Bolick's question, "Who are your influences?" Chitra Banerjee gave a comprehensive answer: Mahasweta Devi, an Indian feminist writer, has been an excellent role model for me. She wrote about women's issues long before it became fashionable or political to do so when it

was hazardous. . . and she suffered a lot for it."

In her Novels, she realistically deals with the experiences of immigrant women. But to this reality, she also mixes imagination and fantasy of a magical and mythical world. In this connection, a review of the Wall Street Journal states "that she beautifully blends the chills of reality with the rich imaginings of a fairy tale." She has written about family relationships, love, passion, and women's life struggles in most of her novels. She tries to dissolve the boundaries between two different countries.

Her book "*Arranged Marriage*" is a collection of short stories about women from India caught between two bewildering worlds. She has written about six novels in English Literature now; these are "**The Mistress of Spices**", "**Sister of My Heart**", "*Vine of Desire*", "*The Conch Bearer*", "**Queen of Dreams**, and *The Palace of Illusions*. In her Novel, "**The Mistress of Spices**", the character Tilo Provides spices not only for cooking but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants experience in her shop. In '**Sister of My Heart**', two cousins, Anju and Sudha, one in America and the other in India, share details of their lives with each other and help each other solve their marriage problems.

"**The Vine of Desire**" continues the story of Anju and Sudha. Far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, the

deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support they need. The women's bond is shaken to the core when they must confront Anju's husband's profoundly passionate feelings for Sudha. *The Conch Bearer* is a mystical story about twelve years old Anand, living in Calcutta, who is entrusted with a conch shell imbued with magical powers. *Queen of Dreams* is a novel about the character Rakhi, a young artist and divorced mother living in Berkeley, California, js struggling to find her footing with her family and a world in an alarming transition.

The dominant theme of Lahiri's works is a sense of homelessness experienced in a foreign land. This sense of emotional exile, the clash of cultures, the tangled ties between generations, and various stages of immigrant experience are well reflected in her significant works "*Interpreter of Maladies*", "*Unaccustomed Earth*", a collection of short stories, and her novel "*The Namesake*". To the common assumption that diasporic studies generally nurture voices of differences and disagreements, Lahiri's work in totality negates the viewpoint mentioned above. With patronizing amicability, she probes into the confused vision of the diasporic characters. And so, going through the conflicts between cultural hegemony and untutored spontaneity and the dispossessed man's obsessive attachment to memory, history, roots, and identity, her text construes itself only in terms of the search for: 'beyond'. Dispossession,

as she sees it, could be from the home, state security, trust, faith, love, etc. The dispossession from the values of life is as terrible as the diasporic identity crises as the writer keeps presenting the disorders of people experiencing homelessness.

"The Namesake" is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis, into America, over thirty years; the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American-born children in different ways; the spatial, cultural, and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle "home" in the new land. S. Rajagopalan writes that "The Namesake" explores the theme of "immigrant experience and the clash of cultures in the U.S." (Rajagopalan, *Hindustan Times* 3). There is a variation in how Ashoke and Ashima, the first-generation immigrants¹ and Gogol, Sonia, and Moushumi, the second-generation immigrants, feel alienated in a foreign land. The people of the first generation migrated both out of choice and due to necessity, but their pull towards their native land is much stronger than the second-generation immigrants. The sense of dislocation and nostalgia does not allow them to detach entirely from their native country.

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