



Women Voices: Some Indian English Women Novelists Since 1980

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Women, down the ages, have been an exploited, deprived, underprivileged and suppressed class while they played a very significant role in the creation of the society. But with the passing of time they became aware of the fact that gender is neither natural nor immutable rather it is the creation of patriarchy. In the modern age, the role of women goes beyond the home and the bringing up of children. They are now adopting a career of their own choice and sharing equally with men the responsibility for the development of society. They are getting themselves admitted in professional colleges, which offer courses like B. Ed, Computer application and Fashion designing etc. Let us analyse how these educated and working women raise their voices. Their voices try to assert that they do have their own preferences and choices in their decisions, be it in accepting the responsibility of marriage, be it in love-making with their husbands, be it in choosing creative writing in order to assert their emancipation and be it in decision making about marital and extra-marital relationship. After 1980 Indian English fiction by women has received a lot of talented writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Anita Desai and Manju Kapur. These Indian women writers are free to

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handle even the intimate lives of women in a new light with more frankness. It was not easy task for them because there was still strong hold of tradition. These novelists have tried to explore the various situations and repercussion on the personality of their characters. They have tried their best to express the inner urge of Indian women in the best possible way and strongly objected to the treatment of women characters as objects and not as subjects. The status of women in society and their struggle have been focal point in the writings of these Indian English women novelists. They seek to portray women's struggle within and against the social constraints reflecting the desire to change.

Shashi Deshpande, the prominent novelist depicts the agony, anguish and conflict of the modern middle class Indian women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand and individuality, self expression and independence on the other. She says: "I know women better than I know men, so perhaps my books are more about women and that's about it"¹ Among Indian women novels of the 1980's, her novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) is the first. Sarita (Saru) a doctor shows her individuality by raising her voice against her husband when he wanted to make love. Men always claim that the bodies of women are their property. They feel that whenever they want to make love, their wives have to subdue themselves. It is not essential whether they are willing or not. They do not have freedom to say 'Yes' or 'no' to their husbands. Saru has courage to say 'no' to her husband and expresses her voice and individuality when she says :

She remembered the first time she had been reading in bed when he turned to her, pulling the book savagely out of her hands. "That is enough; come to me now."

For, when she left him against her, she knew there was nothing. It was a sham. And something about it sickened her.

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“No, No, Please, no.”²

It is clear that it was she who had to decide whether to read or to stop. It is obvious that she was not interested or in no mood, so definitely felt ‘Sickening’. Indirectly she is voicing that it was her body. She had to decide whether she should participate in making love or not.

Deshpande’s women protagonists undergo great mental trauma in their search for identity before they assert themselves. She has been a tremendous success in voicing the concerns of women characters. She writes for the suppressed and reveals the predicament of modern Indian women. Search for identity and quest for freedom are the two prominent traits that appear again and again in the articulation of novelist’s mental or psychological tension and frustration, In another novel of Deshpande *That Long silence* (1988) for whom she got the Sahitya Academy Award in 1990 Jaya has asserted her voice in choosing her creative writing, The title itself suggests the silence that the protagonist maintained throughout her life and at last wished to break to search for her real individual self. The story may be said to be a journey of Jaya from subordination to autonomy and from silence to eloquence. She takes this step at the end of the novel. When Jaya wrote a story and got it published in a magazine and got a prize her husband protests against her act of writing. He suppresses her voice. Any husband would be happy if his wife wins a prize. But here case is different. Jaya does not want to hurt the feeling of her husband. She decides to give up writing. But it does not continue for long time. She cannot suppress her zeal and longing. Whatever ‘panic’ she had earlier disappears. Again she starts writing. Thus, she raises her voice to become a full fledged and open creative writer.

Nayantara Sahgal looks at the lot of half the world’s population in her novels- that of women. The position of women in the world and especially in a patriarchal

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society is that of a second class citizen. Sahgal shows that all political freedom would be meaningless unless women are respected and they are allowed equal say in the matters concerning them. In novel after novel, be it *This Time of Morning Storm* in Chandigarh, *The Day in Shadow*, *Rich LIKE US Or A situation* in New Delhi-all her protagonists at the centre are women-three of them walking out of bad marriages and all of them concerned with the problems of women trying to survive in a male-dominated society. An Indian woman is expected by society to conform to the ideals of Sita and Savitri. She still has the image of a chaste, patient, self-denying and long-suffering wife. The values embodied by the mythical Sita and Savitri loom large in the consciousness of women even when they reject those role models. Sahgal's women are educated belonging to middleclass, therefore, more self-aware and with greater resources to fight for their rights. They fight against male domination even by taking recourse to divorce. In the novel *Rich like US* (1987) Sonali, an I.C.S Officer has shown that principles are more important than promotion or demotion in discharging her duties as a sincere, honest, dedicated and patriotic Officer. Sonali is the character in Indian English literature whom a great prestigious position is given to a woman character. She has stuck to her principles. Dev in collaboration with Mr. Neuman wants to establish a fizzy drink factory which is not the sole purpose, but "is really a cover up for the import and storage of car-parts required for the manufacturing of an indigenous car by the Prime Minister's son."³ Having realised the reason, Sonali as per her principles, does not recommend the file and gives negative remark raising her voice: "... I wrote a brief rejection in the wide margin of the proposal on my disk ..." ⁴Here is a person who rejects the proposal without any hesitation. It is the power of pen. Ravi is to replace Sonali. Sonali does not speak a word which suggests that she is showing her individuality and raising her voice in protest. But he is corrupt. The fact is that he is sanctioning the proposal itself makes him feel guilty. He is corrupt as opposed to Sonali who proves that her principles are

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more important than the demotion. Thus, She has raised her voice above the man. She could even claim that the female is superior in this case.

Anita Desai occupies a prominent and distinguished place in Indian English fiction writing since 1980. In her novel she seeks to unravel the complex responses of middle class women to their domestic world. Her novels are about the inner world of her characters. Her protagonists suffer from acute mental trauma that stems from estrangement, from their own self and the society. Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is an important novel among Indian English women novels since 1980. *Bimla* (*Bim*) becomes a sacrificer accepting the responsibility of her family. *Bim* has an elder brother *Raja*, younger sister *Tara* and younger retarded brother *Baba*. She has lost her parents as well as her aunt *Mira*. *Tara* marries *Bakul* and leaves India. Next to *Tara*, *Raja* decides to leave Hyderabad. He is not a responsible brother. Knowing everything that *Bim* will be alone and he has a retarded brother he decides to leave them. Moreover, he shouts at *Bim*. *Bim* never says a word. She is bold and courageous. She is confident. She says that she will not stop him. She gives permission to 'go'. She is mature and independent enough to look after *Baba*. *Raja* never expected that she would raise her voice in saying 'go'. The tone of *Bim's* word 'go' suggests her assertive voice. *Dr. Biswas* understands *Bim* well because he wants to marry her. But she does not want to marry because she is not an escapist like *Raja*. The reason why she does not want to marry is disclosed by *Dr. Biswas* in his words :

"Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life... to your sick brother....Who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for him."⁵

Bim always tries to console *Baba*. She knows well that she has to depend on herself. She does not care for it and accepts the challenge of responsibility boldly.



Shobha De, the popular novelist describes the image of the upper class women i.e. the neo- rich aristocratic women in her novels. She tries to go into the psyche of women and how the psyche has bearings on the lives and activities of women characters. She writes for the liberation of women. She describes their problems and gives new approach to them. The early soft voice of the protagonist gradually turns into an explicit annoyance and finally takes the shape of an open rebellion. Karuna in her novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989) raises her voice against an unhappy marital relationship. She introspects her married life: "What was wrong with my marriage ? What had gone wrong ? My marriage went sour because I had married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. My husband was not a villain. He was just an average Indian husband... unexciting uninspiring & untutored."⁶

The wife is asking herself what went 'wrong' in their marriage and whether marriage was successful or not. She regrets for it. Here is a women who voices that she has not married the 'right' man. There was a time when man used to say that he has married a wrong woman. Now, it is the time when woman declared that she has married a 'wrong' man. She openly says that she is not happy. May be she expected something more romantic from her husband, but he was unexciting and uninspiring. She announces that he is an average Indian husband. Shobha De is giving a voice to Karuna in order to voice her freedom. She is different from an ordinary Indian woman. She is free, frank and candid. She asks her husband openly why he married her. Her husband simply laughs it off. He gives no answer. He does not find any difficulty. The difficulty arises when Karuna is introduced to Krish Mukherjee, a friend of her husband. Krish develops an intimacy with Karuna and it turns into an affair. Let us see how intimacy develops between Krish and Karuna :

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.... I did not know what I was doing. I bloody well did. The affair seemed inevitable and was the best thing that could have happened to me... for three years we plunged into what the tabloids call a 'torrid affair'- the better part of it conducted through letters. ... It came to stage when the postman was the most important individual in my life. I would wait like a lunatic for the fact eavelopes to slip into my hands as I waited this side of the door.⁷

From the above lines it is quite obvious how Karuna is assertive in developing her relation with Krish. One will be really surprised to know and see a wife waiting for letters from Krish who was a friend of her husband. This affair has been going for three years. A wife seeks solace or communication from others when she is not happy with her husband. Really, she is raising her voice to point out her husband that he is not studying and understanding the mind of his unhappy wife. A husband should not be careless otherwise wife will develop relation with other like-minded person.

Manju Kapur's prominent novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) deals with the theme of woman's struggle for existence. Kapur portrays a woman who raises voice against established norm of society and breaks it before adjusting to them. The novel reveals a saga of Indian woman's innocent aspirations, her rebellion against the tradition-bound society, resolution and assertiveness. Virmati, the chief protagonist of the novel, raises voice defying convention and falls in love with a married professor and marries him, Kasturi tries her best to enable Virmati to succumb to the wishes of the family but of no use. Her marriage was final with Inderjit but it was postponed due to the death of his father. Virmati becomes the centre of focus because of her revolutionary zeal. She neither yields to the age-old tradition of Arya-Samaj family nor marries the person to whom she is engaged. Her suffering to get her love and marriage with the professor symbolizes her assertiveness. We find

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Shakuntala and Swarnalata who have paved the path of their independence against the parent's will and have their own voice. Shakuntala and Swarnalata belonged to the type of advanced women in society. Shakuntala after doing her M.Sc. in chemistry had experienced the joys of independent life. Her decision of not getting married during those days shows her strong character. Virmati accompanied her mother to Dalhousie to take care of her mother with a new born baby. Shakuntala's visit to Dalhousie planted the seeds of aspirations in Virmati. After meeting with a spirited, defiant cousin sister she also wanted to be like Shakuntala. She started thinking " It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore Colleges."⁸ She understood that it was possible to be something than a wife. Shakuntala invited her to Lahore saying : "...times are changing and women are moving out of the house, so why not you ?"⁹ It was due to her aspiration only that Virmati could aspire to soar very high in the sky defying her traditional family and got herself highly educated, with the potential of being economically independent through her life- a rare accomplishment for women of times. Her determination shows her assertive nature.

In conclusion, I would like to say that all these educated women raise their voices in order to assert that they have capacity and courage to take decisions according to their choices. Sarita protests her husband refusing the proposal of his love in *The Dark Holds No Terror*. Jaya raises voice against her husbands in choosing creative writing in *That Long Silence*. Sonali expresses her individuality by rejecting the wrong proposal accepting demotion as a reward in *Rich Like Us*. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* becomes a sacrificer by sacrificing her marriage accepting the responsibility of her family. Karuna raises voice expressing the feeling of her unhappiness in her marital relationship in *Socialite Evenings*. Virmati revolts defying the convention of society in making love and marrying a married professor

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and continuing her higher education against the wishes of her family in *The Difficult Daughters*.

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