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Women in Contemporary Literature And Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Unlike “The world of Shakespearean Comedy is a comedy made safe for women, a world in which a girl can prosper and come to flower” the women in the contemporary literature and cinema are presented with various life problems. The conflict between work and love or femininity and ambition are central themes of modern cinema. The silent voice through literary text has expanded the horizon of literary appreciation beyond the paradigms of aesthetics. The Indian novels that deal with women issues gives often the peripheral treatment of subject or end up glorifying the stereotypical witness of Indian women like Patience, devotion of whatever is meted out to her. The fictional world of Anita Desai, Manju Kapoor, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Bharti Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri is exclusively a women’s world encompassing socio cultural paradigm of gender relations with the realization of the mental reaction of obsessive mechanism of oppression operating within the social structure.

Typically the films of 1970 appear to have brought about the re-emergence of the strong heroine or ‘new women’ who try to break the shackles of patriarchy and challenge the traditional notion ‘of angel of the house’. The “new women” in the contemporary literature and cinema are not the counterpart of Hardy’s Susan to be auctioned by her husband in a drunken state in “*The Mayor of Casterbridge*” or Tess to be sent to work at a mansion for being seduced and raped by the owner’s son in “*Tess of the D Urberville*”. Moreover, the ‘new women’ in contemporary literature as portrayed by Anita Desai in her novel “*Clear Light of Day*” and in Manju Kapoor’s “*A Married Women*” are contemplative about their predicament, choose not to surrender but break the convention to face the situation. At the same time Arundhati Roy’s “*The God of Small Things*” is also a voice against the exploitation of lower caste and of women. Shobha De’s Karuna in “*Socialite Evenings*” is able to recognize how Indian women are made to listen and tolerate and are denied to live as an autonomous being. Thus, the role of women in contemporary literature is caught in a constant flux of new equation. The wired-up world makes no critical distinction between the sexes in terms of old divides of brute physical strength and constraints of the child rearing biological model in which women are cast.

The connection between cinema and literary classics/scripture was evident from the start and endured till the present time. This is most obviously true for the cinema’s link with classical epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. One of the earliest feature film Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) remade in (1917) was based on the legend included in *Mahabharata*. This inaugurated the persistent trend of epic-derived film. Such early examples may give the false impression that epic based on movies are old-fashioned, reactionary and irrelevant for contemporary cinema. However that the epics are abidingly popular source of inspiration, it is made clear by the spectacular success of televised epic serials *Ramayana* by Ramanand Sagar and *Mahabharata* by B.R. Chopra. Other films that are landmarks of Indian popular culture have taken roots in literature too but again these are under stressed. There has been much discussion in the popular press about the successful recent movies *Devdas* 2002 by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. In this segment Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* and Dev Anand’s *The Guide* are the milestones of yesteryear while Bhardwaj’s *Omkara* and Amir’s *Three Idiot* are some of the Indian blockbusters of contemporary cinema. Recently, the book based movies like Mira Nair’s *Midnight’s Children* on Salman Rushdie’s novel of the same name and Abhishek Kapoor *Koi Poche* based on Chetan Bhagat’s *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* have set new standard in this symbiotic relationship between literature and film.”¹

The portrayal of women in cinema has evolved over the years, reflecting major changes in society. Women have always appeared alongside men and supporting roles in movies, their interests and activities were quite distinct from those of men. In the 1920's women appeared in strong role. These women escaped the world of domesticity, being worldly characters often fallen women who were punished in the end. These women characters did not compete with male characters but occupied a different genre. This genre consisted of fantasy, song and dance that appeared to many women in the time of depression. Women role in cinema reflect western culture as well as the changes that have happened due to the feminist movement. Typically the films of 1950's and 1960's portrayed women in sexually and socially conservative roles such as 'stand by your man' stereotypes. The 1970's appear to have brought about the re-emergence of the strong heroine or 'new woman' who was presented differently. This reflects the influence of the newly visible women's movement, the changes in family life brought about by feminism. The progressive change in the sex roles within society meant film production had a focus on the problem faced by modern woman by the breakdown of the traditional family and general upheaval. Such films may present broken relationships, portraying female liberation, growth and fulfilment.

The present paper is an attempt to probe into women in contemporary literature of a few women novelists like Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Shobha De. These women novelists have moved away from the traditional portrayal of enduring self-sacrificing woman towards conflicted female characters searching for identity no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. Many Indian novelists have explored subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is imposed by patriarchal society. The women world in general has struggled to be accepted on par with men both in the social and literary canon in the human history of civilization. Their constant struggle and conscious effects have brought about many cultural and social changes in various countries around the world in the dawn of twenty first century. The literary canon has perhaps given more hope and space to treat them as powerful as men or even stronger, more efficient and more rebellious than their male counterpart. Gone are the days when women were supposed to be the silent sufferer of subjugation, extortion and exploitation in the form of kidnap, honour killing, bride burning, gender discrimination, poor wages for long hours of work and so on. The dictum of Manu that a woman is never fit for independence; her father's protection in childhood, her husband's protection in youth and her son's protection in old age contain very little relevance in the contemporary literature. Now women protest against their use as an article to be sold and purchased or a belonging to be lost and won in a gamble. They have diverted their way from the traditional image of being an idol of compassion, patience and tolerance. They don't want to be Hardy's Susan to be auctioned in a fair by her drunkard husband Michael Henchard. An insight into the auction-episode in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* unlocks the silent resentment that fills a woman's heart. The absolute indifference with which Susan submits to her destiny is expression of her inner cry and discontent with her status as the wife of a drunkard as she finally pulls off her wedding ring and flings it across the booth in the hay-trusser's face. Finally she warned her husband against her misdemeanour: "before you go further Michael, listen to me. If your touch that money, I and this girl go with the man. Mind, it is a joke no longer." Each word uttered by the dishonoured wife not only pronounces her indignation against the act of her husband but also expresses her protest against the social norms that compel a woman to yield to the words of her man, howsoever, in human and illogical he may be. We must admit that the times are changing even if the pace of change is marginal. As an evidence of the changing scenario we may look at a statement by Anees Jung in her pioneering book titled *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* (1888).

"Not long ago a woman who spoke about herself was considered a loose woman. To voice a pain, to divulge a secret was considered sacrilege, a breach of family trust. Today voices are raised without fear and are heard outside the walls of homes that once kept a woman protected, also isolated. Some of the women who speak here have stepped out. Others who have not are beginning to be aware, eager to find expression."²

In the galaxy of women writers Virginia Woolf is regarded as one of the most important figures of 20th century literature. Her most famous work includes the *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To The Lighthouse* (1927). Her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) includes

the famous quote, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write a fiction.”³ Woolf ponders the significant question of whether or not a woman could produce art of the high quality of Shakespeare. In doing so she examines women’s historical experience as well as the distinctive struggle of woman artist. She says the genius like Shakespeare is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. In her view, some kind of genius must have existed among women then, as it exists among the working class although it is never translated to paper. The narrator argues that the difficulties of writing especially the indifference of the world to one’s art – are compounded for women who are actively disdained by the male establishment. By boldly advocating the fact that both the freedom from economic dependence and the freedom from the fetters of the mind and body are conditions of the possibility of genius and its full expression Woolf laid the foundation of the feminist movement.

British novelist Doris Lessing one of the major writers of the mid 20th century has portrayed the fate and predicament of women in contemporary literature. One of her most influential work *The Golden Notebook* (1962) examines her concern about the inner lives of women and she is extremely articulated in rejecting the notion that they should abandon their lives to marriage and children. Having known what means to be intelligent and frustrated and female in an essentially male dominated world, she states: Any human anywhere will blossom in a hundred unexpected talents and capacities simply by being given the opportunity to do so Lessing critically and realistically explores the controversial question being debated world over the stereotypes marriage, motherhood, the predicament of emancipated women.

Among the contemporary Indian women novelist Anita Desai has acquired her illustrious and most prestigious position as a brilliant fictionist with feminism and social consciousness. Her emerging ‘new woman’ is contemplative about her predicament and chooses to protest and fight against the general accepted norms. What is different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequence of their choices. Anita Desai asserts that her protagonists are new and different: “I’m interested in characters that are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against the general current; it is for them a challenge to better their own personal existence. Her *Clear Light of Day* is chosen to evince and examine the wide space that divides the two types of women hailing from the same family-the women who do not act but surrender and so keep the tradition alive and also the women who choose not to surrender and be meek but break the convention to face their situation and take up a new road where no one can dictate to them”³

Bimla the protagonist, a lecturer at Delhi College ultimately reconciles to all the developments to her household, the neglect of her parents, the indifference of sister and the partiality of her brother Raja and the constant shifting of her handicapped brother – becomes an independent lady, advises other neighbourly Mishra girls to be educated and independent. She dresses and smokes like a man enables her to grow up strong and confident. She refuses to confine herself to her role as a traditional woman. Bimla the eldest of all incurs upon her all the burden of the family. After the death of her father she accepts the role of a father to take care of her sisters and brothers and later marrying them. She sacrifices her own life for the betterment of the family and becomes family representative of the new women of contemporary Indian urban woman – single, independent, self assured. It is her extreme sense of responsibility for the family and for Baba which makes her feel strong and in control of herself. She appears to show that woman can look after the family much better than any man. Despite all the odds Bimla gets success in building up her ambitions, is triumphant in being independent and it is Tara and Bakul who realize this “Bim had found everything she wanted in life. It seemed so incredible that she hadn’t had to go anywhere to find it that she had stayed on in the old house, taught in the old college and yet it had given her everything she wanted”(158). Thus Bimla does manly duties and the traditional norms and currents. It is now evident that Desai’s woman is reflective about her condition. Her protest is not for quality but for the right to be acknowledged as individual capable of intelligence and feeling. The new woman that has been explored in the book reveals that Bim is not the ‘ideal’ or the best woman. She is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential, along with the struggle to fulfil her urges and needs.

Another remarkable treatment of new women in contemporary literature can be traced out in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* a novel exposing the hypocrisy and entrenched prejudices of traditional Indian society as seen in the microcosm of Ayemenem. As a voice of protest against exploitation of the lower classes and of women it is a novel of rebellion. A helpless woman named Ammu has to face a number of difficulties right from her childhood when she has seen her father beating her mother with brass vase. Ammu gets step-motherly treatment in her house. She is deprived of having college education while her brother is sent to Balliol College in Oxford University. Her father is of the view that when a girl is sent to college she becomes corrupt. Ammu feels suffocated to survive in the dreadful atmosphere of her house. Out of frustration and monotony she wants to make herself free from all shackles of this uncongenial atmosphere as well as the apathetic attitudes of her family members. "All day she dreamt of escaping from Ayemenem and clutches of her ill tempered father and bitter long suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually one worked. Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with distant aunt who lived in Calcutta."

In wedding reception Ammu meets her would be husband Baba an assistant manager of Tea Estate in Assam. She very hurriedly marries him thinking that anything anyone at all would be better than returning to Ayemenem. Very soon after her marriage she realizes her committed blunder by marrying Baba as he is a big drunkard. Her husband wants to trade her modestly to his boss Mr. Hollick. Finally she leaves her husband's house with her two kids and comes back to Ayemenem where she finds the response of her parents towards her very cold. Having received no support, no sympathy from anywhere she leaves the big Ayemenem House too and meets her doom "in a grimy room in Bharat Lodge in Allepy where she had gone for a job interview as someone secretary, she died alone." (161). Thus "woman in order to achieve her freedom, seeks marriage as an alternative to bondage and looks forward to the role of wife with the hope that her new role will help in winning their freedom"⁵ Ammu could not get the freedom which she desired from marriage but became the source of inspiration for the women who struggle hard for freedom.

Any sensible analysis of contemporary literary work from feminist point of view Shobha De's treatment of women has aroused curiosity on the one hand and downright reflection and denunciation on the other. De voices against the malice culture and strongly detects the marginalization of women. She does not believe in describing her women characters love-slaves or or mere helpmates at home. A broader evaluation of her work reveals her protest against the good old image of woman as 'an appendage' or 'an auxiliary' Shobha De' strives to undo this distorted image of woman who cries for freedom and equality which still goes unheard in the patriarchal world. Her protagonists Karuna in *Socialite Evenings*, Mikki and Alisha in *Sisters*, and Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* appear to be rebellious modern Indian women who challenge the orthodoxy of sexual and social taboos. De's women are far in comparison to their male counterparts with better control and placidity in their attitudes, desire and expression. They are neither submissive nor guilty about their affairs and attitudes. In *Sultry Days* the female character Sujata is quite gross and repulsive in her mid-forties. She goes by mind; she does not lead a life which is defined by her husband. Similarly in *Sisters* Mikki is not emotional, subdued or weak like traditional Indian women. On the contrary she is assertive, pragmatic and strong. Mikki challenges the usual orthodox vision of a society. She is a woman who easily and without any sense of guilt breaks off her engagement with Naveen, when he fails to respond to her wish. The actress Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* finally decides to quit films and live with Akshay, her Amma tries to dissuade her from doing so. Asha Rani boldly pronounces: "Money, money and money. That is all you think of well. I'm fed up of being your money machine. I've done enough for everybody Sudha and other-now, I want to live for myself and enjoy life." Here Aasha Rani seems to be more powerful and bold than Akshay. She like other heroines of Shobha De' designs a code of conduct for herself which is free from the prescribed gender roles.

In response to men De's women are active, mature, sensitive, willing or able to take action to take responsibility. De's women have the ability to detest the indifferent and callous attitude of the husbands who often keep themselves busy in drab monotonous activities like reading business page of the newspapers. Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* can realise how Indian women have been assigned a subordinate and relative position, as she says, "We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered us was trivialized.

The message was our priorities. It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs". Karuna is able to recognise how Indian women are made to listen and tolerate and are denied to live as autonomous beings. Of course, Shobha De writes from definite feminine perspective. Her women revolt against the traditional image of Indian women in words and deeds. One may not like everything in De's fiction but her treatment of the contemporary urban Indian woman's challenges, predicament, values and life-style is surely not without significance.

To sum up, the chronological study of Indian English Feminists emphasizing the fact that the theme of confrontation between tradition and modernity and women's struggle for emancipation is the main thrust of the contemporary literature and cinema. Women in contemporary literature and cinema explore the myth of man's unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and paragon of all virtues. There is constant focus on woman's awareness of her predicament, her wanting to be recognised as person than as a woman and her wanting to have an independent social image. The role of woman in contemporary literature is caught in a constant flux of new equation that there is a man within woman and a woman in every man. Now the women are more educated, sophisticated and even more rebellious but the woman herself is wary of shedding off the traditional values which form part of her inherited consciousness.

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