

The self and society: A struggle of woman characters in the booker prize-winning novels of Jhabvala, Roy, and Desai

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Abstract

The world of women is now seen with new perspective and completely with a new angle. In a male-dominated society, women have always been ignored and treated as subordinate. The way to these suppressed voices was given by the Indian Women Writers, especially of the last few decades. These women writers took 'her' away from the so-called image of 'a silent sufferer' or a puppet in the hands of man. They touched those areas of women's life which were never a part of earlier Indian English Literature. An attempt is made in this paper to study this change in the writings of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai with special reference to their Booker Prize winning novels.

Keywords: patriarchal domination, identity crisis, social transgression

Introduction

Indian women writers have contributed a great deal to the growth and development of literature. Today Indian Women Fiction is dealing with various issues related to the self and society. They are the true advocate of social justice and equality in a patriarchal society. The world of women is now seen with new perspective and completely with a new angle. In a male-dominated society, women have always been ignored and treated as subordinate. In the midst of this ignorance and ill-treatment, she is now searching for her own space, her womanhood, and her identity. The way to these suppressed voices is given by the Indian Women Writers, especially of the last few decades. Even renowned male writers like Narayan and Anand could not present her more than an idol of patience and sacrifice. In an attempt to present her in an idealized garb, they could never touch her inner psyche.

A period came when some of the women writers gave voice to her suppressed desires and helped her in searching for her identity. Writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Manju Kapur, Shobha De touched those areas of women's life which were never a part of earlier Indian English Literature. These women writers took 'her' away from the so-called image of her as 'a silent sufferer' or a puppet in the hands of man.

My attempt in this paper is to study this change in the writings of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai with special reference to their Booker Prize winning novels. These three great female writers brought laurel to the country by winning reputed Man Booker Prize- Ruth Praver Jhabvala for her 'Heat and Dust' (1975), Arundhati Roy for 'The God of Small things' (1997) and Kiran Desai for 'The Inheritance of Loss' (2006) [4].

Let us peep into the life of the woman characters present in these three extraordinary novels.

Jhabvala, who occupies a very special place among the Indian writers in English, is specifically known for her treatment of women in her novels. She presents a realistic picture of the

familial and social scene of India. East-West encounter, the clash between modernity and tradition, marital discord, identity crisis are some of the issues which are repeatedly handled by her in her novels. In the novels of Jhabvala, woman, as mother and wife, finds herself subordinate to their male counterparts. She tore the veil of an idealized myth of Indian women. She is best known for her deep understanding of her woman characters, especially Europeans. The European characters are more impressive than the Indians. Being basically a European, she finds herself close to European characters. A neutral approach also helps her to have a clear picture of Indian women. With an objective and an external point of view, she presents a picture of Indian society in general and a place of woman in particular.

A most complex relationship of man and woman, in and out of marriage, is beautifully handled by her. In 'Heat and Dust', Jhabvala presents a touching story of two English women of different generations. The narrator of the story, a young English woman, visits India to know about her grandfather's wife, Olivia, who had an affair with Nawab of Khatm. She got her pregnancy aborted and decided to leave her husband and go to Nawab. On one side, when we see a lack of frankness and courage in Olivia, the narrator looks at life in a more natural way and takes it bravely. Perhaps a difference in the period is responsible for their respective attitudes.

The story of the beggar woman is the story of the poor and their sufferings. The beggar who is a widow has no other option but to beg because she is thrown away from the house by her in-laws. The sorry picture of widow is really a blot on the society. Marriage, the most auspicious moment in the life of human beings turns into a complete compromise or a failure in the case of Inderlal and his uneducated wife Ritu. The elders have the privilege of settling the marriage. The boy and especially the girl have no say in that. Ritu, needed psychiatric treatment for her neurosis, is regarded as possessed by an evil spirit and red hot iron is applied to "various parts of her body, such as her arms or the soles of her feet"¹ to drive out the evil spirit. Even more frightening was the crude method applied by

the midwives for abortion on Olivia.

Though pictures of non-Indian women are more dominant in her novel but they also face the intricacies of life like Indian women. They also possess the same emotions and sentimentality. These western women are also presented frustrated and incidentally in search of calm life. Indian spirituality attracts them, where they expect a peace of mind. The same search of identity is prevalent in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things', a novel set in a town of Kerala. Predicaments, social suppression and individual freedom of women are also a matter of concern in her novels. Caught between the patriarchy and tradition on one hand and individuality on the other, she often finds herself nowhere. Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel-all the female characters experience the weight of patriarchal domination. Whenever they try to move away from the path set by tradition, they found themselves morally digressed, and ultimately face destruction.

A female protagonist of the novel, Ammu, is a victim of holy practice among Indians- marriage. Married to a heavy drinker, she often experiences the beastly behaviour of her husband who forces her to sleep with his boss. She opts for divorce but she doesn't receive any support from her family. The age-old discrimination between son and daughter is quite visible when we notice a difference of approach between Ammu and Chacko- her brother. Chacko disregards his sister and tells her:

"What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" [2].

When she comes in contact with Velutha- an untouchable- there developed a sexual relationship between them which is against the norms set by Syrian Christianity. She dies alone in a lodge and the church refused to bury her. On one side when we find the flirt and sexual relations of Chacko with factory women are kept hidden, Ammu-Velutha relationship is taken in the other way. Kochamma reacts to her relationship with Velutha and says,

"She has defiled generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptism and birthday parties [3].

In Mammachi, we notice the same marginalization. A lady who established a good pickle business is always a matter of hatred for her husband, Pappachi. The same male-dominance she experiences from Chacko- her son. She never questions and accepts everything submissively. The negativism in Baby Kochamma's character is the result of her shattered dream of marrying Father Mulligan. Rahel, the offspring of divorced parents is always shown in the midst of some trouble. Child of divorced parents, she is never accepted in the family. The most horrible example of her social transgression is her incestuous love with her own brother, Estha. A brilliant student of architecture, Rahel, fell in love with the researcher but she could not find solace there either. Neglected by the family and the outside world, she could only find the balancing harmony with her twin brother Estha.

No doubt, Roy's female characters suffer a suppression in patriarchal order but they are not passive characters with an exception of Mammachi. Their social transgression, especially in the case of Ammu and Rahel, is their way of protest. They search for their identity in the midst of fears and frustrations. The struggle of women for the establishment of their identity

and their economic and sexual freedom is the key feature of the novel. Ammu, a valiant fighter shows her spirit in rejecting her husband, opposing her brother and choosing her own way of life. Rahel also shows her stamina by surviving both in New York and Delhi. Both of them find the way to their frustration in a sexual act. Though degraded, but it is a kind of revolt against the set-up of society.

Kiran Desai, another Booker Prize-winning woman writer, received it for 'The Inheritance of Loss', is also a great champion of feminism. In a male dominated set up, her female characters are successful in showing their identities. Desai beautifully portrays various female characters of three different generations. Nimi (Bela) represents the rustic and illiterate side and characters like Sai, Noni and Lola represent the educated and the urban class.

Nimi is a victim of male-dominated society. She is shown as a woman for whom husband is everything. Her marriage with Jemubhai tells us the sorry picture of marriages in Indian society. She is often tortured by her husband calling her illiterate. A handsome dowry from Nimi's father makes Jemubhai accept the proposal. Bound by the traditional norms, she doesn't revolt, rather submits herself meekly. Nimi symbolizes those thousands of women who are the silent sufferers in the society. Jemubhai who used the money of Nimi's father for his career never accepts her in his life. She remains an outsider in her own house. Death finally ends all her troubles.

Another important character is Sai, Jemubhai's granddaughter. She is young, bold, educated and independent. A daughter of Zoroastrian father and a Gujarati mother, she always struggled for her identity. The things become worse when her parents died in an accident. She has no other choice but to come to Kalimpong to her grandfather. But she finds the life in Kalimpong lonely and secluded. Her life experiences change when she comes in contact with Noni, her tutor, and Lola. Noni, who herself is a failure in life, encourages Sai to go for her ambitions. Noni sees herself in Sai and wishes to see her own desires come alive in Sai's bright future. Noni advises her:

"If you get a chance in life, take it. Look at me, I should have thought about the future when I was young." [4].

Sai's life takes a turn when she meets Gyan, her Mathematics tutor and an activist of GNLF- an organization which was fighting for separate land- Gorkha land. She finds solace in his company but it doesn't result in a fruitful relationship. Sai's bold and realistic behaviour is in complete contrast with the dreamy picture of Gyan. She is very straightforward when she tells Gyan:

"And how grown-up are you? Too scared even to come for tuition because you know you've behaved nastily and you're too much of a coward to admit it." [5].

Desai's other female characters like Noni and Lola are also significant. They prefer to live their life in their own way. Both are interested in reading and discussing a matter of substance. Lola is a widow and lives with her sister. Both are not happy with their way of life. Noni finds her dreams coming true when she meets Sai. Though very close to the age of information, they could not take advantage of it. No doubt, both these women are free from patriarchal domination, they suffer from the loss of identity. Humiliation, loss of dignity

and loss of dream take away the satisfaction from their life.

An analysis of all these three novelists and their award-winning novels provide us with the plethora of pictures and different dimensions of womanhood. Roy presents characters of different levels. On one side when we notice a character like Mammachi who looks like a passive character, at the same time we notice a kind of rebel, a tendency to break bounds in Ammu and Rahel. They are not afraid of crossing the fences set by the patriarchal system. Desai also portrays the same. On one hand when we come across a young, frank and free girl like Sai who is aware of her 'self', on the other side we meet Bela (Nimi) who is completely subjugated and lose her identity. She doesn't resist. Rather she accepts everything as 'a fate of womanhood'. Noni and Lola are aware of themselves. Jhabvala's Olivia or the Narrator both are in contrast with each other. Olivia seems fearful and timid but the Narrator looks more natural and free.

Though 'she' is a rebel like Ammu or learned like Sai, nobody could escape from the trap set by the society. Especially the norms set by Indian society compel them to surrender or to face the horrible results. Every woman character in these novels is trying to search for her identity, whether Western or Indian. All the three novelists, keen observers of woman's life, advocates of feminism, are successful in presenting the true picture of women- their predicaments, sufferings, frustrations and more than that their inner psyche, their inner struggle to cope up with the world and more than that their incessant struggle to search for 'self'.

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