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THE CHANGING FACE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

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Abstract:

Indian women writers presented a rich variety of themes - from the theme of conventional woman to that of the new woman, reflecting in the process the changes that have been going on in the society. Images of woman in Indian women fiction are characterized by contradiction- there is a conventional image and there is a protesting voice. Indian woman at the turn of the century are in a transitional phase via-s-visa the interface of tradition and modernity. The two novelists - Kamala Markandaya and Shobha De – discussed here convey two different attitudes of women. Kamala Markandaya portrays the rural women and their predicament. Her novels focus on the woman's awakening consciousness and her confrontation with a tradition-oriented society. Shobha De has projected the marginalization of upper class women at the hands of men in the patriarchal Indian society. These two novelists present the changing face of woman in Indian writing in English.

KEYWORDS:

conventional, contradiction, predicament, consciousness, confrontation, marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

Women have inspired literature and the feminine theme has been a pivotal importance too. She herself is also a creator of literature and is all pervading. This is true of Indian women literature also. Indian women writers presented a rich variety of themes - from the theme of conventional woman to that of the new woman, reflecting in the process the changes that have been going on in the society. Post independence literature in India portrays all these trends and voices, the clamoring of women for a new and just way of life.

Comparatively speaking women characters of women writers boldly protest and assert their right in the society with firmness and dignity. They have depicted the inner characters of woman with all its conflicts and contradictions with authenticity and truthfulness in such a way as to carry our conviction. We must also remember that mostly it is the middle class educated urban woman who has carved a niche for herself. Woman in the rest of the country are for the most part still dogma ridden due to lack of education. We have the enlightened brave new woman and we have the helpless, illiterate male dominated woman existing side by side in life and literature.

Images of woman in Indian women fiction are characterized by contradiction- there is a conventional image and there is a protesting voice. Past independence literature reveals the woman's quest for her identity giving rise to a number of issues. The new woman is emerging and there are a number of new

themes and issues to be taken by the future. However, two overall views of woman dominating Indian literature from ages, the Sita and the Draupadi archetypes. There is a silent suffering with utmost loyalty to man in the Sita type and woman as an individual demanding social justice in the Draupadi types. The later has got greater appreciation. But we have to remember that family plays a pivotal role in the Indian scheme of life.

The new woman in Indian women fiction does not break the family but dreams to make the family 'Home Sweet Home'. Be it small or big, be it in the courtyard or in the courtroom, woman is the cause of all action. If woman is absent, there is no poetry, no song, no drama, no tears, no laughter and ultimately no life in this world. But they are still walking on a tight rope to achieve their human rights and social justice. Indian woman at the turn of the century are in a transitional phase via-s-visa the interface of tradition and modernity. Though women writers are tolerant and respectful towards the rich tradition they are still confident of their own new self and sensitive to the dogmatization of traditional values.

The two novelists - Kamala Markandaya and Shobha De – discussed here convey two different attitudes of women. They may be called the symbol of woman as they saw her. Kamala Markandaya portrays the rural women and their predicament. Her novels focus on the woman's awakening consciousness and her confrontation with a tradition-oriented society. Shobha De has projected the marginalization of upper class women at the hands of men in the patriarchal Indian society. She presents the contemporary woman who is in search of identity and seeks freedom through sexual independence. These two novelists present the changing face of woman in Indian writing in English.

Kamala Markandaya's debut novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' (1954) presents a story of a peasant family. The outstanding character of this novel is Rukmani. She represents traditional Indian woman. Her daughter Ira represents the modern progressive woman. Both however are similar as far as their feminine sensibilities are concerned. Rukmani is the archetype Sita who follows the husband through thick and thin and in the process forgets that she is a person in her own. She accepts her husband's betrayal and moral weakness with calm resignation. She suffers silently. It does not mean that she lacks sufficient strength and courage to protest her husband. She accepts her husband because she loves him deeply and profoundly. Ever sacrificing and always supporting the family there is hardly a time when she questions her identity. Markandaya shows Indian woman as the pillar of the society supporting, strengthening and enduring everyone around her. Her women characters do not question the established norms. They accept their faith and follow the norms of the patriarchal society. Yet all the characters she has portrayed have feministic traits in the sense that they emerge as a strong individuals after a break-neck fight with the circumstances. Some of the circumstances, reported in Markandaya's fiction, give evidence of her intense awareness of her identity as a woman and her attention to feminine problem.

Even Ira, the helpless girl in 'Nectar in a Sieve' emerges as a strong figure taking hold of the situation and finding her own solution. Though she is deprived of a happy married life on account of her barrenness, she gives birth to an albino child. A mother does not distinguish between a legitimate and illegitimate child. But society particularly traditional Indian society does not welcome such a child nor does it respect an unmarried mother. Ira Shows the will power and mental strength to bring forth the albino child.

Sarojini is again the central suffering woman character in the novel 'A Silence of Desire'. This novel presents a conflict between tradition and change, spiritualism and scientific rationalism, faith and scepticism. Sarojini has been an ideal wife to her husband for 15 years. Like Rukmani, she accepts her husband's extramarital sexual relation. She says : 'Yet a husband destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere or devoid of good qualities..... must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife.'(Markandaya 44) These extramarital relations point up the inequity of the moral law in its application to men and women. Thus female characters are the meek victims of the atrocities of society.

In the novel 'Some Inner Fury' Mira is torn between her passionate love for Richard and her patriotism. Despite their deep and lasting love for each other, she is mature enough to understand the hindrances to their union. In Mira we find the adolescent Indian girl changing into a fully mature woman. She is ready to meet the challenges of life.

Kamala Markandaya deals women from all strata of society. Her women are rooted to the tradition yet they are strong in mind. They are undeniably the forerunner of the doomed female of modern India. They fight a lone, silent, protected battle for their right to love and happiness.

Shobha De deals with the issues and problems in the contemporary society in a quite different manner in her writing. Her female characters are multidimensional like human beings, a splendid mixture of virtue and vice. Her characters are working women, socialites who are intrinsically attracted towards the world of glamour. Their problems are different from the rural women as portrayed in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. De painted confident, demanding and asserting Indian women. Her writing was a big blow to the established norms in our society which viewed marriage and men as the only orbit in which women's world revolves.

De's novels make a deviation from traditional norms. Her female characters resist to the idea of marriage. They are modern new woman, independent in every way. Their breaking out of the bonds of matrimony and finding her feet into a profession of their choice display the shades of their character. They show off the traditional conventions of moral values and seductively rise to the social status of the upper classes. Whether it is Karuna in 'Socialite Evening' of Asha Rani in 'Starry Nights', their struggle is more with the inner self than with the outer world. Married women of De speak about their inner life. There is no emotional attachment, no love, no sharing. Her novels are realistic and concrete portrayal of life experiences.

Shobha De gives significant priority to sex in a woman's life. She recommends a mature attitude to sex. Hence all of her women are conscious of their sexual appeal. De has shattered the concept of marriage in her novels. Most of the De's women go out of the marriage like Karuna who finds her marriage uninteresting. Her two novels 'Snapshots' and 'Second Thoughts' deals with the restraints and frustration a woman feels in a marriage. Her novel 'Strange Obsession' deals with homosexuality through the characters of Amrita and Minx. All of De's protagonists speak the same language of dissatisfaction. Bored out of their unfulfilling marital relationship, some of De's women even go for divorce.

Thus all the novels of De have a strong female protagonist who explores the world on her own and learning from the first hand experience shapes her future without any regrets. In a true sense De's women are women of attitude and assertion, beauty and merit.

CONCLUSION:

Indian feminine sensibility can be fully felt by discussing above two novelists. The hidden and suppressed world of Indian women comes to full light in their novels. Kamala Markandaya's women show that they are not confined to the self-conscious, emancipated and educated women. One can come across such a woman in any social environment or in any class of society. They reflect on the lot of woman but also understand and sympathise with everything that is tender, meek and suffering. The realization of fulfillment becomes an important aspect of their personality. Shobha De's women are socially emancipated and modern outlooks. None of them reaches the core of her personality. They cannot understand the deeper emotional and spiritual needs of the person. They experience no such fulfillment in their relationship with their husband. Their love making too, is a listless and a mechanical affair.

Both the novelists show the fundamental problems and aspire towards the higher ideals of womanhood through the depiction of women characters. The development of Markandaya's women is along moral and spiritual lines. The questions of economic freedom, social status assume a secondary role in the consciousness of her women characters. But in Shobha De's women characters we find that they have deviated from value-system. Their concern lies with themselves.

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