

Question of Gender in Globalizing world and Indian English Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Globalization in its broadest sense, refers to the economic, social, cultural, and political processes of integration that result from the expansion of transnational economic production, migration, communications, and technologies and is associated with social and cultural aspects. This phenomenon has influenced all facets of life as well as literature in general. Besides, globalization has led to the paradigm shift in terms of gender roles in society that reflects in literature as well. The present paper is an attempt to give a panoramic view of Indian English fiction and the depiction of gender roles with specific reference to the globalization and gender dimension. The paper concentrates on major Indian English novelists and their novels that address the issues such as gender equality, liberation and emancipation of women in a globalized India with its historic background.

Key Words: *Globalization, Gender, Feminism, Emancipation, Indian English Fiction*

Paper: Wikipedia defines Globalization or globalisation as the process of interaction and integration among people, companies, and governments worldwide. As a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, globalization is considered by some as a form of capitalist expansion which entails the integration of local and national economies into a global, unregulated market economy. Globalization has grown due to advances in transportation and communication technology. With the increased global interactions comes the growth of international trade, ideas, and culture which cross borders and merge into the very structure of the society and culture.

According to S. Parekh 'Feminist theoretical approaches to globalization' is an umbrella term that refers to a number of specific theoretical approaches that feminists have used to articulate the challenges that globalization poses for women, for the people of color, and for the global poor. These various approaches include those ideas developed by post-colonial feminists, transnational feminists, and feminists who endorse an ethic of care. He identifies four key features shared by these various feminist approaches to globalization and outline some of the distinctive characteristics of each theoretical orientation. Those four key factors can be summarized into the influence of globalization that has enforced to understand gender injustices associated with globalization, to understand the opposition to the subordination of women, experiences of women of gender oppression shaped by other forms of oppression such as race, class, disability, and sexual orientation, habitual standpoints and foreground perspectives that challenge accepted ways of thinking. It is in all these contexts that one needs to see the Indian English fiction and its nature and scope of the issues.

It is also essential in this context to understand the origin of the term 'globalization'. As per Wikipedia globalization is assigned to have developed in the European age of Discovery and voyages to the New World and the large scale globalization began in the 1820s. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the connectivity of the world's economies and cultures grew very quickly. However, the term *globalization* is quite recent in its current meaning established in the 1970s. But in terms of addressing the issues concerned with rights, oppression and subordination of women, many writers and thinkers have shown concern towards these issues in the past too. The word 'feminism' was first used by the French writer, Alexander Dumas (1802-1870), to designate the emerging movement for the rights of women. It gradually developed to be

worldwide cultural movement to secure equality of women with men in all fields of life. The first person to address rights of women was Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). It was she who demanded equal opportunities for women in the areas of education, economics and politics. Surprisingly, John Stuart Mill was the strong supporter of liberation of women and he displayed serious concern for the oppression of women in his *The Subjugation of Women* (1869). He also emphasized on the education for women and expressed complete disapproval of oppression of women as domestic slavery. The western feminists like Elaine Showalter (b.1941-), an American literary critic is the founder of feminist criticism. The collaborative work of Susan Gubar (b.1944-), an American author and Sandra Gilbert (b.1936), an American literary critic, "*The Mad Woman in the Attic*" (1979) is widely recognized as a text central to the second wave of feminism. These writers left an indelible impact on the subsequent writers and on their writings. Feminism is an awareness of oppression of women and exploitation in society and conscious action by both men and women to change this situation. Today, feminists are working towards the emancipation of women and are struggling for the achievement of equality, dignity and freedom of choice for women. It is an endeavor to control lives of women within and outside their homes.

Feminism with its major concern with the problems of women has brought a major change in contemporary Indian English fiction, particularly written by women writers, appear to focus deliberately on experiences of women. These women writers have fictionalized different forms of life of women in their works; the marginalisation and subordination of women in different walks of life. A notable change is observed in their depiction of women in their presentation of the women characters different from their traditional counterparts. Instead of submissive, docile and passive women, assertive and aggressive women characters rule in the writings of contemporary Indian-English women writers. These writers address the gender issues conspicuously.

However, the concern for subaltern status of women is not so contemporary. The status of women in India has gone through a graphic upheaval in the history and the same reflects in the society and writings of those times. In the early-Vedic period, women had a respectable position in the society. Girls and boys were brought equally without any prejudice. Girls enjoyed equal freedom as the boys did. Women were looked up as the embodiment of beauty, culture and wisdom. Gargi and Maitreyee were the renowned Vedic scholars. Vak, Saraswati, Ubhayabharati, Lopamudra, Ghosa, Apala, Romasa, Suiya, Savitri, Juhu, Yami etc were popular poets, whose verses were incorporated in the Vedas and Puranas.

It was in the later-Vedic period, the status of the women started to deteriorate. Men established themselves as the masters of the society. Education was only male domain and they wrote 'shaastras' to their advantage. Such writings became the law of the land. Evils like subjugation of women, polygamy, child-marriage, widowhood came into existence which blocked the creativity of women. In the next Puranic and Smriti Age society became very rigid to women. Manusmriti was a great blow for the status of women and husband became the master and woman was subjugated to the secondary and lowly status.

In the subsequent Epic age, the status of women improved to some extent. They got better scope to develop their individuality and freedom to choose their husbands. When Buddhism became prevalent, women were revived to have some honour in society. It offered opportunities for women to join the Bhikshuni Sangh and had an access to education and culture. It accepted their participation in public life. This gave rise to many learned women who became proficient in the sacred texts.

During the Muslim invasion of India, women lost their freedom to a very large extent. Social customs like child marriage, sati and purdah came into existence, basically to keep women away from the invaders. Women were driven into darkness, inaction and ignorance. The Bhakti Movement emerged in different parts of southern India, and produced a number of women poets. Akkamahadevi wrote nearly 350 vachanas in

Kannada. Janabai wrote poems in Marathi, narrating the restrictions and hardships to face as a woman. Muddupalani, a Telugu poet, wrote of men, describing them as inconsistent, impatient, and unreliable.

When the British arrived in India, the condition of the women was at the worst. During the British rule, social reform movements were started by the reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Maharshi Karve, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Vishnushastri Pandit. They focused on the hardships of the women and advocated for education of women. Thus, a new awareness arose, voicing against women's subordination. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote the first Indian novel in English **Raja Mohan's Wife** (1864), which deals with the contemporary Bengali society and made woman the central figure. It narrates the story of a housewife who revolted against the ill treatment. Saratchandra Chatterjee wrote many novels in Bengali with strong women characters. Many social reformers tried to uplift the condition of the widows and encouraged widow remarriage. Ishwar Chandra himself married a widow. Pandit Ramabai founded the Sarada Sadan in Bombay for the education of the widows.

The novels of most of the late 19th and early 20th century Indian women writers in English are mostly autobiographical projections. Toru Dutt's (1856-1877) **Bianca**, or the **Young Spanish Maiden** (1878) Krupabai Sathianathan's (1862-1894) **Saguna**, **Kamala** (1887), Swarnakumari's (1855-1932) **An Unfinished Song** (1913), Cornelia Sorabji's (1866-1954) **India Calling** (1934) and **India Recalled** (1936) etc are some of the noted examples of this category. The emergence of women writers in English in India is of great importance as they could communicate their own experiences as women.

In the post-independence period, the feminist awakening has extended to women prose writers. Novel as the main prose literary form has gained popularity among women readers as well as writers. It has become a medium through which women have communicated their feminist views and the injustice done to them in the society. Women have voiced their objections to the oppressive treatment of women in their novels. Themes of their novels are women fighting for their respectable positions in the society, for rebellion against oppression to inspire women to face the challenges and so to lead a meaningful life. Consequently, a new kind of woman emerged, a woman, honest and powerful in expressing her views and experiences. The most popular among the feminist novelists in English are Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Gauri Deshpande, Bharati Mukharjee, Gita Mehta, Manju Kapoor, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. Majority of these novelists project woman as central figure, highlighting her hopes and frustrations, her desires and longings, her conformity and rebellion, her individuality and responsibility. Through their characters, even as minor characters, they present the dilemma that are faced by the modern women in a traditional society. The female characters are portrayed as intellectuals, responsible, courageous, devoted to their duties, and longing for liberty simultaneously. These characters are the representatives of the modern women.

In comparison with the female Indian writers in English, the male writers have not been at all contributing and very less in its quantity in raising the feminist issues. However, there are a few exceptional works by male writers, such as, **The Old Woman and the Cow** by Mulk Raj Anand and **So Many Hungers** by Bhabani Bhattacharya, both of them are concerned with women characters and their problems. Writers like Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan have attempted to understand the problems related to women in the changing society. But such male Indian writers, who assigned due merit to the role of women, and, those who succeeded in convincing the readers towards this cause by a fair treatment, are quite limited in number.

Considering the contemporary Indian English Fiction writers, there is a definition of the new woman who questions the partiality and gender arrangement. Many of these writers voiced their problems, experiences, feelings, desires, aspirations, and failures, in their writings. Some of them have used their own personal experiences to fight against the poor social status and disparity against women. They disguised themselves to avoid the possible embarrassment in their conventional surroundings in displaying their own experiences

like the fictional heroines of their writings. Their literature depicts the new woman, who refuses to be submissive and subordinate to man. This global and revolutionary concept is termed into the movement called feminism.

Feminism at its best in Indian context, asserts the value of women as women and efficiently counters the systematic devaluation of women under patriarchy. It demands and fights for a just and equitable society where there is no discrimination based on sex. Thus, the concept of feminism incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international recognition. The voice of new Indian women writers through their writings, published in between 1980s and 1990s, has ushered in a literary renaissance is the third generation of female Indian writers in English like Nayantara Sehgal, Anitha Desai, Shashi Desh Pande, Gita Mehta, Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpha Lahiri, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. These writers are the significant third generation women novelists and they have made a distinct mark on the World literary scene with their rich cultural heritage and skilled language control. They have received national and International recognition, royalties and prestigious awards.

All these feminist writers have written on various themes on life of women and their status in male-dominated society. For example gender equality, alienation, anxiety, insecurity, fear for her marital, familial and social relation, sufferings and exploitation, struggle for new identity, psychological disturbance in her mind, mother-daughter relationship, disharmony between husband and wife's relationship etc. Through these themes these women novelists have tried to project various images of women. For example the image of traditional, modern and new, liberated, immigrant, middle class, sensitive, sterile, emotional and self-sacrificing woman. Each one of them have contributed in the process of evolving the new woman and for her emancipation in their unique way.

Nayantara Sahgal's (b.1927-) novels portray women who are oppressed by marriage and by political circumstances. Characters in her novels question the existing moral codes and values, while rebelling against the unacceptable social norms. They become aware of their emotional needs and continue to fight against the hostile environment. She has written novels: **A Time to be Happy** (1963), **This Time of Morning** (1965), **Storm in Chandigarh** (1969), **Sunlight Surrounds You** (1970), **The Day in Shadow** (1971) In **The Day in Shadow**, the main character, Smriti, is a spokesperson for a woman who abstains from her husband who has totally different values unacceptable to her. She refuses physical intimacy and obtains divorce from him, asserting her individuality. Breaking the old tradition, she gives up intolerable subservient role and starts a new and dignified life with another man who shares her values towards life.

Anita Desai (b. 1937-) in her novels and short stories, focuses on the personal struggles of anglicized, middle class women in contemporary India as they attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by a tradition bound patriarchal culture. Her novels move around women characters. She has written novels such as **Cry, The Peacock** (1963), **Voices in the City** (1965), **Fire On The Mountain** (1977) **Bye Bye Black Bird** (1971) **Where Shall We Go This Summer** (1975) **Clear Light of Day** (1980) **In Custody** (1984), **Baumgartner's Bombay** (1988) and **Journey to Ithaca** (1995). Most of Desai's works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture far from feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining a self identity as an individual. She sees social realities from a psychological point of view and does not look at them as a social intimate expression of the inner world of her characters. She makes each of her work a haunting exploration of the psychic self. She has double sensibility, which gives her novels an objective effect.

Shashi Deshpande's (b. 1938-) novels **The Dark Holds No Terrors** (1980), **Roots and Shadows** (1983), **That Long Silence** (1988), **The Binding Vine** (1992) **A Matter Of Time** (1996) **Small Remedies** (2000) reflect image of women and feminine consciousness. Shashi Deshpande's novels are

concerned with the plight of the modern Indian woman, who is trying to understand herself. Her characters are not exemplary feminist heroines, but women struggling to find their own voices. Her novels start with the confused phase of the heroines like Indu, Jaya, Kshama and Manju. Gradually these persona become more confident and assertive, exhibiting better control over their objectives and actions. Shashi Deshpande focuses on the working of psyche of her female characters. They desperately struggle to assert their individuality. Sensitive to the changing times and situations, they revolt against the traditions of patriarchal society.

Bharati Mukharjee (b. 1940-) has had different experiences in her life. She has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life, first as a colonial then National subject in India. She led a life of exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada finally shifted to a celebratory mode as an immigrant, then citizen in the United States. She has written novels like *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It To Me* (1997). She responded to the Feminine approach and reflected various images of Women through her fiction. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of the women of Bharati Mukharjee who are seen caught in the conflict between conventional and contemporary. Her novels *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002) make a bold attempt to rewrite the origins of America's history in the light of wider American experience. For instance, in her second novel *Wife*, she writes about a woman who suppressed by men attempts to be the ideal Bengali wife, but out of fear and personal instability murders her husband. Her best fiction *Jasmine* (1989) develops the idea of the synthesis of the East and West with a story telling of young Hindu women, who leaves India for U.S. Her fourth novel, *The Holder of the World* (1993), attempts to integrate contemporary travelogue and ancient history. This novel too has the theme of transformation and migration, but with a difference. Her fifth novel *Leave It To Me* (1997) is completely American. The only Indian touch is the prologue, which retells the mythological story of the goddess, who killed the Buffalo Demon. Her last and sixth novel is *Desirable Daughters* (2002) is a contemporary American story of a woman who in many ways has broken up with traditions but still remains tied to traditions.

Gita Mehta (b. 1943-) is another woman writer who has proclaimed about the problems of the contemporary immigrant women with sublime standards. She wrote *Snakes and Ladders* (1997) and *Glimpses of Modern India* (1997). It has become most widely read book particularly by those unfamiliar with India. Gita Mehta's first novel is *Raj* (1989) which is a very powerful and enlightening and readable novel. It is considered to be one of the great historical novels of our time. But her second novel 'A River Sutra' (1993) is the one that deals with the sense of male dominance, hardships of women, suffering, and self identity in Patriarchal society.

Manju Kapoor (b. 1948-) is one of the significant writers whose work establishes the link between the tradition and modernity. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998), was awarded with Commonwealth Writers. Prize for best first book. It is the story set around the time of partition and of a woman who is torn between family, duty, desire and battle for Independence. Her second novel, *A Married Woman* (2003) which is quite powerful. It's about a woman from affluent society surrounded by ennui and disappointment, engages herself with illicit relation with a woman and jeopardizes her life. This novel is about the sexual awakening the topic that was generally hushed and scandalized. Her other novels: *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011) deal with the issues of women. *Home* is about the conflict between old and the modern, conflict between a traditional woman, and a woman who chooses to break away from the conventions. *The Immigrant* is about a woman who struggles in her marriage to an NRI in USA and about her attempts to establish an independent identity as an immigrant. *Custody* is about a woman who leaves her bourgeois husband and her two young children for a man of her dreams and a legal battle that

follows for the custody of the children. This is about a woman's courage to follow the desire by breaking away from the traditional idealization of motherhood. Thus Manju Kapoor in her novels depicts a new woman who rebels, reacts, desires and fulfills her dreams.

Shobha De (b. 1948 -) is the first to depict a new urban woman. She shatters patriarchal hegemony in her novels and essays. In fact as a writer, she considerably differs from other Indian women novelists writing in English. She is very bold in the depiction of controversial issues related to women in her writings. She offers a different perspective on woman's freedom and liberation. For her the extra-marital affairs of women are the medium to break the traditional and moral values in society. This is one of the most important aspects of her feminism. Her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra-marital affairs to satisfy their natural urge. These women are not hesitant in using sex as a calculated strategy to get social and financial benefit. Marriage for them is an insurance against social values. Her novels *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Second Thoughts* (1996) deal with the themes such as Family, Marriage, Patriarchy, quest for Identity, struggle for survival and marginal status. *Starry Nights* (1991), *Sisters and Strange Obsession* (1992) focus on the life in film industry, Bollywood and concentrate basically on lust and sex. However, her novels *Sultry Days* (1994) and *Snapshots* (1995) handle the themes of emancipation of women and project the ultra-modern lifestyle of neo-rich people. Her elite and educated women characters of the upper class family are trapped in the social institution of the marriage and family for the sake of money and honor.

Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967-) who created the different space for self among all the Indian women writers. She is a great storyteller with a distinctive voice. Unlike most of the first generation writers of Indian fiction who are born and brought up in India, Jhumpa Lahiri's connection with India is through her parents and grandparents. India would appear to her sometimes full of wonders, sometimes full of beggars. Lahiri is an Indian by ancestry, British by birth, American by immigration. Her debut book *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), is an anthology of stories that deal with the question of identity. Her novel *The Namesake* (2003) is a story about Indian immigrants in the United States. But her novel *The Lowland* (2013) gives a picture of a woman who is academic and intellectual and for a conventional reader she comes out to be selfish for her marriage of convenience and for discarding motherhood for the sake of following her heart's desire. Here Lahiri creates a female character who enjoys the privileges of a man in a patriarchal society with no guilt and takes responsibility for whatever she chooses to do.

Arundhati Roy (b. 1961-) is a novelist and also an activist, she invariably writes about the social problems. Her monograph, *The Greater Common Good* (1999) exposes us to the realities of the Narmada Project. Her earlier essay *The End of Imagination* (1998) urges for nuclear disarmament. Her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) won her the Booker Prize and Sidney Peace Prize. The novel is about search for identity, predicaments, social suppression and individual freedom of women. A woman who struggles being caught between the patriarchy, tradition and desire for individuality consequently reaches nowhere. This struggle to establish their identity and for economic and sexual freedom features the novel. Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel, all the female characters suffer the agonies of patriarchal domination. Their attempts to defy tradition lead them to their moral digression and self destruction.

Kiran Desai (b. 1971-) is another Booker Prize-winning woman writer for '*The Inheritance of Loss*' is also a great champion of feminism. In this novel her female characters, Nimi, Lola, Nona and Sai are victims of male-dominated society. They suffer humiliation for being illiterate (Nimi) and also for being sophisticated and educated women (Lola, Nona and Sai). They suffer from the loss of identity, loss of dignity and loss of dream and this takes away the satisfaction from their lives.

In addition to these writers, there are many other Indian women novelists in India who have also addressed issues related to women. Some of the noteworthy writers are: Uma Vasudev who in *The Song for Anasuya* (1978) describes women using men as per their convenience; Rama Mehta in *Inside the Haveli* (1977), depicts a woman character, an educated girl from Bombay married into an orthodox Rajastani family rebels against the oppressive situation and succeeds in changing everyone through patience and understanding; Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) portrays the rebelling girl under oppressive situations; Raji Narasimhan in her novel *Forever Free* (2009), depicts a female character fruitlessly runs from one man to another in search of love and meaningful existence; Namita Gokhale through her five novels depicts the struggle of women against the patriarchal norms that tries to suppress and extinguish her identity.

In conclusion, the question of gender is not merely prevalent in contemporary writers but the question was raised in the past as per the ethos and the acceptance of the contemporary time. However, the globalization has given rise to a trend among the writers particularly women writers to address these issues explicitly in their novels. Greater the education, the exposure to cross-border culture and academic excellence, the economic freedom, the intellectual pursuits among these writers, greater is their aggression towards the oppression of women in the patriarchal society. One can infer that, though globalization has not really assured in gender equality in terms of economic and financial equality, but it definitely has given opportunities to women for education, for personal and financial freedom, for individuality. This has enabled women to shackle age-old constraints and have a happy life with individual choices taking responsibility for their choices, good or bad and for the emergence of a new woman which reflect in the contemporary Indian English fiction particularly in female writers.

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