

Gendering the Narrative

Gendering the Narrative:

Indian English Fiction and Gender Discourse

Edited by

Nibedita Mukherjee

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-7796-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7796-1

To

Sri Shailendra Sharma
The “touchstone” of my life

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CHAPTER ONE

GENDER DISCOURSE AND INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

NIBEDITA MUKHERJEE

*It's exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness;
it can also be confusing, disorienting and painful.*

Adrienne Rich. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision",
College English, October 1972.

Around the 1970s, feminist theory began to look upon gender as a social identity, designed, implemented and perpetuated by social institutions rather than being something innate to the way the "body" works. Gender studies, like other theories, is not a creation in alienation but rather evolved out of feminist theory. It was Kate Millett who argued in *Sexual Politics* (1969) that a female is born, but a woman is created. She was of the opinion that sex can be biologically determined but gender is more of a social construct. Many critics embraced this concept that while "sex" is fixed, "gender" is a mutable and argumentative entity. So there exists a basic *difference* between the two.

By arguing that gender has no impact in shaping one's identity, the feminist theorists were attacking the long held essentialist concept of the classical humanists. Instead they were embracing the mutable concept of social constructivism. The evolving gender critics turned essentialism head around and pointed out that selfhood (identity) is not predetermined, but rather subjective. Hence identities undergo a continuous process of change – there exists a binary opposition which highlights the unstable relationship in man/woman, male/female and masculine/feminine gender equations.

In the third world, especially India, the concept of gender discourse was late in coming. Even towards the end of the twentieth century Indian males could not think of piercing their ears or taking up a regular place in the

kitchen. But in the aftermath of globalization the scenario has undergone a holistic change and equal importance is being given to masculine, feminine and LGBT studies. Literary works are being produced and movies being made which explore these issues of social constructivism.

Literature has evolved as a cultural construct dependent upon the socio-political condition of the nation. This challenges the earlier notion that since fiction (specifically the novel) was of Western origin so Indian English fiction evolved more as an imitation of the colonial culture. However, a study of Indian literature (in its varied regional tongues) reveals that fiction possessed an ancient nativity and it was only a matter of time and exposure before it gained popularity amongst English authors. A specific aspect of this fiction was a concern with gender problems. Initially Indian English fiction reflected a concern with feminist issues for various socio-political reasons. So women-centric fiction was written, throwing light upon various previously ignored issues. As time passed the “women question” was replaced by “gender awareness” which stretched beyond merely female issues and included also the third gender. The present anthology is an attempt to study these varied issues which are now challenging the hitherto male-dominated society.

The study of gender through discourse is an interdisciplinary endeavour that maps varied areas. It includes fields such as sociology, linguistics, communication, anthropology, psychology and literature. In fact, discourse acts as a mirror through which gender issues are analysed. Analysis of male/female dialectics through the study of discourse is said to have emerged in 1975 with the publication of three books: Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place*, Mary Ritchie Key's *Male/Female Language* and Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley's *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. These books emerged as part of the feminist movement of the 1970s when people began to question the difference between biological “sex” and the socio-cultural construct of “gender”. Language was looked upon as a powerful tool for studying male/female difference. In the following years research advanced in this field with works on talk among women (Johnson and Aries 1983), social language (Philips et al. 1987) and use of narrative (Johnstone 1990). Numerous edited collections appeared such as Preisler (1986), Todd and Fisher (1988), Coates and Cameron (1989) and Cameron (1990). 1997 marked a milestone in the study of men's use of language with the publication of *Language and Masculinity* by Johnson and Meinhof. Herein, Tannen identifies a pattern where she finds that during male/female conversation, males prefer to take up the role of experts while females cower from it.

Thus we find the prevalence of a social constructivist research approach in the study of gender and discourse. Scholars agree that the “meaning” of gender is culturally mediated and in this sense the field of study has come full circle with gender theorist Judith Butler (1990; 1993). She follows the presently fashionable performative approach that brings gender into being “through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices” (1993, 227) a freshly buzzing area of research.

The perspective of this anthology is not to highlight a particular politicized theoretical agenda, rather to travel through the varied aspects of gender study, that is, feminine discourse and masculinity study as well as third gender conceptualization. The essays are selected from this perspective and cover this broad spectrum. They do not profess a general agenda but instead reflect the diverse critical, cultural and sociological interests of scholars whose textual enterprise is centred upon gender. They interrogate Indian English literature from this fresh mindset and represent studies that are unique and unparalleled.

Feminism is emancipatory in its premise and applied to literature offers a freedom from the binding shackles of form and genre and makes it more accountable to life and society. It has affected a multidisciplinary approach whose single purpose

was not to replace the authoritative male subject at the centre of traditional historiography with a powerful female subject who would rewrite history and repossess the authority of the self. By focussing on the denials, repressions and blank spaces that made a certain kind of history possible, feminism sought to re-examine questions of authority and self making, to expose the tensions of a concealed dialectic that runs through the apparently homogenous texture of recorded history, and to restore, as one theorist puts it, “conflict, ambiguity and tragedy to the historical process”. Moreover it articulated and made audible voices that had always been there, for the texts of the world are never monologic: they speak to those who will listen, whether through apparent silence or through the murmurs of the dispossessed – even at times in the cultured tones of the naturalized subject who cannot reflect on her dispossession. Most importantly, feminist scholarship asked new, difficult questions about identity, selfhood, the shaping of the world by culture, and the practise and possibility of writing. (Chaudhury 2002, 1–2)

Though feminism in India can be traced back to the time of such great literary figures as Gargi, Maitreian and so on, who opened up a new universe, Indian English literature (which was a late offspring of English proper) was even later in experiencing the warm winds of the feminist movement. It was in the 1960s, the era of the Second Wave, that feminism

began to exert its influence on Indian English literature, especially in the area of fiction. However it was not introduced by women who *write women*; initially it was men who spearheaded this endeavour. Helene Cixous wrote that men and women are both

caught up in a network of millennial cultural determinations of a complexity that is almost unanalysable: we can no more talk about “woman” than about “man” without getting caught up in an ideological theatre where the multiplicity of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications, constantly transforms, deforms, alters each person’s imaginary order and in advance all conceptualizations null and void. (1980, 248)

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the earliest Indian English novelists, was also the earliest to voice his protest against gender discrimination in the orthodox Indian society. The features of a “new woman” such as revolt, resistance, education and economic independence are all found in his female characters. In the *Untouchable*, Sohini voices a resistance against an attempt at molestation by the high caste Hindu priest and in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Leila vehemently revolts against her sexual harassment by the white foreigner. Again, in *The Big Heart*, Janki protests against the exploitation of widows and voices her love openly for Ananta after the death of her unmatched husband. Similarly, R K Narayan too possesses a feminist concern and places his female protagonists at the epitome of excellence. His women characters depict an innate strength that is admirable and show that the emergence of the modern woman in Indian society is no longer a myth. Starting from Savitri in *The Dark Room*, through Rosie in *The Guide*, to Bala in *Grandmother’s Tale*, the characters grow stronger and leave an indelible mark on the Indian psyche. Indeed, Narayan’s women are bold, assertive and self-reliant. Not only do they gain independence themselves but also strengthen their menfolk.

Like Narayan, Raja Rao too possessed progressive ideas about women and this thinking is amply reflected in his fiction. For instance Achakka and Rangamma represent social and cultural changes within Kanthapura in particular and India in general. They show how Indian women, despite being mired in traditional ways can embrace change and be an active agent of reconstruction. Again, in *The Serpent and the Rope*, Raja Rao represents the ideal woman assimilating concepts from the Upanishad, the Dharmashastras and the Mahabharata as well as the modern concepts of the West. Thus in this sphere Lakshmi, Savitri and Madeline all bear the essence of that oneness.

Another great novelist, Salman Rushdie, however, failed greatly in portraying strong female characters. His women are always subservient to

the males and hence portray a typically chauvinist society. But, by his own admission, he had forever sought to create female characters as rich and powerful as those he had known. In fact women are the pivot in novels of his such as *Shame*, *The Enchantress of Florence* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. They are expected to defy social conventions and emerge as path breakers. But, sadly they fail to do so. Despite the disturbances which they cause to their respective social dynamics, they ultimately stand secondary to their male folk.

Radically opposite are the female protagonists created by Amitav Ghosh. They are neither radical feminists, nor the stereotypical images of the ancient *satis* such as Sita, Savitri or Damayanti. Ghosh portrays them with innate sympathy and represents them as real women, created of real flesh and blood. They possess emotions, often fail in life and yet stand up against all odds to put up a Herculean battle. Dolly, the nurse maid of the Burmese princess in *The Glass Palace* serves as an epitome of an ordinary woman who struggles through life and its varied roles – lover, wife, mother – and ultimately realizes that true peace rests in renunciation of worldly life. But her duty calls upon her and she continues to fulfil her various roles, first as wife of Raj Kumar and next as mother of Dinu. Her task fulfilled, she ultimately enters the nunnery to satisfy the true calling of her life. Similarly, in *The Hungry Tide* powerful women characters such as Nilima, Kusum, Piyali and Moyna are portrayed, all of whom struggle and portray different phases of a manless life. Thus through the portrayal of female characters, Amitav Ghosh envisages a future where female empowerment will lead to ultimate emancipation and freedom from a male dominated society.

Female authors began to exert their true impact on Indian English fiction from 1960 onwards or under the impact of the Second Wave of feminism. Feminism in its true *avatar* was quite late in making its impact felt in India. In the strictly male dominated Indian society women had to suffer immensely in order to gain gender equality. The most striking feature of the feminist movement or battle for gender equality was that it was initiated by males. Men such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Kesav Chandra Sen, Matahari, Agarkar, Ranade and others initiated the movement and it was only later that women joined. They together battled to abolish heinous activities such as Sati (burning of the wife in the funeral pyre of the husband), child marriage and the ban on female education – the list was long and varied. However, the third world did not merely mimic the gender equality concept of the West. Due to historical and cultural specifications, India had to think in its own way and accordingly charter its own agenda. Women's empowerment in India was

very much associated with literacy and employment, two things which were long denied. The feminists showed the way and female authors – in regional languages as well as Indian English – took up the cudgel and started questioning the old patriarchal practices. Authors such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Geeta Hariharan, Manju Kapur and Mahasweta Devi have written about the multiple problems – both physical and psychological – faced by women in Indian society and have tried to call forth a solution to these problems.

For instance, Markandaya spoke about the suffering of rural women in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Through the characters of Rukmini and her daughter Irawaddy, she points out the agony of village women at the hands of their husbands and sons. Similarly, Shashi Deshpande's novels present contemporary Indian women's struggle to break the shackles of male domination and attain an autonomous selfhood. In her first three novels, *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*, she features the women's struggle for their rights, equality and freedom. Her other novels, which include *The Binding Vine*, *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*, all portray the voices of modern Indian women clamouring for a just way of existence.

Thus women came to be represented as the very essence of existence. Raja Rao refers to this new concept of women in modern fiction desiring to highlight gender equality. He writes:

Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound, woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulation of space, the knowing in knowledge, the woman is fire, moment, clear and rapid as the mountain stream, the woman is that which seeks against that which is sought. To Mitra, she is Varuna, to Indra, she is Agni, to Rama, she is Sita, to Krishna, she is Radha. Woman is the meaning of the word, the breath, touch, act, woman that reminds man of that which he is and reminds herself through him of that which she is. Woman is kingdom, solitude, time, woman is growth, and the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born, woman rules, for it is she, the Universe. (1974, 357)

This existential role of woman is very well depicted in the novels of Nayantara Sehgal. She has portrayed the need for awareness amidst women. Her heroines are aware of the injustice done to them within marriage and hence they walk out of their marriages. In spite of being reared on the staple Indian culture, they yearn for freedom and self identity. Maya in *A Time to be Happy*, Rashmi and Uma in *This Time of Morning* and Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* all portray the battle for freedom and self empowerment.

However, the feminist struggle for equality was not the only face of gender variation in Indian society. The third gender or homosexuals had long been relegated to the periphery of social existence. But this does not mean that they were entirely absent from the sphere of literature. Though treated as unequal, they find regular reference in Indian literature. Even in the Vedic Age we find reference to them in the Markandeya Purana which carries the story of Avikshita, a prince who refused to marry as he believed himself to be a woman. Both in ancient and medieval India gender was a fluid entity for humans. In the Mahabharata, we find a reference to Shikhandini, the daughter of King Dhrupad who was transformed into Shikhandi (a male) in order to be able to take her revenge on Bhishma. Again, the sage Vatsyana, in his legendary sex manual *Kamasutra*, devoted a whole chapter to homosexual love. In the medieval age there were significant, though scant references to same sex love. In *Tuzuk-i-Babri*, Emperor Babur recollects his sentimental love for a teenage boy. Again, Dargah Quil Khan in his diary *Muraqqa-e-Delhi: The Mughal Capital in Muhammad Sha's Time*, refers to the pederastic circles of the then Delhi.

Though Indian writers in modern times are quite slow in coming out of the closet, yet, the LGBT consciousness is broadening and many are daring to write fiction about same-sex love. Vikram Seth in *The Golden Gate*, a novel in verse, speaks of homosexual love and a feeling of guilt that it brings, though ultimately the characters accept their own sexuality and the problems arising because of it. Lurking behind the evident satire of the novel is Seth's message that sexual acceptance and meaningful commitment are the basics of genuine love, be it heterosexual or homosexual.

Andrew Harvey, an Anglo-Indian by birth, is more explicit and elaborate about homosexual themes. In all three of his gay novels the characters initially have problems with their own sexuality but ultimately learn to accept a love that is very much elusive in nature. His first novel, *One Last Mirror*, deals with the relationship between an elderly widow and a young bisexual male. In *Burning Houses*, Harvey's second and most famous work, he focuses on the troubled relationship between Charles, an author, Adolphe, the aging queen and Charles's lover, Mark who again is a married man. *The Web*, Harvey's last novel and a sequel to the second one, traces Mark's emotional collapse. In all three novels Harvey tries to portray the social bias against homosexual relations and the problems caused because of it. He seems to be calling out for gender equality.

In contrast to these authors, Hanif Kureishi was the first to present South Asian protagonists as characters in his gay fiction. Though the son

of a Pakistani father, he is included in the Indian English canon as his father hailed from Madras, in India and later shifted to Pakistan. His brilliant screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, deals with the mingled yarns of race, class and sexuality in tracing out the love story between Omar, a young Pakistani and Johnny, an Englishman. Similarly, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, his protagonist Karim voices his bisexual love problems. His two other novels, *The Black Album* (1995) and *Something to Tell You* (2008) also explore the interconnections between race, class and sexuality.

The battle to gain gender equality is continuing. R. Raj Rao (*The Boyfriend*, 2003), Neel Mukherjee (*A Life Apart*, 2010) and Rahul Mehta (*Quarantine*, 2011) are all on the bandwagon carrying on the battle for gender equality. This volume is an attempt in this direction and the articles included here address these multiple aspects of gender identity and open up doors for varied speculations. The authors considered range from Saratchandra to R Raj Rao, from Jhabvala to Manju Kapur. The range considered is also vast, bringing in all aspects of gender discourse: feminism, masculinity and homosexuality.

In “The Third Sex: The Oppressed Man in Patriarchy”, Longkumer highlights another side of oppression which is in contradiction to the popular view in some feminist quarters that all men in patriarchal societies enjoy protection under the male-biased social norms that brutalize its weaker female members. There exists, in fact, a certain class of underrepresented males who are victimized by a system believed to pamper them. Critical analysis of Indian novels and short stories has revealed that some men, too, fall victim in their attempt to obey gender expectations or in their failure to satisfy their cultural prescription. The study finds limitations in the view that dismisses all men as beneficiaries of patriarchy and, therefore, challenges that order.

Again, Rohit K Dasgupta in “Queer Kinship in New Queer India: From Wadia’s *Bomgay* to R. Raj Rao’s ‘Crocodile Tears’” uses a radical anarchized lens, and makes two broad moves. On one hand it suggests that queer kinship can be understood beyond the family/one-lover narrative espoused by the neoliberal agenda and on the other hand that Indian queer literature (especially Rao’s work) has often illuminated on this production of queer dislocation in focusing on how otherness can be constituted within the queer identity categories focusing on slippages and “repressed queer narratives” (Halberstam, 2011).

“Is the Homosexual an Invisible Being? ‘Comrade Love’ in the Select Fiction of Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh” by Bondina Elangbam is a comprehensive comparative study of two divergent authors. In this short chapter the author traces the homosexual/queer narrative in the fiction of

Mistry and Ghosh, two well known postcolonial writers from India, and questions whether fiction in India should be content with the mere affirmation of its existence or there lies a need for further unravelling of the mystery.

On the other hand “Indian Chick Lit: Desiring and Deriding?” by Srijanee Roy is a different piece of work altogether and here the author studies the popular literature of the day from a feminist perspective. Indian chick lit is an altogether new genre of popular literature. The present paper deals with two pairs of novels: Nirupama Subramanian’s *Keep the Change* and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City*, where the protagonist of the first novel repeatedly refers to the second one as the preferred mode of free existence but at the same time is aware of the unbridgeable gap between the two situations; and Advaita Kala’s *Almost Single* and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, where both the protagonists deal with relationship issues and career troubles in two starkly opposed social situations but a shared psychological space. This juxtaposition of Western chick lit and its Indian counterpart also provides a commentary on the problems of adaptation of a genre to a different socio-economic context from the one it originally belonged to.

Again, Jyoti Kala in “Gender, Sex and the Psychodynamics of an Eternal Quest in *The Dark Holds no Terror*” makes an attempt to bring forth the psychodynamics of the eternal quest for the fulfillment of a woman through a man with reference to the notions of gender and sex. The sensitizing act in the novel is not a woman’s point of view only but the undercurrents of the psyche of both man and woman trying unconsciously to create a consciousness which has been put aside in the post-modernistic advancements in the man–woman relationship.

A gender study does not merely mean an attempt to review the problems faced by the females or homosexuals in a male dominated society. The situation of the dominant, that is, the male, is also to be reviewed and this is thoughtfully done in “A Quest for Masculinity: Balram’s Life in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*” by M. S. Veena. This paper looks into Balram’s life as a quest for masculinity. Balram had to abandon his studies during his school days and shoulder the responsibility of paying off his family’s debt like a true man. He gets the impression that a driver’s job would provide him with the means to lead a decent life. But once he becomes a driver, he realizes that his position is equivalent to that of a servant. He finds himself turning into an effeminate servant at the beck and call of his masters. His masculinity comes under constant questioning because of the expectations associated with his job. Balram is able to successfully regain his masculinity only after he cruelly kills his

master, flees to Bangalore with his money and becomes a successful businessman. Balram's quest for masculinity thus ends successfully (though brutally) with Balram switching sides and becoming a master.

A study of gender in Indian English fiction is incomplete without a study of the novels of Manju Kapur. Translated into a number of foreign tongues, her novels deal with woman's struggle for existence and emancipation. Anwesha Roy Chaudhuri looks into this theme in her article "The Flavour of Emancipation in Manju Kapur's Novels". Here, the author concentrates on Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* to examine women's attitudes towards their families and to the society at large, and the birth of ideas around individualism and conventionalism. The chapter also interrogates issues such as sexual liberation and lesbianism within the context of India.

Sutapa Chaudhuri makes an interesting study of gender discourse across cultures in "Gendering the Shared Narrative: Reading *Ice-Candy Man*, *A Different Sita* and *The Missing Queen*". This chapter spotlights the way the women writers in Indian English fiction portray the shared narrative of violence from a gendered perspective. The three Indian English women writers that this chapter analyses – Bapsi Sidhwa, Niaz Zaman and Samhita Arni – all present unlikely heroines who witness and comment on the history of political turmoil that scars their nations: Bapsi Sidhwa in *Ice-Candy-Man* uses the perspective of Lenny, the eight-year-old lame Parsee girl, to comment on the Indian Partition; Niaz Zaman in *A Different Sita* uses Shabina, a housewife and mother of two, as protagonist in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation Movement; and Samhita Arni in her latest retake on the epic *Ramayana*, *The Missing Queen*, uses a young female journalist to voice the devastation that war and violence causes on women and nations thereby shedding light on marginalized memories through a more nuanced narrative that, instead of harping on about the woman question, views the socio-political condition of a nation from a woman's perspective that decentralizes the hegemony of patriarchal points of view based on aggression, violence, strife and exclusivity and posits a feminocentric worldview strengthened by female bonding, familial support, tolerance and inclusiveness.

An equally interesting study is "To tell a little bit of the other side of the story": Revisiting Iconic Female Myths" by Enakshi Banerjee. Her article projects the presentation of Sita and Draupadi, icons of the eternal feminine in classical Indian literature, myth or religion and the representation of these two iconic women characters from the perspective of two modern women writers – Mallika Sengupta and Chitra Divakaruni. De-womanizing is an ideological practice of patriarchy. The presentation

of Sita and Draupadi in the epics is essentially patriarchal. They are the hapless victims of patriarchal values. They have been projected from the perspective of the male narrator. And it does not stop here. Their roles have been manipulated in such a way that they unwittingly serve to condone and advocate patriarchy themselves. Trapped in a vicious circle, they are muted and marginalized – in more technical language, “othered”. But this process of “othering” takes place in such a subtle way that it is almost revered and likened to value attribution. The women are positioned in such a way that they fail to realize the ways in which they are wronged, and even when they do realize, they are not in a position to avenge the exploitations and maltreatments they undergo at the hands of the dominant patriarchal society, the way they are abetted by the same.

Stuti Dinesh Sharma too tries to study the iconic female myths, but her interest is in Draupadi, the controversial heroine of the *Mahabharata*. In “*Draupadi: Surviving, Subverting and Resisting the Fear and Shame of Rape*” she explores and examines the issue of sexual violence in India by studying select writing from India and recounting the voice and response to them. The author here studies the position of tribal women (as a centre of “othering”) as contrasted to the upper caste woman when faced with the severe trauma of rape. Md. Kamran Ahsan too studies this “otherness” in “*Subverting the Patriarchy and Re-Shaping Feminine Identity: Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain’s *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padmarag**”. Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain, a pioneer feminist of colonial India, is noted for her two feminist utopias, *Sultana’s Dream* and *Padamarag*. As a third world feminist, Rokeya locates indigenous cultural roots in order to counter colonial feminist discourse. Rokeya strives for the assimilation of local cultural heritage fused with new ideas of the West. This paper sheds light on the gender issues raised by Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain in her two feminist utopias. Her presentation of women’s questions in an insular society, one that offered very limited space to its women, shows Rokeya’s bold endeavours to create a feminine identity free from the shackles of the patriarchy.

Another important essay included in this anthology is “*Pooro in Pinjar: A Symbol of The Woman’s Cry against her Existential Fate and Social Abuse*” by Charu Chitra. Amrita Pritam’s timeless novel *Pinjar* is a stunning account of cross religious abductions of women that took place during partition, one of the most horrific testimonials of blood baths within human history. Pooro, the protagonist, has become an embodiment of violence against women in the novel. This chapter examines the violence done to women against a nationalist narrative. Similarly, Amrita Ghosh in “*Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust: A Feminist Reading**”

studies the *écriture féminine* as a woman's search for identity and space. Thus the entire collection is an attempt to study the discourse of gender in Indian English literature. It does not profess a common agenda, but rather reflects the diverse critical, social and cultural interests of scholars who have placed gender at the heart of their textual enterprise. They have highlighted different resolutions or ended up with new queries which together enrich the volume. It does not present rigid assumptions or reflect any particular theory – rather, a third world perspective is held up which often questions the Western point of view and altogether enriches it.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE THIRD SEX: THE OPPRESSED MAN IN PATRIARCHY

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Over the years, there have been many studies made on gender relations. Most of these studies have shown the relationship between the man and the woman as lopsided and tilted in favour of man. For example, Gerada Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* says that:

The recorded and interpreted record of the past of the human race is only a partial record, in that it omits the past of half of humankind, and it is distorted, in that it tells the story from the viewpoint of the male half of humanity only. . . . No man has been excluded from the historical record because of his sex, yet all women were. The contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition. When, in that process of struggle, at certain historic moments, the contradictions in their relationship to society and to historical process are brought into the consciousness of women, they are then correctly perceived and named as deprivations that women share as a group. This coming-into-consciousness of women becomes the dialectical force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male-dominated society. (1986, 4-5)

The man has been painted as the perpetrator of gender violence while the woman has almost always been the innocent victim, as Kate Millet points out in her work the *Sexual Politics*: "The great mass of women throughout history have been confined to the cultural level of animal life in providing the male with sexual outlet and exercising the animal functions of reproduction and care of the young" (1977, 70). Recent studies, particularly by Judith Butler, have attempted to destabilize the heterosexist signifying chain by suggesting that gender is not tied to people's bodies but is located in discursive practices. It is against this

background that this paper attempts to carve its own position within this body of literature by adding its voice to the deafening choruses on the politics of relations between the sexes. This paper makes an attempt to bring society's attention to an often neglected third voice in gender politics as reflected in literary works.

Many contemporary Indian writers, especially female writers such as Arundhati Roy, Shobha De and Shashi Deshpande, have been successful in bringing out the plight of Indian women from different strata of the society. While the subordination and marginalization of women in patriarchal contexts as reflected in their works of art is fairly well documented, that of the weaker men is not. For instance, while critics have been quick to rightfully condemn the way in which Ammu has fallen victim to patriarchal society in *The God of Small Things*, the same critics have been slow or hesitant to comment about the effect of the same societal oppression on Velutha – a low caste or untouchable carpenter with whom she falls in love.

This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the trials and tribulations of such male characters who seem to belong to a forgotten sex, what researchers call the *weaker* men who are psychologically traumatized by the patriarchal values of their societies but suffer in silence because it is unmanly to express emotion. The purpose of the paper is to render visible some facts about the reality of these *weaker* men's lives which may have been formerly unnoticed or less visible.

In order to evaluate whether some men are victims of the patriarchal order or not, there is need to first examine the theoretical underpinnings of patriarchy as reflected in feminist discourse. An understanding of the patriarchal values and expectations on men is central as it provides a framework by which we can weigh whether these values are injurious to men or not. Generally, feminist scholars posit that patriarchy is an institutionalized form of male dominance over women and children, both within the family and in society in general. Patriarchy has been seen as the means through which women are constituted not as subjects, but as the "other": they are the objects, not the subjects, of discourse. In other words, feminists view the hierarchical patriarchal structure of society as the arena of women's subordination and the architecture of discriminatory gender roles. This view casts women in the powerless role of biological victims of the social order and all men as occupiers of the centre of power.

However, there are emerging voices which believe that patriarchy places certain expectations on both men and women. Burck and Speed in *Gender, Power and Relationships* for instance, argue that "whether we are women or men, all the selves we are and could be are organized, and

sometimes constrained and warped, by the various layers of the culture in which we live” (1995, 18). This seems to suggest that there are definite expectations that the patriarchal culture places on people irrespective of their sex.

In other words, nobody is free and exempted but all are expected to conform and adhere to their scripted sexual social roles as determined by their culture. For this reason, sex roles for both male and female become prisons if they do not allow for individual variation. Strong and De Vault, in their work *The Marriage and the Family Experience*, point out that “being male is not an easy task” (1989, 59) since there are social demands peculiar to them. For instance, maleness, a biological factor, is equated with aggression, competitiveness, lack of fear, analytic reasoning, anger, fear of failure, aggression, competition and strength as well as being assertive and unemotional.

On the other hand, femininity is equated to submissiveness, weakness, irrationality, emotionality, complaining and dependence. This demonstrates patriarchal tradition’s highly rigid regulatory frame for both sexes. It becomes obvious that in as much as patriarchy lectures a woman to value submission to the man, the same patriarchy admonishes the man to exhibit his so-called masculinity. The implication is that the patriarchal world does not accommodate either men or women who fail to abide by their socially expected behaviour. This is indicative of the fact that power, powerlessness and power struggles are much more complex phenomena than explicable by their limitation to just two asymmetrical factions fighting, with one’s biology as the determining matrix. Thus, there have been cases of both men and women living outside the shells of their socially defined roles as reflected in works of art.

This paper investigates how the patriarchal system has been oppressive to the *weaker* man, a man who had been socialized to associate the male sex with masculinity, power, production and authority and the female body with weakness, reproduction and powerlessness. The paper acknowledges the existence of marginalized women in several facets of life as represented in literature and documented in several books but argues that a theory of a “true literature of the oppressed” should also embrace the potential existence of marginalized masculinities. This is a field of academic study neglected, a fact which renders this study quite significant.

There are some scholars who seem to suggest that even men should struggle for freedom from the system that promotes gender differentiation just as feminists champion women’s struggle. Foreman, in his article “Probing the Myth of Masculinity” claims:

men's movement may eventually develop . . . because the traditional male role is dysfunctional. Yet men rarely express the pain that lies beneath the surface of their lives because it is not considered manly to express emotions. (1982, 5)

Although this view can be frowned upon in some feminist quarters, it suggests that men suffer a common plight because there is a conspiracy of silence since it is deemed unmanly to express emotions. This explains the need for a careful examination of the portrayal of how men function under patriarchy, a system some feminists argue is meant to elevate him, as represented in literature.

The question then is how men themselves are oppressed in a patriarchal set-up. In her work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir categorically rejects the notion of males as victims of gender relations when she argues:

If he seems to be the victim, it is because his burdens are most evident; woman is supported by him like a parasite; but "a parasite is not a conquering master", but the fact is that . . . it is the society developed by the males in their interest that has established women's torment for both sexes. (1949, 230–231)

Beauvoir's comparison of woman to "a parasite" and man to "a conquering master" dismisses the possibility of man feeling the oppressive function of patriarchy. In her view, the oppression of men is only a feeling and not something that is real. However, if a parasite can suck the blood of the conquering master, then, the man, too, cannot escape suffering some form of pain despite his stature. One cannot simply ignore the impact of gender expectations; a man who fails to be man enough to meet his expected roles is usually seen as a weaker man by the patriarchal society.

The first and most important theme that portrays how man suffers under patriarchy is the psychological entrapment of man by social demands. This can be illustrated through the reading of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Devdas* (2001). Devdas is the son of a zamindar, a *babu*; *babu* was a term the British used to refer to the educated Bengali male. Fate made him love Parbati, the daughter of a poor neighbour. They loved each other in spite of social barriers. He wanted to revolt against his parents, but he had to obey them. Devdas was broken-hearted. Easy friends with easier virtues gathered round him. Wine came and with it came women. Devdas invited death and death accepted his invitation. He thus committed gradual suicide. A few pieces of wood, a flame, and he was no more. It is the tragedy of a person to whom life *seemed* cramped and meaningless. He failed to find social and emotional security and therefore he sank to

drunkenness and suicide. If we analyse the story of Devdas we can understand the weight of social expectation on him. Poonam Arora in her article “Devdas: India’s Emasculated Hero, Sado-Masochism and Colonialism” points out that “the *babu* of colonial India sought to self-organize his masculinity by acquiring a western education; by distancing himself from the values and practices of rural, ‘indigenous’ India; and by adopting the Western values of ‘manly self control’” (1995, 257).

Devdas in this sense can be seen as heroic rather than pathetic from the patriarchal point of view because he has continually strived to demarcate the boundary between himself and the feminine, and this was considered to be masculine for *babus*. Not only does he reject first Parvati, then Chandramukhi, but towards the end he has to fight the temptation of returning to his mother. However, he meets his tragic end when he at last attempts to break-free from this social expectation.

In Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1995), which is considered to be largely autobiographical fiction, a dialectical novel that draws many elements from epic, philosophical discourse and folk-narrative, Rama the protagonist can also be seen as the victim of patriarchal expectations. The plot of the novel is basically concerned with the life of a South Indian youth by the name of K. R. Ramaswamy. He goes to France to work on a thesis connected with the Cathar heresy. He is a *Smartha* and his lineage goes back to Vidyaranya and even the Upanishadic Yajnavalkya. He had been initiated into the Upanishads at the age of four and is a master of both his mother-tongue and Sanskrit. He quotes from French and Italian too with felicity. He is firmly rooted in the Indian Vedantic tradition, but is at once at home in France or England and achieves communion with its living spirit. He is wise in himself and is the cause of wisdom in others, like the Ganges whose waters purify and whose purity does not diminish. He is the modern embodiment of Tristan, Krishna and Satyavan, but in spite of all his qualities he is in constant search of truth because he cannot free himself from the patriarchal values with which he is imbued. Throughout the novel we can see that he is involved, as well, in a conflict of roles which stems from the patriarchal tradition by which he defines himself. As a student, Rama’s *dharma* is to concentrate on his work and live a life of celibacy. Chronologically, though, he has reached an age where he should be a householder, and having a wife seems to be logical. He cannot devote himself to making money and having a family because he is still a student, and because as unofficial ambassador of his culture, he finds himself propelled into stereotypes of Indianness. The extreme form – that odd *sannyasin*, the wandering renouncer of worldly things – is a role he chooses; he constructs an image of a sage, to which he knows he is not

entitled. Rama, therefore, is a struggling man caught in his quest for truth in a society governed by patriarchal values.

Apart from the weight of patriarchal expectation, some men's silent suffering under patriarchy can also issue from a sense of castration that oppresses them psychologically and makes them feel less of men. If we think about a key reason in the breakdown of Rama's marriage to Madeleine in Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, we can understand that it is Madeleine's inability to produce a son. The pressure is not only on her but also upon Rama, because it puts a question mark on his masculinity too. Moreover, the thought of not having someone to light his funeral pyre and carry on his legacy are questions that haunt Rama. He is not free from the psychological oppression of not fulfilling his patriarchal obligations.

Pappachi in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a male character who exhibits another sense of emasculation. Mammachi, who is his wife, possessed the adept business skills and starts a pickle factory all by herself, but he "would not help her with the pickle-making because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high ranking ex-govt. Official" (47). His inability to provide for the family as is expected of him by the patriarchal society perhaps fills him with an intense sense of loss of manhood. Economic instability can at times make some men feel less of a man. The patriarchal code dictates that a man has to provide for and fend for his wife and children and when the ability to do that is lost, the sense of manhood in him too, is lost. What heightens that sense of castration is a situation, especially, where the wife emerges from the shadows of the domestic sphere to dominate the economic sphere while the husband is relegated to the kitchen. It is all because patriarchal tradition has prepared him for a role he cannot fulfil and which he no longer plays. In the eyes of his society, he is a failed man and that view makes him a he-victim of his own culture.

In the words of Kuzwayo:

The changing role of the woman as she makes an increasing contribution towards the family income, even brings in more money than the husband, has added to the problems of family relationships. This factor hits at the root of the traditional acceptance of the man as the head of the family . . . father and master, with his word the last in family decisions. (1985, 46)

Kuzwayo here shows the psychological dilemma which the man suffers if the traditional order is upset and reinstalled differently. Thus, some men who are fossilized in patriarchal traditions of their societies have become trapped and incapacitated by the modern realities which conflict with the traditional script.

Weaker men have also fallen prey to those men who are exemplars of patriarchy. In *Godaan* (2010), which is a Hindi novel by Munshi Premchand, the exploitation of weaker men by the powerful patriarchs can be seen. Hori, the main character in the novels, is a peasant. He is a righteous man and struggles throughout his life to preserve his virtue. He has two younger brothers and he considers his obligation as the eldest brother to help them and save them from problems, sacrificing his own family. He bribes the police officers who come to the village enquiring about the death of his cow. Thus, he saves the police from entering his brother Heera's house for a search. He is a man who is bound to the community and considers the verdict of the panchayat as final. He is penalized for the death of the cow and accepts it. He feels orphaned to be out of the community and hence accepts the penalty levied by the panchayat when Gobar brings home a low caste girl. Similarly, he allows Bhola to take his oxen away as he is neither able to pay the cost of it nor willing to send Jhunja away from his house. They have accepted her as their daughter-in-law and her child as their grandchild. He is kind and generous. He does not hesitate to give shelter to Seliya, a cobbler's daughter, who is exploited by Matadin, a Brahmin, and who has been shirked by her own people. All through the novel we see how the man without power and wealth, the weaker man like Hori, is exploited by the stronger and so called ideal patriarch like Rai Saheb.

From such a literary based analysis of a cross section of texts, it is clear that it is faulty and erroneous to lump all men together as members of the oppressor class of society's female half because there are some men who, ironically, find themselves ensnared by the patriarchal machinery which is meant to elevate them on the patriarchal social ladder. Thus, patriarchy is not a selective system but treads upon and crushes any man or woman who dares challenge its ideology. It is in this light that men and women ought to join hands in the fight to dismantle the iron grip of a system that only benefits the *real* man of this world at the expense of the majority. Therefore, it becomes imperative for critics, educationists, sociologists and others to find a new literary theory that incorporates the view that patriarchy imprisons all women and some men.

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