



## NOVELS OF WOMEN WRITERS IN SOCIAL MALEVOLENCE IN INDIA

**Ashraf Khan**

Research Scholar, Kalinga, Raipur

**Dr. Parul Singh**

Professor

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### ABSTRACT

*Indian women novelists do not lag behind in their voice of protest. Ruth Praver Jhabvala explores middle class family life, social problems and personal relationships within the typical Indian institute of the extended family, with all its opportunities for intrigues, clashes between generations and marital fending. About Jhabvala, Sunand K.Sinha observes that being an European, uninvolved and unconcerned provides her a detached outlook which promotes irony and satire in her work, it cannot be forgotten that she writes exclusively from the point of view of her own dilemma as a white European woman caught in the mixed marriage in a tropical country. Such a compulsion provides for fitful glimpses in her novels of the vision of womanhood and these are fatally compromised or flawed.<sup>40</sup> Having spent a large portion of her life in India, she presents details of the people and their problems. She portrays the problem of marital discord in all her novels and her characters pass "through crisis and most of them are in quest of better partner searching their hearts within."<sup>41</sup>*

**Keywords:** Social malevolence, English literature

### INTRODUCTION

Jhabvala's *To whom She Will* (1955) presents a realistic picture of the problems of rich and wealthy families. Prema's husband Suri is busy in earning money, scarcely giving time to his love thirsty wife. Another novel, *The Nature of Passions* (1956) portrays a high-caste Hindu businessman's mental attitude towards caste system. He earns huge wealth by his crafty nature. He is a caste

conscious father who is very particular about marrying his daughter in his own caste. Kanta, a young educated anglicised woman defies caste. She accepts the material advantages combined with a marriage. Jhabwala criticises the outdated customs observed in an Indian joint family like traditional method of arranging marriage after comparing the horoscope, taking into consideration family status,



caste, relative affluence and future prospects. It projects a general attitude towards women. Birth of a girl child saddens the heart of the father, Om Prakash. An educated, fashionable woman is a subject of grave criticism in the family.

Esmond in India (1958) deals with the rich anglicised family abiding by the patriarchal order on the question of marriage. Their attitude towards matrimony is extremely materialistic. Gulab tolerates all taunts, insolence and individualities of her husband Esmond. She carries out all his commands. Like a traditional wife, she never raises questions to her husband. Finally, with a sudden inflammation in her spirit, she protests against her husband and leaves for her parental house. Get Ready for Battle (1962) unveils the hypocritical aspects of the face of urbanities. Mrs. Bhatnagar, wife of the textile mill owner is preoccupied with various committees as 'Poverty- Relief to make a display of her riches. She goes through the false show of being charitable because society demands it and not because the poor need it. In A Backward Place (1965) Judy marries Bal but is frustrated and disappointed. She tries to rebel but has to submit like a cow. She is like a bird in a cage. Kamala Markandaya believes that India is in villages and agriculture is the basis of life. She protests against the exploitation of the farmers and the poor people and shows that the heartless moneylenders and the big landlords always somehow manage amassing wealth by exploiting the peasants. She builds up a world which is a

close understanding of the Indian situation today. In the words of Charu Mehrotra, "Markandaya, like Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya has a firm conviction that literature must be purposive and play a significant role in the amelioration of humanity."<sup>42</sup> She has a great concern for the economically weak class and strives for their betterment. She exposes that fear, hunger and despair are the constant companions of the peasants. She shows that the establishment of industries, though thought to be a symbol of progress and prosperity, has added little to the happiness of the villagers and the poor men. On the contrary, it has posed numerous threats and problems, new challenges and untold miseries before them. She highlights the helplessness of these people in the face of stark starvation and death. A.K.Arora points out the broad area covered by Markandaya's novels as,

The fictional world of Kamala Markandaya is thematically wide as her concern is social, economic, cultural and sometimes historical. Rural life, poverty, hunger, fear, despairs and deaths are her recurrent themes.<sup>43</sup>

## REVIEW OF LITERATURES

Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve (1954) describes the poverty and miseries of the sons of the soil caused by the famine. The untimely rains flood their fields leading to scarcity of rice. Despair and disgust leads women like Era to the flesh trade to avoid the death from starvation. Her mother Rukmini, however, stands firm against all calamities and exploitations. Markandaya describes the poverty-stricken, heart-



breaking existence of the downtrodden. The novel exposes that fear, hunger and despair are the constant companions of the peasants. Rukmini, a bride at twelve, mother at thirteen, mother of six children at twenty-four and old at forty represents those wretched villagers whose spirit of acceptance strengthens more in the midst of abject poverty. The novel introduces the plight of labourers in a tea company in Ceylon. The wages of plantation workers are very low and insufficient to feed their family. The novelist feels aghast by the miseries and the tears of the wretched workers. The big industrialists exploit the workers just like a machine. It deals with the rampant hunger and indebtedness of the Indian peasant. They are further cursed by overpopulation, wedding expenditure and funeral rites. Death is considered as passing away from the responsibility and burden of the famished society. The novel shows the impact of economic forces on the helpless rural masses. The authorities transform the villages into township to modernise things. Agricultural land is used for building a tannery. Consequently, the tenanted labourers are rendered jobless. Kamala Markandaya has emphasised the helplessness of man in general. The moneylenders and traders exploit the poor in the famine conditions and food scarcity. They control the village economy, no matter what the situation is, whether it is a marriage or any hour of crisis. The novel is a protest against poverty, illiteracy and the dowry system. Nathan did not want a girl child who would take a huge dowry but a son to continue his family lineage. It is because of the dowry system that the

Indian society shuns the idea of having daughters in the family.

Markandaya's novel, *Possession* (1963) is a portrayal of the starvation of hungry people with torn clothes as the result of economic upheaval. The hungry people never hesitate eating grass to satisfy their hunger. Granny's death following torturous starvation is heart-rending. Markandaya vividly portrays the poverty stricken class. In *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Ravi comes to Madras to seek wealth and happiness on the basis of his elementary education but is soon disillusioned to find that his education cannot compete him with the young graduates who hung around the streets. He becomes associated with the gang of loafers, addiction to drink, smuggling and theft. Ravi is exposed to the evil that rages in many forms in the city. The novel describes exploitation of workers by the capitalists, the black marketeers, and the drug-peddlers at the cost of the poor. The novel is a protest against unemployment, poverty and hunger. The looting scene of the rice-filled warehouse by angry mob shows the extended suffering and starvation. The grain prices go high, monsoon works havoc. The D.M.K. party comes into power by giving false election manifesto for providing rice for the poor at a measure for a rupee. It was a handful of rice that could make all the difference between life and death. Corruption was rampant in every field. The title of the novel indicates the novelist's anger at the existing situation. The use of the word 'rice' suggests the depths of human hunger. Economic exploitation begins when people



accept injustice passively, without any protest. The novelist seems to marvel at the economic disparity where the rich have everything and the poor have nothing. The misfortunes and tragic predicament of the sons of the soil is projected. In *Two Virgins* (1973), Lalitha protests against traditional and conventional morality. Markandaya shows how superstitious people go to the swami for cure of all sorts of ailments. Sarojini, the protagonist, who suffers from tumour, refuses medical treatment. Instead, she goes to the Swami for she feels that only he can heal her through his supernatural powers.

### **WOMEN WRITERS IN SOCIAL MALEVOLENCE IN INDIA**

Nayantara Sahgal depicts the suffering caused to women in their mismatched married lives. Her objection is against the treatment of woman as a toy, an object of lust. She is disturbed against the inequality of men and women. The society denies freedom to women. Women should be treated as man's equal and honourable partner. Her female protagonists represent modern women's protest against traditional taboos and her thirst for emancipation. Sahgal seeks independent existence of women who are victims of conventional Indian society engaged in their quest for identity. In *A Time to be Happy* (1958), Sahgal discusses the way the upper caste Hindus waste time repeating god's name as 'Ram' 'Ram' 'Ram'. She criticizes the business class who obtain money through shrewd means. Maya expects some kind of recognition of existence in her married life. She protests

against male domination. Maya expects nothing except emotional response from her husband. In this novel, Sahgal detests the idea of arranged marriages. In *A Silence of Desire* (1960), Dandekar treats his wife Sarojini as a slave. She has to cook, look after her children and please her husband sexually. *This Time of Morning* (1968) shows Nita's marriage as a business transaction. She yearns for love rather than materialistic pleasure. She protests against the procedure of customs which reduces an individual to a commodity. There should be a reform in Hindu marriage traditions. Uma is dissatisfied in her married life because of her husband's indifferent behaviour. This makes her emotionally and sexually desperate. She takes to drinking and becoming friendly with other men much against social norms. The lack of communication in married life leads it to unsuccessful affair. In *A Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), Inder believes in male dominance. He does not like women talk and behave like men. He considers his wife Saroj as a slave and his possession. When Saroj confesses her past guilt, Inder becomes angry and jealous. He never forgives her for her pre-marital affair. However, Inder is himself guilty of the same sin. He is not ashamed of his relationship with another woman, but Saroj's relationship, prior to their marriage, long before they knew each other, makes him react improperly. Saroj is disappointed in her marriage as there is no emotional response from her husband. Finally, she gives up her futile relationship. In *The Day in Shadow* (1971), after marriage Simrit had to leave



her old ways of life and create a new life for herself. Her husband, Som treats her just like a commodity. He is a materialistic person who loves the wealth and not his wife. She revolts against him because of his obsession with power and wealth. It is with divorce that she feels she will be able to retain her dignity but it does not give her the cultural freedom by society. Simrit realises that in this maledominated society a woman has no place. She has to face a lot of oppressions from the narrow minded and orthodox society. Anita Desai's novels are rooted in reality and portray a complex society. Her protagonists are unable to refuse the imposing norms. They desire freedom from all social norms and like to remain independent individuals. Desai's protagonists suffer from deep sense of insecurity and undergo traumatic experiences. Marital relationships deprive the women of their mental affinity and understanding. They protest through withdrawal and isolation. It reveals the negative side of social values. A well-known scholar, M. Balasubramanian points it out very aptly as,

A study of the novels of Anita Desai reveals that a major narrative component is the voice of protest in the novels. Protest, here, is not simply remonstrance against actions, intentions or persons caused by any immediate and singular episodic context in a novel. It is a narratively evolving and comprehensively orchestrated opposition that has an existential relevance. This kind of protest runs not only through a single (whole) novel, but through all the novels, thus shaping the theme and structure of the

whole narrative [all the novels] and the dialectic relationship among characters. Hence it is hypothesized that a major narrative pattern that underlies the structure of the novels of Anita Desai manifests itself in variant forms is the dynamism of the voice of protest, whose movement from the narrative position to the other informs the structure of the novels of Anita Desai.<sup>44</sup>

In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Maya is unable to lead an independent existence. She is never allowed to grow out of her childhood. She becomes isolated and fails to adjust with her husband. Social and cultural forces are responsible for Maya's lack of social interaction. Desai shows that social alienation is the consequence of an oppressive and incompatible social system. The novel revolves around the problem created by superstitious belief. Maya is obsessed with the gloomy prophecy of an albino astrologer. As per his prophecy, the fourth year of her marriage will be the end of either Maya or her husband. Her father suggests her to forget it. However, in the fourth year, Maya's dog dies and shatters her. She becomes a neurotic. In Desai's next novel, *Voice in the City* (1965), Nirod is bitter towards the well-to-do class. He refuses to make compromise with life and wishes to deteriorate to the depths. He protests by giving up his family name. He wants to have an independent existence so he leaves his home. He hates the society that confers success on a man only to make him compromise with life as it is. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) introduces the marital discord bringing deep agony to Sita, who continually breaks



apart into violent show of rage, fear and protest. Sita is angered by the unimaginative ways of her husband and his family. She escapes to Manori with her two children as a mark of protest. In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Nanda Kant does what her husband wants her to do, even wears silk to please him. She never sets her mind on social activities and in defiance renounces wifedom and family and wants to be left alone. Nanda's granddaughter, Raka always detests being a social symbol of respectability. She feels that once she breaks all connections, she will once again feel whole. Her protest consists in complete withdrawal from society that has given her nothing but distress. In Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977), Geeta gets her identity lost in the customs and traditions of a society. For her, Haveli stands for the oppression and tyranny of age-old customs. She fights hard to be free of the living framed by the haveli which was like a cage that had imprisoned her youthfulness. In the words of Darshan Trivedi, a scholar of Rama Mehta, "The provincial story of Udaipur transforms into the story of every Indian woman, who tries to establish the bridge between traditional and modern values of life."<sup>45</sup>

Shashi Deshpande's all novels in general and *Moving on* (2004) in particular, shows the protagonist's struggle to break free from the traditional bonds of social conventions. Her protagonists revolt against their long silence and their image of a submissive creature. Some of her characters defy the conservatism by indulging in inter-caste marriage.

Deshpande exposes the way in which helpless women are exploited through suppression, harassment, rape etc. Deshpande presents a 'new woman' who asserts her individuality by revolting against her passive acceptance of suffering. Her novels are a strong indictment on the outdated beliefs and customs that are forced on women. Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997), a Booker Prize winning novel, shows inhuman treatment given to the Dalits, particularly in Kerala. They were not allowed to walk on the public roads or have to cover their upper bodies. While speaking, they had to put hand over their mouth to divert polluted breath away from those whom they address. In this regard Paul Brians observes,

Yet, as Roy's novel suggests, prejudice against untouchables remains. One still hears from time to time of untouchables in remote villages beaten to death by infuriated mobs because they have dared to use the community well.<sup>46</sup>

Velutha, a representative of the untouchable Paravan caste had been in habit of going to the Ayemenem House with his father to deliver coconuts. The Paravans were not allowed to enter the house. They were treated as untouchables. They were expected to hang a broom sweeping away the foot prints so that the high-born ones would not defile themselves. Velutha converts himself into Christianity to evade his unwanted identity, however discovers that he had only jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Even in Christian religion, they are



given separate churches, with separate service and separate priests. They regret for being Christians because they are denied caste reservation benefits after independence. Velutha is not allowed to marry Ammu because of his low caste origin. The novel shows how the untouchables are denied basic human dignity. Thus, a famous critic, Amar Nath Prasad feels that Arundhati Roy through this novel “has heralded a revolutionary attitude against the mal-treatment of the untouchable, the vulnerable and the down-trodden.”<sup>47</sup>

Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* (2000), apart from the theme of partition, protests against the humiliation, exploitation and injustice given to women. It is a story of Roop, a sixteen year old girl. As she grows, she witnesses pathetic situation of women around her. She has to marry a middle aged wealthy Sardarji who marries her because of the infertility of his first wife, Satya. Roop’s father had to marry his daughter off because he owes debt to him. After marriage, Roop has to give her first born baby to Satya. She does not have even the right of being called as a mother. About the helplessness of Roop, Seema Malik comments: “Roop, who might have protested against injustice a few months ago, refrains from doing so now. She realizes that Sardarji can make or mar her future and so she turns herself accordingly.”<sup>48</sup> Thus the novel is an attempt to reinstall faith in women’s innate strength. It is an appeal to women to fight against the limitations of a male dominated society. Manju Kapur in *Home* (2006)

protests against the male domination in a joint family. She shows how women are taught to internalise the male dominant ideology and cooperate in derogating their own sex. She also condemns the evils of the dowry-system and the opposition to inter-caste marriage in Indian society.

Kiran Desai’s *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) is a satire on the blind faith of the people in religion and the Sadhus. The protagonist Sampath Chawla is an employee in a post-office who reads others’ letters out of curiosity. When he loses his job, to escape his father’s remarks he climbs on the top of a tree in a guava orchard. Mischievously, he speaks out all the personal details of many people. However, he is deified as a godman, Sanyasi or Monkey Baba. Kiran Desai here protests against absurdity of blind faith of the people who waste time on irrational things. According to an eminent critic of fiction, Shubha Tiwari, the major satire in the novel is “the Indian sense of religiosity.”<sup>49</sup> Kiran Desai’s latest Man Booker Prize winner novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), apart from the themes like globalization, multi-culturalism, terrorism, fundamentalism etc., throws a light on the burning social problems like dowry system, exploitation of women, corruption and miserable plight of the proletariat immigrants. Jemubhai Patel, who belongs to a poor peasant family, marries the daughter of a wealthy man to fulfill his dream of educating abroad. Even after getting a handsome amount of dowry, Jemubhai ignores his wife and in his stay abroad for five lengthy years almost



forgets her. After his return, he tortures her in sadistic ways.

## CONCLUSION

The novel also focuses on the corrupt practices in the court of law. Jemubhai's father earns money by becoming a false witness and does not feel a sense of guilt. Ironically, his son becomes a judge in the Supreme Court. Desai exposes the dark side of the poor immigrant labourers in India. Biju, the son of a cook, goes to India with a dream of glorious future, but he has to lead a life of frustration, insult and humiliation and lives in a highly wretched condition. Thus, the brief survey of Indian English novel right from the beginning till date shows a trend of social protest, It can be concluded that the novels of social protest have struck deep roots in the Indian soil while imaginatively exploring the existing problems. Although these novels protest against contemporary problems, their handling of the theme has universal appeal. The struggle of the victims to overcome their lot arouses the novelist's deep creative impulse. These novels are thus, a mirror of their age, reflecting its "nervous system, coursing of its blood and the unconscious prompting and conflicts which sway it."50

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