

INDIAN WAYS OF INTERACTION CAUSING GENDER INEQUALITY AS REFLECTED IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI AND GEETA HARIHARAN

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ABSTRACT

The society at large is patriarchal and marriage is a power –relationship between husband and wife. In the traditional set up after marriage a woman loses her individuality but in the present day world woman is not willing to lose her freedom. She is educated, career oriented, enterprising and thus is emotionally and economically independent. Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan proved to be writers of this change. The study brings to light how they vocalize their perception of change in women characters, in their novels through gender interaction. They focus on the identity of the individual, especially Indian woman. They highlight the advantages trans-affecting an identity to solve the conflicts arising out of gender interaction. This article explores in detail the roots of man-woman inequality in India and the socio-cultural reasons for them. It also pinpoints the advantage of having a new self-concept or new woman or modern woman. The evolution of new self concept of a new woman emerging out of a series of gender interactions arising in the select novels of Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan is traced, placing them in the frame work of sociology, psychology, ideology, history, feminism and Freudianism.

Key Words: *Gender, Inequality, Man-woman, Socio-cultural*

The history shows that male writers in their works depicted and have mostly reduced women as inferior and weak. The present paper probes all the areas to prove that the way man and woman interact is radically different from the traditional concept of gender interaction. It attempts to assume the impact of a new

self-concept arising out of a series of gender relations with its long –lasting influence on the psyche of Indian women. According to Pratima:

“The synthesis of eastern and western literacy modes has given a comprehensive perspective to the Indo-English writers, and they have successfully analyzed the psychological, emotional and spiritual crisis experienced by the Indian Intellectuals as well as men and women representing the different layers of Indian Society” (180).

Against this backdrop, the study explores Gender interaction in select works of Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer* and Githa Hariharan’s *Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*.

Differences in interaction and difference of opinions touch every man and woman all over the world in all walks of life. This study is important because the problem of misunderstanding between man and woman is a common problem but not much of research has been conducted in this area. All human beings are involved in relationships since it takes major part of life especially that interaction is inevitable and people interact with each other because they are part of a society where it is impossible to survive without communication. Thus it is important to first be aware of the ways that men and women interact with each other, and then try to understand them in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts.

The purpose of the study was to reveal the causes of the problem of misunderstanding between genders which may help people understand and know themselves better as well as the consequences of the gap that exists between them. This may contribute to establishing a better understanding and acceptance of the differences of the others. Today such a concept has come to

be called as ‘gender sensitization’. Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan have emerged as writers possessing deep insights into the female psyche. Focusing on the marital relations and gender interaction they seek to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. The novels of Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan reveal the man made patriarchal traditions and the uneasiness of the Indian woman in being a part of them. The study includes conflict of ideas, the struggle, and controversies that men and women experience and encounter in their life.

The women characters in the novels are victims of male domination. Female docility has been one of the prevalent issues ever since the human evolution began the idea

and practice of gender is given shape and meaning by the social structures of a society. An analysis of the women characters of Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan reveal the presence of a definite quest for a true self identity, their woman-centered novels and short stories give us a psychological insight into the working of a woman's mind; especially one belonging to a typically Indian background. The years of societal and cultural conditioning teaches the Indian woman to be self-effacing, submissive and subordinate to man, suffering of a patriarchal society in silence. Githa Hariharan, by making her heroines undergo stages of self-introspection and self-reflection, makes them evolve themselves into more liberated individuals than what their biological nature or culture have sanctioned.

These women strive heroically to overcome their cultural conditioning and the barriers created by society in matters of tradition and manners. They finally emerge as free, autonomous individuals, no longer content to be led, but desirous of taking a lead. In the Indian context, an ideal of self-hood in a woman requires to take into consideration the institution of marriage, wifehood and motherhood. Formerly these were the only identities women had. Even woman who wanted an identity of their own, were required to fulfill these three stages in life. In the present day also, women seek an identity of their own mostly within the family circle, without disturbing the status-quo of the Indian family set up. This working-out of their individuality is seen in the female protagonists of Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan.

Women are seen to function as individuals within the familial background. Anita Desai is one of the prominent contemporary, woman writers in India, writing in English. Her novels raise important issues including: a woman's quest for self; an investigation into the female psyche; an understanding of the mysteries of life; a woman's encounter with the difficulties in the contemporary Indian society. The women in her novels are interrogating and defining their identities as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and above all as human beings.

Hariharan's women characters have strength of their own, and in spite of challenges and hostilities, remain uncrushed. Most of her novels present a typical, middle-class housewife's life. Her main concern is the urge to find oneself to create space for oneself. Her imaginative flashes and the role played by memory in her novels. She presents a conceivable story of authentic characters and not shadowy abstractions. She believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be. For her portrayal of the predicament of middle-class Indian women, their inner conflict and quest for

identity, issues pertaining to marriage and sex, and their exploration and disillusionment. Hariharan does not believe in offering ready-made solutions.

R.S.Pathak is of the view that “The Indian novel in English sustains challenges and enigmas. But it has endured the test of the time and proves its excellence”(6).

The present study is a modest effort to explore how women character’s search for identity in their relationship with men in select novels of Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan.

Anita Desai is indisputably one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English. Desai, (1937-), of a German mother and Bengali father, is a north Indian novelist remarkable for sensibility of inner world. She represents the welcome “creative release of the feminine sensibility” which began to emerge after the Second World War. She married Ashvin Desai, they

have four children. She started writing short stories regularly before her marriage rather than the queer world of action. As a novelist Desai made her debut in 1963 with Cry The Peacock. Desai is a writer who elaborates a woman’s feelings, emotions alienation, loneliness, aloofness, and quest for self identity very clearly and beautifully. In addition to a large number of essays, articles, reviews, short stories, Anita Desai has about a dozen popular novels to her credit. Besides being a professor at various educational centers indifferent parts of the world, she is the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award (1978), Guardian Award (1984), Booker McConnell Prize (1980), Padmashri (1990) and Neil Gunn Award (1994) etc. She considers Clear Light Of Day (1980) her most autobiographical work as it is set during her coming of age and also in the same neighborhood in which she grew up. In 1984 she published In Custody - about an Urdu poet in his declining days - which was short listed for the Booker Prize. In 1993 she became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her latest novel published in 2004, The Zigzag Way, is set in 20th-century Mexico. Desai has taught at Mount Holyoke College and Smith College. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and of Girton College, Cambridge University.

Desai is a most significant novelist, as a young woman, when she was very seriously writing, it was British writers like Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster who influenced her and were her role models. Desai is a part of a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English, which dates back only to the 1930's or

1940's. Her new style of writing is different from many Indian writers, as it is less conservative than Indian literature has been in the past. She portrays the cultural and social changes that India has undergone as she focuses on the incredible power of family and society, relationships and the alienation between family members, paying close attention to the ordeals of women, suppressed by the Indian society. The

isolation experienced by women in a male dominated society is a significant modern trend, in the Indian society women are not allowed to play any active role in decision-making. Anita Desai tries to focus on the predicament of women in the society the inner crisis in the lives of the characters. She writes about helplessness, agony, struggle and surrender. It is her style which gives dress to the inner psyche of her characters. It is the use of images, symbols, metaphors and the narrative devices which provide a good deal of peep into the disturbed psychology of characters. Desai is one of those significant fiction writers who refuse to accept traditional and idealistic approach in her work.

She writes about helplessness, agony, struggle and surrender and inner psyche of her characters. Desai is widely acclaimed for her literary works and has a worldwide audience who make her a literary celebrity of great significance. The interior landscape peopled by woman characters is set against the background of man's domination of social and domestic life with accumulated authoritarianism as its foundation are some of the themes she deals with.

Githa Hariharan was born in 1954 in Coimbatore, South India, and she grew up in Bombay and Manila. She was educated in these two cities and in the United States. She worked as a staff writer in WNET-Channel in New York, and from 1979, she worked in Bombay, Madras and New Delhi as an editor, first in a publishing house, then as a freelancer. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. Her other novels include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). A collection of highly acclaimed short stories, *The Art of Dying*, was published in 1993, and a book of stories for children, *The Winning Team*, in 2004.

Githa Hariharan has also edited a volume of stories in English translation from four major South Indian languages, *A Southern Harvest* (1993); and co-edited a collection of stories for children, *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997). Hariharan's fiction has been

translated into a number of languages including French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Greek, Urdu and Vietnamese; her essays and fiction have also been included in anthologies such as Salman Rushdie's *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing 1947-1997*.

Hariharan wrote, for several years, a regular column for the major Indian newspaper *The Telegraph* and has been a Visiting Professor or Writer-in-Residence in several universities, including Dartmouth College and George Washington University in the United States, the University of Canterbury at Kent in the UK, and Jamia Millia Islamia in India, where she was Scholar-in-Residence from 2010-2012. Hariharan belongs to the second generation of postcolonial women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Mridula Garg, Anita Nair and Shobha De who together created the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. These writers have invigorated the English language to suit representations and narration of what they felt about their own women and their lives in postmodern and postcolonial India. Apart from sharing the common theme of exploring female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not allowed by a patriarchal society along with her

fellow Indian women writers, Githa Hariharan has also created a separate identity for herself by attempting to write about non-feminist subjects like the question of writers' freedom and the true meaning of education and teaching in the Indian milieu.

Githa Hariharan started her career as a writer by attempting to write on a subject that was close to the heart to many women writers, that is, the female subjectivity and portrays the changing image of woman in the modern and the post modern era through her not so very conventional women characters.

Women in Hariharan's novels pass through the three stages of tradition, transition and modernity. Women in her novels seem to be the personifications of 'new' women who have been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions they have carried for ages. Hariharan's female characters' resolutions conform to a re-definition of the lives of women, fulfilling the implicit political aim of the author, as she is not merely concerned in documenting reality, but she has used her novels as a medium for the exploration of the new reality and a subtle projection of values, by posing questions, by suggesting re-assessment and redefinition.

Antonia Navarro-Tejero, a Spanish writer and academician, while comparing Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan says “Roy and Hariharan are engaged – in different degrees – with social reforms, and this is what makes them writer-activists, as they are sensitive to gender and caste experiences. They are not so prescriptive, but offer alternatives instead of victimizing the oppressed” (38).

A woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position. Man can think of himself without women. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees-she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being.

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the in essential as opposed to the essential. Simone de Beauvoir finds great substance in what an eminent feminist commented about marriage:

“We open factories, offices, the facilities for women but we continue to hold that marriage is for her a most honorable career, freeing her from the need of any other participation in the collective life”(67).

Women have not learnt to see themselves because the mirrors they look into do not reflect them .They reflect the male idea of a women – whether married or single. The mirrors reflect the men in their lives – the fathers and brothers who are out there in the open, while women are confined in long skirts, or long sleeves, or behind purdah or the chilman. In their interface with men, the enigmatic and chaotic fabric of Indian women’s life is seen. The texture of the fleeting impulses, frustrations, disappointments, distorted vision of life of Indian Women and their emotional and transient feelings result in the fragmentation of the personality of a woman. If the interaction between man and woman is not congenial and positive in nature, it damages the relationship and distorts their peace of mind. Nilufer E. Bharucha states:

“Female space is biologically recessed. The enclosure of the womb affords protection to the growing fetus and is therefore a positive factor. An andocentric world, however, has extended the analogy of biological female inwardness to create a feminine reductiveness. This is turned a biological virtue into a societal and cultural handicap. The male world, after having imposed this limitation onto women, has celebrated it in song and dance. Literary discourse has been utilized to bear witness to the circumscription of women’s worlds. The outer limits of women’s lives have also been delineated by religious scriptures. While literature and poetry have

romanticized these worlds, religious texts have provided it moral sanction and dogmatic validation. Women have always been the ultimate territories and countries on whom men have mapped their rights of possession.”(93).

There are many such men and women who indulge in infidelity and wreck their own marriages. When partners become unfaithful to one another, divorce becomes the only solution. It is recommended that spouses manage their relationship with mutual understanding, fairness, and a tiny dose of conciseness, concern, commitment, compromise and compatibility. Satisfactory intimate relationship plays an important role in a successful marriage. Physical compatibility is essential to build a strong emotional bond. Sexual dissatisfaction or reproductive incapability often causes frustration leading to divorce. Divorce is an emotional and a painful scar that can be avoided with some patience and understanding. These days if people ever see a seed of doubt sprouting in their marital life, they consider it worthy visiting a marriage counselor. Theorists have identified locations or settings where gender relations might be best studied. For instance, gender as relational experience occurs on personal and intimate levels as well as on cultural and institutional levels. This suggests that gender relations and health studies can and should occur in diverse locations and contexts to more fully apprehend the multiplicity and patterns within productions of gender relations and their influence on health. Gender relations are an exciting and emergent area in need of more attention from health researchers. Health-related behaviors do not operate in isolation and need to be understood in the context of interactions within and between men and women across personal, interpersonal and institutional levels. A better understanding of gender relations and health in research and policy will have direct implication for health interventions and guide decisions about whether group, dyadic or single point programs are likely to be effective.

As the French feminist Julia Kristeva says, Women are one half of the sky. The changing of the existing power relations between the two sexes would amount to a social revolution and this means that the present world order would inevitably be transformed. The real purpose of a genuine feminist should be not so much the inequality between men and women but a healthy alteration of the present rigid definition of gender discrimination. In this context it is apt to quote Chetan Bhagat, the author of bestselling book *Three mistakes of my Life,*

is in praise of women he strongly advocates that “when we don’t allow our women to come up, or create stress for them, we are not allowing half of India to come up”(16).



Talented, hardworking people are much in demand, mastering the skills, networking with people and figure out ways to be economically independent one ways to build relationships. Strength or positive points would always produce positive emotions that are invariably authentic, engaging or harnessing the strength produce positive emotions like harmony, happiness, satisfaction, joy, sense of pride and fulfillment. A person could be having an array of strengths. If they are not in tune with the goal or do not fit the job or profession one is in, then all the strengths are a waste or just futile. It is always advisable to identify one's core strengths and harness them in a right way to produce results and be successful in life. One of the important strength is harmony in man woman relationship.

In the western countries, the women's issue is mostly one of identity, job equality and sexual role. In India for the majority, it is the question of stark survival. Virginia Woolf remarks:

"Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged: luminous halo, a semi transport envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end". Since the establishment of the society women is branded as the weaker sex, denied full justice, social security ,economic liberation and political awareness" (58).

Sheryl Sandberg the Chief Operating Officer of Face book and the author of the bestselling book *Lean In Women, Work and the Will to lead* says "women should lean in to their careers and take credit for the work they do, be ambitious and unafraid to compete, to challenge the status quo and work for a better world with a distinct outlook." (36).

Sandberg simply raises the flag, announcing that it is time for women to be intentional and confident about being successful .On the converse, it challenges men to share the load with their partners in a manner that will help women lead as well and give everyone a better quality of life. This is in tune with what D.H. Lawrence in "Morality and the Novel" points out,

"The great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary" (130).

Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of a contemporary writing in English. It provides telescopic insights, a wealth of understanding, a reservoir of meaning and a basis for intellectual discussion. Through the eyes of the women



writers we can seek to realize the potential of human achievement. An appreciation of the women's writings is essential while appraising the Indian English literature.

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