

Women's Dilemmas and their Changing Role in the New Cultural Scenario

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Received: February 04, 2019

Accepted: March 05, 2019

ABSTRACT: *Today, after a long struggle, women are not only capable of negotiating their options but are successful in putting forth their choices, which has changed their role from a source of inspiration to creation. Now, woman writers are acclaimed poets, novelist and the sellers of dreams and ideas. Whether it is the British literature or the American literature or even the African literature and the Oriental literature, what is significant is that women writers have succeeded in making their presence noticeable by transcending the traditional boundaries of suffocation, subjugation, suppression, suffering and struggle. The current paper focuses on women's dilemmas, their struggles and how they assert their own rights and develop full-fledged women prospective as a human in the emerging scenario.*

Key Words: *Feminism, gender discrimination, suppression, self-realization.*

Feminism as a movement gained momentum with the publication of many hard hitting books by women writers in which male dominance at various levels was not only challenged but it was also undermined through the accession of the rights of woman. This was necessitated by the marginalization of woman in the world of human society existent almost in every sphere of life. The status and state of a woman in the society was much like that of immigrants in an alien country, who are deprived of many basic rights and denied a dignified living. That is why, Simone-de-Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, where she asserts "one is not born rather one becomes a woman". In the past, women were considered storyteller to generations, due to which women writers were not only story tellers then, but also excluded from literary canons. Whether it is the post-colonial period or colonial period, these women were treated as colonies and their work was undervalued. Quest for female identity in order to achieve satisfaction and liberty has been depicted like breaking the society forged manacles. The male counterparts do not allow woman to define and tread their territory as it would pose a threat to their centuries old traditional hegemony, thereby, pulling down their male superiority and dominance. The statement of Anita Desai in the novel *In Custody* is highly pertinent when she retorts:

Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievements, while I because I was born a female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can, in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected (Desai 196).

Dilemma of a woman also lies in her ability to choose one of the two and discard the other one. In other words, she cannot enclose herself either in her Indian self or her new found alien or migrant self in the new culture, with the result that she becomes a split personality which is beautifully explained by **Parekh and Garg:**

For women currently struggling to transcend the inevitable structure of their life space and create a new space for themselves, this role model of traditional Indian woman evokes admiration and awe, but it does not mobilise them to act for themselves because it also evokes pathos and a sense of inadequacy. The entire dialogue centres around the question, if not this then what? (Parekh. et.al. 111)

So, feminism in its multidimensional expressions and experiences focuses on migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses with the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing. The second generation of Indian English writings comprises new texts by women writers, like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jumpha Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee. These writers have produced the common ground of discourse in their writings i.e. the issue of gender and changing role of woman in society. The central characters in these writings struggle hard to create their own space and particularly women have succeeded in making their presence felt in almost every area of male hegemony. A new woman is born out of the ashes of her meek, docile, and submissive life, who is conscious of her identity, role and place in the family and society, which constitutes the mainstream of their thematic designs.

The female protagonist in *Jane Eyre* of Charlotte Bronte and even like in *Wide Sargasso Sea* of Jean Rhys immensely suffers from the feeling of inferiority. As both these prototypes are victims of the alien social structure, cultural pluralism and racial discrimination, for Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre*, and Annette and Antoinette of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who suffer but don't surrender and hence become examples of woman's bravery and courage to fight back against all odds including tortures and humiliations.

Wide Sargasso Sea beautifully explains the post-colonial social and cultural relationships between the white rulers and the black-ruled colonised people of West-Indies. The cultural pluralism in the novel comprises the cultural sophistication and superiority of the English people and the custom ridden backward people who practise magic called Obeah and love – philtre to set the things in order. The leading characters Antoinette and her mother Anette are the living symbols of the colonial past and present with its practical application of the cultural pluralism. Things started changing with the passage of Emancipation Act of 1833, which declared the freedom of the black slaves. It is during the childhood of Antoinette that the hostility developed between the disappearing white aristocracy and the backward black servants. The mother of Antoinette, after the death of her husband Alexander Cosway, decides to marry again, this time with an English man named Mr Mason. But this second marriage creates more problems than it solves because the black people set their Coulibri Estate on fire and even the close friend of Antoinette, Tia throws a jagged rope at Antoinette that injures Antoinette with blood oozing from the forehead. However, in the meantime, Antoinette brother Pierre dies and Antoinette is enrolled in a convent school with other young Creole girls. As she turns seventeen, Antoinette is married to an unnamed man Rochester thought to be Mr Rochester. With the gradual dwindling of their fortune and the streaks of madness coming to the fore, Mr Rochester decides to take Antoinette to England treating her like a mad woman in the attic. There she is imprisoned in a small cell where grace pulls to guard her. In this confinement, Antoinette parallels the story of Bharta Mason who was confined to the upper storey of Rochester's house. Consequently, Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester has lost all sense of time and place and begins to dream of putting the house on fire. The text in the post-colonial context beautifully and powerfully illustrates that the fire which was triggered by Bharta Mason has resulted into complete destruction by Antoinette of **Wide Sargasso Sea**, the narrator herself explains:

there were more candles on a table and I took one of them and ran up the first flight of stairs and the second. On the second floor, I threw away the candle. But I did not stay to watch. I ran up the last flight of stairs and along the passage. I passed the room where they brought me yesterday or the day before yesterday, I don't remember (Rhys 122).

The female protagonists of Bronte and Rhys have the vantage of hindsight to go back to their past so as to capture and evaluate their social and cultural personalities.

However, with the collapse of colonialism, there emerged a feminist view point that eventually culminated into a strong stream of women writers like Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence and Alice Munro from Canada followed by Indian women writers like Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nayar and Bharati Mukherjee. There are many other Bangladeshi and Pakistani novelists, including Taslima Nasrin and Monika Ali along with Bapsi Sidhwa and Tehmina Durrani. Because of emerging feminism, the image of woman also changed from a suffering woman to that of assertive one, where she redefined herself by defying the traditional categories and boundaries. For example, Nadine Gardiner of South Africa picked up the dominant theme of apartheid in her works where she articulated the issue of white South African as the symbol of racism in all human complexity.

The world of Jasmine, a protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's novel is in tune with her early life but as the time passes, Jasmine acquires the depleting values of the disappearing culture, of course with a potential to make her life better because she believes in action that takes her from a repressive and digressive world to become a complete individual through her willpower. As Jasmine believes, "there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake one self, we murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Foster 25). Andrienne Rich says, 'to assimilate means to give up not only your history but your body.' So, we find an identity of the protagonist that has been able to compress and live the experience of centuries as she moves from a feudal country side to a metropolitan city. In other words, how the third world woman is shaped by her gender and repressive culture of the backward society, which keeps her ignorant and traditional. In comparison to this third world female identity, the woman of the west is more liberal and assertive, who instead of becoming a Sati can murder and challenge the system as a whole. That means, "a self-immolating woman from the Third World is an immigrant to America, she does not need to preserve her identity, which is symbolic of and synonymous with oppression". (Grewal 188).

Parikh and Garg explain the emergence of changing female identity in a typically Indian style with a tinge of irony when writes:

Perhaps the role models of the cultural lore are internalised as deeply as the universe of identities is interjected. The three significant and persistent models running through mythology and history are the virtuous women who suffers, the virtuous and assertive woman who fights, and the one who escapes into religion. (Parikh. et. al. 153-4)

Today, after a long struggle women are not only capable of negotiation but have succeeded in putting forth their choices, which has changed their role from a source of inspiration to creation. That is why, now the woman writers are poets, novelist and the sellers of dreams and ideas. Whether it is the British literature or the American literature or the African literature or the Oriental literature, what is significant is that women writers have succeeded in making their presence noticeable by transcending the traditional boundaries of suffocation, subjugation, suppression, suffering and struggle. According to Margaret Egnor in her essay "On the Meaning of Sakti to women in Tamil Nadu" published in **The Power of Tamil Women:**

A special positive power comes from suffering and self-sacrifice which can be defined as the ability to act, to make other act, to make things happen and as action itself... (Egnor 22).

In keeping with the objective, the woman protagonists have been analysed on the basis of cultural conflicts as well as issues, as observed through the different identities and the process of their assimilation. In addition to this, it has been interesting to notice the reactions of the perceived orthodox female representations in an alien culture. Thus, it can be analysed that in the new cultural scenario woman has changed and portrayed herself as a strong as well as determined mind and becomes particularly interesting in creating her truer identity and role in the society and never shown to be giving up in fight for the true independence and identity.

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