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Caroline Satur
Principal, M.L.B Govt.
Multipurpose Girls Hr. Sec.
School-Bilaspur District
Chhattisgarh, India

Dr. Sunil Gouraha
Sports Officer, Rajiv Gandhi
Govt. P.G. College,
Ambikapur-Sarguja District
Chhattisgarh, India

An exclusive portrait of women in the works of Indian writers in English literature

Caroline Satur and Dr. Sunil Gouraha

Abstract

"If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world.

Deshpande Shashi

The seed of Indian writing in English was sown during the period of the British rule in India. Now the seed has blossomed into an ever green tree, fragrant flowers and ripe fruits. The fruits are being tasted not only by the native people, but they are also being 'chewed and digested' by the foreigners. It happened only after the constant caring, pruning and feeding. Gardeners' like Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao-to name only a few, looked after the tender plant night and day. In modern time, it is guarded by a number of writers who are getting awards and accolades all over the world. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) wrote *Rajmohan's Wife* and published it in 1864. It is the first Indian novel written in English.

Jai Shankar Prasad, who was famous for his strong portrayals of women became popular for famously glorifying women. A popular verse from one of his most widely read poems, 'Kamayani' reads - "Nari! Tum kewal shraddha ho, Vishwas-rajat-nag-pal-tal mein, Piyush strot si baha karo, Jeevan ki sundar samtal mein. (Oh woman! You are honour personified, under the silver mountain of faith, Flow you, like a river of ambrosia, on this beautiful earth)". R.K. Narayan was one among greatest Indian novelists. He wrote many novels such as, "Mr. Sampath" (1949), "The Financial Expert" (1952), "Waiting for the Mahatma" (1955), "The Guide" (1958), "The Vendor of Sweets" (1967), "The Painter of Signs" (1977) etc. Most of his novels were on contemporary social issues. His novel have women characters not as central characters but are often secondary characters like mother, sister, friends, wife or foreigners. He portrays female characters who accept marriage as their fate, about which they can do nothing but suffer patiently. These characters are ever shy and demure as traditional Indian women should always be.

Since the time of the first explorers to the present, women's roles and portrayal in literature reflect the changes occurring historically for women. The insignificance and oppression of women prior to the mid-19th century is related by the small roles of females in literature. As women gained equality, the heroine continued to change. By studying these changes, it is observed that not only do the characters embody the female identity, but also the heroines transform into the new figures that women aspire to be. A woman is a dawn of light where all the darkness disappears. She is the sun that enlightens everyone and beholds the ability to vanish all the fear that grows in darkness of mind. Women are essentially the origin of life. No one can cast a doubt on the substantiality of women that they are the ultimate creators of this very existence. The woman strengthens the foundation of family as a mother, daughter, sister, and wife embracing everyone with the unconditional love. If allowed to grow their potential they not only enhance a women's world as writers, entrepreneurs, mystics, painters, counsellors, scientists but can also provide a better vision to the men's world.

Keywords: English, portrayal, novels, Indian women, literature, equality, potential, writers, existence

Introduction

Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages, but until recent times, most of the published writers were men and the portrayal of women in literature was without doubt biased. A lot of it has to be blamed on the fact that in the ancient world, literacy was strictly limited, and the majority of those who could write were males. However, the contribution of women to oral folklore cannot be taken for granted-in folk songs, stories, poetry and literature in general. Here's a look at how women were portrayed in literature through eras. During the Victorian era, there was an unending debate over the roles of women. While the era was dominated by writers who treated women as angelic figures-innocent, physically weaker and nothing less than household commodities. Jai Shankar

Corresponding Author:
Caroline Satur
Principal, M.L.B Govt.
Multipurpose Girls Hr. Sec.
School-Bilaspur District
Chhattisgarh, India

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R.K.Narayan one among the greatest Indian novelists. He wrote many novels such as, "Mr Sampath" (1949), "The Financial Expert" (1952), "Waiting for the Mahatma" (1955), "The Guide" (1958), "The Vendor of Sweets" (1967), "The Painter of Signs" (1977), etc. Most of his novels were on contemporary social issues. His novels have women characters not as central characters but are often secondary characters like mother, sister, friends, wife or foreigners. Susila, Rosie, Rukmini, Laxmi, etc. are his different female characters in different novels, but they are not protesting women. These characters of women have the usual feminine weakness and surrender themselves under the male domination. He portrays female characters who accept marriage as their fate, about which they can do nothing but suffer patiently. These characters are ever shy and demure as traditional Indian women should always be.

Indian Writing in English is not a recent genre. It is as old as British, American, African and Common Wealth Writings in English. The depiction of Characters, Women characters in particular, differs from Country to country. However portrayal of male dominance over women is a common feature in all these writings including Indian writing in English. The portrayal of images of women by Indian novelists like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Devi Chaudhurani, Torudutt, Anand, Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markendeya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desi, Nayanatara Tara Sahgal, Shoba dey, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Chetan Bhagath, is not uniform. It differs from novel to novel and writer to writer. The research scholar seeks to investigate that there is a vast difference between the portrayal of images of women and the real conditions in which women are forced to live. In reality they continue to live in awful conditions of subjugation, desperate dependence and above all denial of domestic, social and economic freedom by men. Mulk Raj Anand's presentation of images of women can be considered more realistic than those depicted by other writers like Narayan and Raja Rao. The image of Sohini, Bakra's sister, in 'Untouchable' is woefully so pathetic that she is the symbol of oppression. In 'Coolie' two women characters Gujri and Biwi Uttamkour are exposed exploiting Munoo, the hero. Parbati, a pathetic character in the novel, is kind hearted and religious and she shows kindness and affection to Munoo, but she weeps when her husband is taken away to the police station. In 'Two Leaves and a Bud' Anand depicts the pathetic state of women characters under the colonial exploitation Sajani, Gangu, the hero's wife, who represents the fastidious village women whose whole life had been spent cleaning and washing and cooking and cleaning again looks after her husband, Gangu, but she herself gets infected with malaria and dies.

Contemporary popular fiction Indian writers like Chetan Bhagat and Anita Nair have showcased the new woman in their books. While Chetan portrays his women characters as harbingers of social change and equality, an aspect which is evident in his book 'One Night @ the Call Centre', where

men and women are treated equally and work in night shifts. Nair's characters have their own pain and sorrow but they overcome their entire struggle, a fact you'll notice especially in her bestseller, Ladies Coupe. Nair feels nothing has changed in the terms of mentality, "That a woman could live a fulfilled life on her own terms was a concept writers seemed unable to conceive or unwilling to explore. Sadly, very little has changed. Women in fiction may have shrugged some of the strait jacketed representations but anytime a woman character chooses to live life on her terms, readers tend to get agitated.

According to author Anita Nair, "Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms were rewarded with happily ever after".

Author Jaishree Mishra feels if literature is doing its job as a mirror to society then, obviously, the depiction of women in books has changed along with society, from Jane Austen's seemingly demure heroines onto Helen Fielding's openly scatty, mouthy Bridget Jones, a modern-day reworking of 'Pride & Prejudice'.

Raja Rao always portrays women keeping in mind the scriptures of Manu Smriti, which shows the duties and behaviour of women. A submissive attitude is one of the striking features on Raja Rao's characterisation. His ideal women-Savithri, Shantaha and Jayalakshmi are submissive ones. In Kanthapura, not at all assertive but fully obedient wife to her husband is highlighted.

Rabindranath Tagore is a versatile genius. He was not a feminist writer but his thoughts and writing shows his acute understanding of woman's psyche. He wanted women to have decision making power in family and the society too. In his novels we find many images of different types of women. In The Wreck, there is an important incident of boat wreck. There were two families on the boat.

Discussion

The tradition of women being portrayed in literature as submissive and docile has been due to the inferior position women have held in male-dominated societies. However, the wave of feminism in the '70s and '80s sparked resurgence in forging a place for the age of women. Writers began writing about the strong women in their works. Women founded presses that dedicated themselves to publishing their rejected novels. In recent years, a greater emphasis on convergence has encouraged exploration into the relationship between race, gender, religion, and class to further improve the importance of the acknowledgment of marginalised groups in literature. The times are changing and women are becoming the source of inspiration to many writers now.

Therefore, it would be interesting to see the more feminist writings that display the truest essence of womanhood. As Anne Frank in "The Diary of a Young Girl" quotes, "Women should be respected as well! Generally speaking, men are held in great esteem in all parts of the world, so why shouldn't women have their share? Soldiers and war heroes are honoured and commemorated, explorers are granted immortal fame, martyrs are revered, but how many people look upon women too as soldiers? Women, who struggle and suffer pain to ensure the continuation of the human race, make much tougher and more courageous soldiers than all those big-mouthed freedom-fighting heroes put together!"

Conclusion

In the last century, the readers acknowledged the work of women portrayed by Indian writers as a strong way to spread modernism and feminist statements. In the past 20 years, there has been a remarkable progress when we talk about feminist pictures in writings in the Indian literature. In today's generation, women are portrayed more by writers. Novels written by modern women writers focus on the issues related to women, for instance; rape, and other societal issues as well, like corruption and injustice. Most of the stories focus on the themes of unknown psyche of females, and we can witness many such stories where the sorrows of an unlucky housewife are portrayed. These novels are much appreciated by the readers and it adds wealth to the bank accounts of the publishers too.

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