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**Contours of Change: Deconstructing Canonical Assumptions in Modern Indian Women's writing**

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**Abstract**

India women English writers in India today proudly uphold their cause of 'womanhood' through their write-ups. The literary field is most bold to present feminism in Indian English literature in the hands of these writers. However, as we move from one decade to another entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century we observe how women have been able to break the cocoon of domesticity, making their presence in various socio-political spheres which have been usually dominated by men. There seems a gradual shift in the focus of many women writers. Many Indian Women Writers such as Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Parwer Jhabwala, Bharati Mukherjee, Namita Gokhle, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Anita Desai, Jaishree Mishra, Radhika Jha, Anita Nair, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy have sought their space for expression and voiced opinion on the dilemmas and angst faced by human beings in the contemporary world. They feel crippled under the tag of feminist writer as their literary gamut presents a deeper insight into the multi-dimensional, socio-political, cultural, psychological and existential world. The present paper attempts to deconstruct these canonical assumptions by examining the selected works of modern Indian women writers who engage with concerns that transcend gender parochialism. Through the close textual analysis the study demonstrates how these writers articulate experiences of identity, selfhood, modernity, and human relationship in ways that are more inclusive than gender-centric.

**Keywords:** deconstructing, assumptions, surpassing, gender boundaries, feminist fiction**Introduction:**

Feminism encompasses the beliefs that women should enjoy equal social, legal, educational, religious and spiritual right as men enjoy in society. Over the years, several Indian women writers like Toru Dutt, Namita Gokhle, Baby Haldar, Rama Mehta, Kamini Roy, Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni have emerged as powerful voices articulating the muted sufferings and struggles of women through literary works. However, in recent times, there has been a noticeable shift in the focus of many contemporary women writers as they attempt to break the stated feministic

stance and provides the echoes of numerous crises of their characters as individuals. They feel uncomfortable under the label of feminist writer and make efforts to unshackle themselves from the tag of 'feminist writers'. They attempt to display the trans-feministic shade into their novels, engaging with broader human experiences while still acknowledging gendered realities. They endeavor to usher a fresh approach of contemporary feminism that goes beyond the prevailing feminist outlook.

A rigorous study of some of Indian women writers brings to fore that their characters deal with more complex issues of human dilemma than the feministic ones. Several Indian Women Writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Anita Desai, Jaishree Mishra, Anita Nair, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Arundhati Roy explore the layers of human predicament of the contemporary world. In the novels of Mahasweta Devi, winner of Padamshree award, the fight does not seem against male chauvinism, but men and women fight together against the establishment.

Similarly, Shashi Deshpande's major concerns hold up mirrors very closely to an individual's life and its predicament. She always disagrees to be labelled as a feminist writer as due to this, her work is not fully understood "to apply the tag of feminist, is one way, I've realized of dismissing the serious concerns of the novel by labeling them" (Deshpande 230). The work of Deshpande indicates the beginning of resistance writing in India as a whole. One such comprehensive vision where the struggle between the determining forces and free will takes place, makes it visible in *Dark Holds No Terrors* when Saru is displayed as victim of her husband Manu's dark desires but reading underneath it can also be observed that though Manu attempts to impose his fragmented manhood on her wife by becoming a rapist at night. Similar connotations can also be traced in Deshpande's another novel *Moving On* where the protagonist Manjari is brought up in a feministic restraint-free home, always motivated by her father to be ready to take the role of a provider "running out without buttoning up my dress" (68) but alienation emerges in her life due to her fight against numerous determining factors. She becomes a prey to emotional wounds, impositions, opposition, control and violations at an age of twenty-one. Shashi Deshpande also attempts to convey the uncertainties even of the privileged males. In her novels the patriarchal social agencies proclaim their power on both men and women, making men to perform the commanding roles and women the submissive roles. Shashi Deshpande presents how in a patriarchal society a man is also expected to play his role as the producer and provider for his family. Quite similar to this, Manohar in *Dark Holds No Terrors*, in Deshpande's another novel *Moving On* Badri Narayan does not accept his wife's position and asserts individuality in their relationship because of male dominating attitude. Though her works abound in displaying relationships as husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons.

They are not the vague sketches, incidental in importance to the actual concerns. Rather, they are sharply delineated as part of these concerns. There are vast tracts of works devoted to their backgrounds, psychological motives, individual's predilections and social personas. (Singh 12)

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Deshpande does not present her male characters only as representatives of patriarchal norms and structures but also as a victim of their own inner struggle. She displays the dominant charges of determinism and free will exerting their powers equally on both male and female. All become a prey to these antagonist agencies.

Another India's notable writer is Anita Desai who considers the term "feminist writer" very offensive as it reduces a writer's creative autonomy and uniqueness. She has declared a new era of psychological realism with her debut novel *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. Anita Desai, as a writer of human mind presents her protagonist Maya a prey of her own doubts, uncertainties and obsession. Desai does not depict Maya 'sufferings due to projection of male supremacy, it appears she, herself, is the main reason of her loneliness, existential predicament and agony. Her neurosis begins with her childhood without motherly love, her father –fixation, childless married life with an old man, and husband's apathetic attitude for her, longing for child and death of her pet dog Toto. Desai portrays Maya as a woman who being deeply in love with life, in her obsession with death goes hysteric over the fear of death "Am I going insane? Father, Brother, Husband. Who is my rescuer? I am in desperate need of one. I am perishing, God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no I'll never sleep once more" (84).

Similarly in her another novel *In Custody*, Anita Desai discovers the existential suffering and search for freedom of a male protagonist Deven Sharma by diving deep into his inner self. The story revolves around Deven's consciousness of futility of life and his thirst for meaning in it and in Urdu poetry. His existential quest finds place in his married life also. Though he is a simple, timid and sober man but his married life suffers due to his alienation. He feels confined in his students' expression of monotony and disobedience when he teaches in the class and in his married life he suffers due to his wife Sarla's dissatisfaction and disgust. He recognizes himself shackled to the inevitability of making livelihood but his existential predicament is in his romantic belief of meeting his ideal poet Nur. He gets frustrated among the harsh realities of life and personal inability to deal with them "He was so confused and shattered by it that he did not know what it was that shattered him, just as the victim of an accident sees and hears the pane of glass smash or sheet of metal buckle but cannot tell what did it-rock, bullet or vehicle" (58).

Anita Desai offers a diversity of existential concerns through her characters. Observed closely both Deven and Maya suffer due to their existential anguish. They struggle hard with their, existential dilemma, and find themselves helpless at the front of life's barrenness, desolation, and alienation. She embeds existential dilemma in the setting where the battle is not only about the equality between male and female, but her characters are wavered by existential conflicts. She depicts how a modern man, be it male or female is imprisoned in loneliness and metaphysical angst:

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In Anita Desai's two novels, the inner climate the climate of sensibility that clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning, is more compelling than outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action. Her forte in other words is the exploration of sensibility. (Iyengar 464)

Many critics find in her, "evidence of a departure from current modes of fictional writing and of an earnest effort to break new grounds" (Bellippa 1). Usha Bande observes: "Anita Desai disowns all social concerns and asserts more than once that she is interested in individual and not in social issues. Social issues intrude only where they affect the character" (12).

Another great novelist taken for the present work is Manju Kapur. Her novels obtain a substantial new meaning under the tag of feminist writer. Her novels provide significant examples of a great range of human relationships. Her novels reflect on the oppressive mechanism of a male dominated society but she, as a writer of human relations paints her canvas afar the limited territory of a woman. She writes about a human being, complexity of life, structures of values, the life's questions and needs of every relation. She explores the ways to show the evolution of her characters in maintaining relationships in their lives. A reading of her novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* offer a minute understanding of tangling ties of all human relationships irrespective of their gender. In *Difficult Daughters*, the main protagonist Virmati finds her life at odds in the vortex of her desire to be educated and lure of illicit love. The story revolves around three generation and Manju Kapur, very diligently, explores the labyrinth of dysfunctional relationships in each generation. The feeling of loneliness, barrenness and emptiness create a situation in *A Married Woman* where Astha shares a strained relationship with her husband and an incestuous relationship with her ladylove Peepilika. Manju Kapur explores human predicament in dealing with several dysfunctional relationship in the life of its main protagonist, Astha. Both her male and female characters are surrounded in the intersection of these relationships, finding no way to exit. She gives the same space and time to create her male characters who are also trapped in the web of same dysfunctional relationships as her female characters are.

Jhumpa Lahiri also stands apart in offering a fresh perspective as her concern lies with the plight of an individual be it male or female. She admits, "I write about people whose very existence has been shaped by unsettlement." (Hore 29 June, 2008) Her urge to trace her as a writer without any tag can be traced in the course of her two masterpiece *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*. In both novels she deals with the intricacies of displacements, adaptation and multicultural issues among her characters. She paints her canvas with the pangs of cultural alienation and dislocation angst of uprooted individuals.

Her understanding and delineation of diaspora experiences is intense and resonates with the feeling of displacement and cultural estrangement. Jhumpa Lahiri, very meticulously, depicts the diasporic experiences in the life of Asoke and his family members in *The Namesake*. She displays a feeling of nostalgia in the lives of the first generation of immigrants Ashoke and Ashima whereas second generation of Gogol, Sonia and Moushmi is shown as trapped in two conflicting cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri skillfully discovers the relationships in dislocation and realistically demonstrates them with diasporic sensibility irrespective of their gender. In her another novel *The Lowland*, she focusses on the tussle in familial relationships by examining human predicament in Subhash's life on Durga Puja:

He thought of Durga Puja coming again to Calcutta. As he was first getting to know America, the absence of the holiday hadn't mattered to him, but now he wanted to go home. The past two years, around this time, he'd received a battered parcel from his parents, containing gifts for him. Kurtas too thin to wear most of the time in Rhode Islands, bars of sandal wood, some Darjeeling tea. He thought of the Mahalaya playing on All India Radio. Throughout Tollygunge, across Calcutta and the whole of West Bengal, people were waking up in darkness to listen to the oratorio as light crept into the sky, invoking Durga as she descended to earth with her four children. (82-83)

Subhash also experiences identity crisis in the face of disconnection in his family relations. He has taken a liberal decision to marry Gauri but soon he feels disillusioned to find her unpredictable and unconventional nature. The secret of Bela's fatherhood and the hasty decision of marriage results in his identity crisis. He finds himself unable to create any meaningful relationship with both Gauri and Bela. Lahiri renders his diasporic predicament in the process of his disconnection in the family relationship in both places the USA and Calcutta.

Jhumpa Lahiri highlights the in-betweenness, displacement and alienation in the lives of her characters both male and female, irrespective of their gender.

In her earlier collection the first generation Indian-American immigrants struggle desperately to take care of their family in a country, which is very diverse from their own. The stories relate their incessant efforts to keep somehow their children acquainted with Indian tradition and culture-the Indian brand with the foreign label. In her later collection, the characters ascend to new stages of occurrences as they disclose the destinies of succeeding generations who are quite incorporated with foreign customs and are comfortable in countries outside their origin comprehend unlike predicaments and Jhumpa Lahiri shifts to the desires of individuals. (Mukherjee 180)

Observed closely, it can be stated that how by examining the plight of their characters, the contemporary female writers attempt to explore the intricate labyrinth of human plight full of chaos and confusion and liberate themselves from the clichéd labeling of 'feministic writers.' The literary magnitude of these women writers is voluminous and outstanding, and also adds significant contribution to the Indian English Literature by adding

a trans-feminist shade to it. The present study attempts to bring into emphasis that the selected writers present a more inclusive and universal approach of human life, rather than feministic ones.

These contemporary women novelists make very conscious and deliberate efforts to articulate not only the suffering of women but also the broader human predicament. Their narratives portray credible male characters who are equally ensnared in similar webs of suffering as their female counterparts. Through such representations, these writers explore a wide spectrum of existential concerns beyond conventional feminist discourse, including alienation, purposelessness, anxiety and rootlessness. This approach foregrounds the often-overlooked subtlety and sensitivity of women writers inviting a deeper appreciation of their role in expanding the thematic and philosophical scope of feminist literature. The study thus underscores the struggles of contemporary women writers to transcend the prevailing glass ceiling of gendered critical perception and to situate their works within a more inclusive and universal literary framework.

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