

## Gender Equality And Women Empowerment In Indian English Fiction

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper is an attempt to analyze the status of women's empowerment and equality through the female authors in India using various points such as freedom of movement, political place, acceptance of unequal gender roles, sexual harassment, autonomy and decision-making. Women empowerment is defined as empowering women, meaning that women can get supremacy in decision-making whether it is at the internal level or worldwide. The independence of women is essential in order to bring advancement in the political, public and economic aspects of the country. Women have been improvised of rights for long periods of time, now it is the time to create change in this site. After independence, the Indian democracy showed its commitment to the empowerment of marginalized sections of society, especially Dalits and women. Women's issues became significant. With the power of education and employment, there emerged a new woman aspiring for the dignity of equality and freedom of spirit. Her assertion for gender justice and equal rights gave new dimensions to Indian society. The relationship between any society and literature is very crucial, both serve as reason and effect to each other. However, the Indian female authors who try to raise their authority in a male-dominated environment as best as it is possible to them. Women novelists from India are the ones to add a new aspect to the English literature of India. The place and condition of females have also been highlighted by modern authors like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Bharti Mukherjee, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee have a special place in Indian English writing, they mostly right on the problems and issues faced by the women in today's male dominated-society. The paper has tried to briefly discuss the 'role of Indian women writers in the field of women's empowerment'.*

### **Keywords:**

*Male dominated, gender justice, equality, identity, feminine sensibility.*

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When we talk about Indian women novelists, a substantial contribution to Indian fiction in English has come from women. Women are to be considered as born tale-tellers. Women's fiction can be the expression of a different approach to looking at the world. Feminism has grown from Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, R.P. Jhabwala and Nayantara Sahgal to pave the way for Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee and others. These newer female voices have highlighted the interior landscape of the emancipated woman's sensibility and her psychological pragmatism. There is a great change in woman's temperament and conviction. Indian modern woman has now acquired an unconventional character and substance and has paved the way for a new dimension of the Indian novel in English. These women writers have recited the examples of very strong, bold and brave female protagonists who set the examples of self-identity independently in their lives. Their female characters never bow before the struggles of life, and also confront all the problems, hardships and difficulties in life. These female writers have depicted a world of empowered women. They have given importance to the investigation of sociocultural distinctiveness and deeply insensitive women. They portray the modern Indian women as aware of their basic needs and problems. They classify the women because they may work for their own empowerment by breaking away the restraints of the traditional bondages. The female characters of these female writers are asserting their individuality by challenging the taboos and degrading social norms. Many of the feminist writers have recognized the present status of women and the need for empowerment and are projecting their struggle for power in their writings.

In the novels of Kamala Markandaya, although women are victims of operation and exploitation, they do not lose their identity and strength of mind despite hardships. Her very first novel 'Nectar in the Sieve' which deals with the theme of ruler poverty and a woman's constant struggle for it. Her other novels 'Some Inner Fury', 'A Silence of Desire', 'Possession', 'A Handful of Rice' etc. show her women characters struggling between their desire to assert human as being as well as accomplish their duties as daughters, wives and mothers that they inherit from tradition. While delineating the Indian society she also brings out her turbulence in the society and family affects women more than men.

Ruth Praver Jhabwala who came to India at the age of 24 after her marriage to a Parsi architect became a critic of the Indian society and published 8 novels. Her writing revolves around the upper-middle-class people of Delhi amongst whom she lived. Her work shows her awareness of the changing position of women in the Indian family and the conflict arising due to the change in attitude of women. Her fictional world pervades a domestic atmosphere where women occupy the central position and tussle hard to achieve liberation, within the limits of the family. Jhabwala

skillfully presents the conflict in the domestic life and familial relations of Indians under the influence of Western culture.

Nayantara Sahgal a feminist author, affected by the Western Third Wave Feminism speaks on the delicate issues without any fear and her main concern is with self-expression within marriage. She highlights the issues of women in her novel 'Rich Like Us'. The novel follows the lives of Rose and Sonali, two female protagonists and their fight to live in a time of political disorder and social re-organisation. Nayantara projects her female protagonist, Sonali to express her emotion towards the problems of women. Sahgal is against any kind of discrimination in the life of women. Sahgal explores the search, and quest for female identity in her other novels and tries to untangle, and break the complicated notions, and beliefs about the society, thus bringing out the root cause.

An important development in Indian English fiction came with the gradual shift from the portrayal of the external world to the inner world of the individual especially of the women. It was Anita Desai, who with her path-breaking novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, ushered the trend of the psychological novel in India. The works of Anita Desai that specifically focus on women's psyche and gender equality are *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, *Clear Light of the Day* and *Fasting Feasting*. She explores interior landscapes and her protagonists are women who are inward-looking, sensitive and intuitive. Desai's success lies in her concentration on women protagonists to show the turmoil and tensions of the woman as a sensitive person. She also portrays the assertive and educated woman. Through Anita Desai's novels, for the first time the Indian woman had found a voice. Commenting on this issue, Vijay Lakshmi Seshadri remarks:

“ Anita Desai's heroine, Maya, was the first of her kind to represent the author's documentation through the fiction of a radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of ideal womanhood. The passive female surrenders her place to an intelligent sensitive woman who asks endless questions of life in order to elicit from experience. (57-58)”

Hence her works are a revolt against the traditional for portrayal of the female figure as a passive heroine idealized in her suffering and self-effacement. She portrays the modern educated woman with her fears, frustrations, anger, helplessness and alienation caused in the transitional Indian society. Her novels depict the quest of a woman who struggles to find a “space” and “voice” of her own. Shashi Deshpande focuses on the world of women who struggle in modern Indian society unable to fully defy traditional patriarchal norms of society. The women in

her novels attempt to realize and preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings. Her feminism is mainly Indian in the brains that it is born out of the dilemma of Indian women placed between contradictory identities. Her works like 'The Dark Holds No Terror', 'Roots and Shadows', 'The Long Silence', and 'The Binding Vine', have given us an in-depth view of the vulnerability of women, the power of women, the deviousness of women. Shashi Deshpande probes the mental states of the protagonists, their social and interpersonal relationships and their roles as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. Moreover she depicts the discord and disappointment in marital relationships caused by the traditional attitudes held by men. There is a complete lack of communication and understanding because women are meant to deny their needs. Hence, what mostly dominates her works is the woman's frustration in her attempt to achieve personal autonomy within the conventional marriage by seeking equal partnership and mutual understanding. The crux of her works is the modern woman's journey towards self-realization and fulfillment and the difficulties faced in it because of her domestic roles as wife and mother. The quest for self-fulfillment sometimes brings conflict in their lives. But they face everything with their immense inner-strength which is their power.

Manju Kapoor has earned critical acclaim as well as a commercial success both in India and abroad with novels that emphasize her consistent effort to bring to the forefront the predicament of women in the Indian society. Kapoor projects strong assertive female protagonists and through them addresses issues like female emancipation, their physical aspiration and their effects in repositioning themselves in the present social environment. Kapoor has presented her female characters as educated aspiring individuals who are caged within the confines of a male-dominated society. She has presented women from Indian traditional backgrounds to those who have migrated to foreign lands. In all her work she consistently maintains the questioning attitude of women and her inability to accept subordinate positions. Her famous character, Virmati in 'Difficult Daughters' is the precursor of liberated women. Virmati marks the strength of the Indian woman who strives to fulfill her dreams under immense pressure but does not surrender. In a male-dominated society where laws for women are made by men, Virmati searches for self-identity and desires to assert her rights.

Bharati Mukherjee, a diasporic writer presents the problems faced by expatriate Indian women in an alien world. The characters Tara in 'The Tiger's Daughter', Dimple Das Gupta in 'Wife' and Jasmine in 'Jasmine' are often victims of racism, sexism and such other forms of social oppression. The Tiger's Daughter is a story about a young girl named Tara who ventures back to India after many

years of being away to return to poverty and turmoil. In 'Wife' Mukherjee writes about a woman named Dimple who dreams about her married life. She believes that it will be filled with romantic love and grace. But her husband never tries to realize her mental condition. Mukherjee's women are strong individuals and do not get lost in an alien culture.

Anita Nair is also a very popular Indian English novelist. She especially became popular for her work 'A Better Man'. She shares the experiences of her female characters with the readers. She places her protagonists in a cross-cultural scenario. Her novel 'Ladies Couple' deals with subjects by asking fundamental questions that not only shake the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. In the novel 'Akila' she thinks of her future life as being married and leading a life of oppression as she believes marriage is a source of oppression for women. Therefore she rejects being in a relationship. Anita's writings explore the male-female relationships and this exploration becomes the significant basis of feminist liberation.

Arundhati Roy's work 'The God of Small Things' also serves as a vindication of the female position in the family. She is mainly concerned with the problem of patriarchal dominance in Indian society. She has beautifully and effectively shown the plight of women in Indian society. Roy has taken up the issue of feminism to fight for their identity and economic and social freedom. Her female characters in the novel 'The God of Small Things' stand out as persons and not as role-players. It shows the women's marathon struggle to seek a sense of 'identity' in a totally averse and envious society. The social structure of an average Indian woman is full of ups and downs, ifs and buts. It can be very clearly seen in some of the women characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Margaret Kochamma. These female characters show the untold miseries and the undeserved sufferings of women who have to bear the brunt of male domination silently and meekly. She transcends the ordinary concept of feminism.

Shobha De is also a very famous novelist who fights spiritedly against all the traditional beliefs and moral values denouncing them. The heroines in Ms. De's novels build their lost fortunes. She doesn't believe in describing her women's character as love slaves or mere help mates at home. De as a writer tries to portray her feminist mindset while portraying women in her novels. Women in her novels are represented as sexually liberated and free thinkers who have been termed as 'New Women'. Her women have found various ways of seeking pleasure and they don't hesitate to design their own attitudes and behavior which may vary from their counterparts. They are mostly urban women who give less or no importance to the

morality and spirituality. They want to enjoy the same rights as men. In her novel 'Socialite Evenings' her women characters Anjali, Ritu and Karuna do not seem to treat their sexuality as a burden or weakness. On the contrary it becomes a useful weapon in the power game of relationships. De tries to create new types of women who are revolutionary. In her novels 'Sisters', 'Sultry Days' and 'Snap Shots' De shows the diverse marital status of women. Shobha de has striven to shatter the patriarchal hegemony and has drawn attention to women's exploitation and discrimination.

The above study shows that Indian women writers have expressed their concern for women and their problems. The variety of subjects, they have touched upon is a great contribution to creating the awareness for the modern women all over the globe. They have recorded their discomfort with the patriarchal order, their dreams to prove themselves, their dilemma to choose between career and family, their physical and psychological needs, and their struggle to gain individual recognition in family and society. The aim behind portraying women was to empower the position of women and provide them equality. Thus feminist literature is playing a major role before the readers by not only highlighting the oppression and suppression of women but is also presenting women as role models.

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