



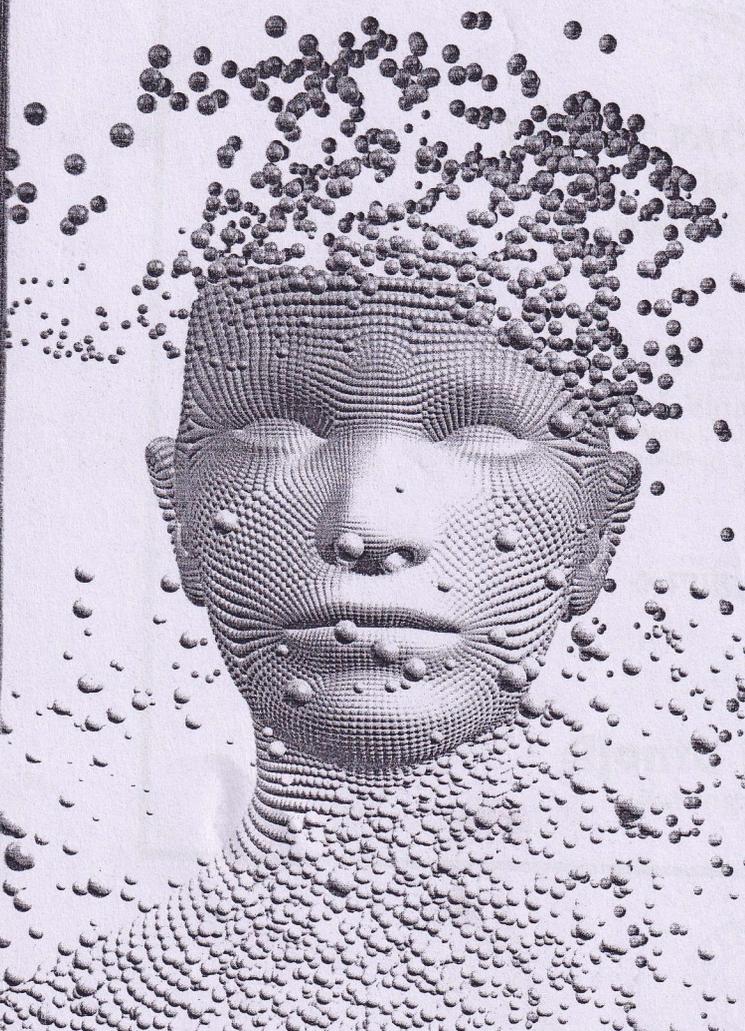
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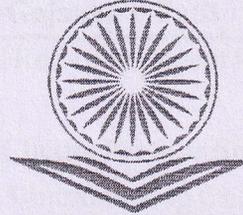
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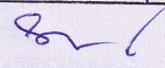


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12. Major Indian Women Novelists in Post-Colonial India

Dr. Shriram G. Gahane

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Indian women writers in English have contributed a lot to the development of Indian English Literature. They form their own specific current in literature. Using English language as global lingua franca, these writers successfully appeal to the readers throughout the globe. Although, their work had been undervalued at the initial stage due to patriarchal assumptions and male dominance, the women writers projected themselves, in the course of time, as strong feminists asserting their rights. The fact that they had not been provided any kind of domestic space caused lot of troubles for them and inspired them to rebel against traditional man-oriented society. Hence, majority of these women writers depict the psychological and physical sufferings of the women.

Indian writing in English by women writers has created its own space in the world literature, particularly, in the field of fiction. It has given a realistic touch to literature and has earned many laurels at home and abroad. They have been questioning the dominant old patriarchal existence of human society. They do not want to be the mere puppets in the hands of man. They sketch women characters who have proved equally superior in every walk of life, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The works of Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Geetha Hariharan, Manju Kapur and many more have addressed many burning issues related to women in Indian society. A feminist or women-centred approach is a dominant viewpoint of all these writers. They explore female subjectivity to establish an identity.

The close look at the works of Indian women writers in English shows that the image of woman has undergone a sea change in post-colonial period. The traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women have become the thing of past and have paved way to female characters searching to establish their own identity, not willing to be recognised as victims. Some of these women writers and major themes in their novels are discussed below:




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Anita Desai

Anita Desai is a celebrated Indian English fiction writer. She holds a unique place among the contemporary women novelists of India. She has created a huge bulk of literary work. Her ten novels and other literary works are read and enjoyed by readers throughout the world. The women characters in her novels are projected as rebels against male-dominated society and explore their own potential. They criticise all those cultural and traditional ideologies that come in their way of becoming free individuals. They want to establish freedom within the community of men and women. The women characters in her novels become depressed, violent and sometimes, self-destructive. They lose their sanity, kill others or destroy themselves. The root cause of their destruction is found in the complex social context, family environments, and relationships with their men. Although some of the protagonists of Desai's novels, such as Bimla in *Clear Light of Day*, are portrayed as single women, she does not neglect the Indian institution of marriage. Tara, a protagonist in the same novel achieves fulfilment in the marriage. Of course, Bimla is a symbolic feminist emancipation that lies in not restricting women to their traditional roles but in awakening them to several other possibilities. Anita Desai's first novel, *Cry, The Peacock* deals with Maya's psychological problems.

Anita Desai reveals varying mental states, psychic observations, inner motives and existential pursuits of man in her novels. She successfully unfolds the existential traits of women in society.

Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy is one of the most celebrated novelists in India. She is best known for her novel *The Gods of Small Things*. The novel won 1997 Booker Prize for fiction and was one of the best-selling books of its time. Roy believes that "*A feminist is a woman who negotiates herself into a position where she has choices*". The protagonist of the novel represents feminine sensibility. The stylistic innovations by the novelist make the novel unique. Ecology and subalternity form the themes of the novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri is an internationally acclaimed novelist who deals with NRI characters, issues related to immigrants and problems faced by people in foreign lands in her novels. Her simple and metaphorical narration focuses on day to day nuances and the hidden dramas in every person's life. A film has been made on her novel *The Namesake*.




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Kiran Desai

Kiran Desai is a citizen of India and a permanent resident of the USA. The Economic Times, India's leading business publication, listed her as one of 20 'most influential' global Indian women in January 2015. Her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* won the 2006 Booker Prize and the National Book Critics fiction award. It is based on her personal experiences. It talks about the pain of migration and living between the two separate nations. Several economic, political, social, cultural and educational issues related to modern civilisation find place in her novels. Globalisation has affected human life. It has changed the concepts of competency. Kiran Desai touches all these aspects in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. As Shubha Mukherjee remarks- "As intelligent writer and careful observer of human behaviour, Kiran Desai fulfils the responsibility of writing about current sensational issues".

Shashi Deshpande

A winner of Shitya Akademi Award for her novel, *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande is well known for creating contemporary women characters in her novels. In her novels she reflects on the problems and issues of the middle class Indian women. The source of her novels is the culture in which she lives. Her realistic remarks on everyday events and experiences are very sensitive. She is essentially a novelist of gender issues as she has touched upon almost all the issues of concern to the feminists, Indian feminists in particular. Her feminism is borne out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities. Her women characters seem to be making adjustments in life with traditional approach to tie family and profession to maintain the virtues of Indian culture. Her subjective experiences are artistically woven to create new female faces objectively. In her fictional works, she writes about the marginalised community of women in India and expresses her concern for women's disadvantaged condition within patriarchy. Her *A Matter of Time* explores many facts of the feminine experiences. The themes of silence, gender differences, passive sufferings and familiar relationships are displayed into deeper realms. Her simple and straight forward narration reads like a grandmother's tale that captures the attention of the reader and pierces deep into heart. The underlying themes in her novels are based on human relationships, particularly those that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife, and between mother and daughter. Her women characters are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination. They are conscious of the great social injustice done to them and try to struggle against the biased nature of the social norms.

Three types of suffering women characters occur in her novels. The first is a motherly figure, the traditional woman who believes that her place is with her husband and family. The



second type is a bolder one- self-reliant and rebellious. She does not surrender herself to the patriarchal monopoly. The third type of woman is neither traditional nor radical in her practice.

Shashi Deshpande believes in the strength of woman. It is man who constantly hammers her by saying that she is weak. She is compelled by men to hide her strength. Actually woman is the real head of the family as she takes care of everybody, feels for everybody, and is the main support of the family. Shashi Deshpande has very minutely and delicately dealt with the problems of urban middle-class educated women.

Kamala Markandaya

Known for her writings about cultural clashes between Indian urban and rural societies, Kamala Markandaya is mainly remembered for her best-seller book, *Nectar in a Sieve*. It is the story of an Indian woman **Rukmani**, who faced incredible hardships yet never ceased to dream of a better life. She is a very hard working woman and is devoted to her gentle husband. Even after facing poverty, famine, and divorce of her barren daughter, the deaths of her sons, her daughter's prostitution and finally her husband's death, she still stands strong.

Nayantara Sahgal

Nayantara Sahgal was the first female Indo-Asian writer to receive wide recognition as a novelist. Her novels reveal her deep and sincere concern with contemporary social and political changes in India. She belongs to a family which played a significant role in the national movement. She gives a vivid picture of India in transition with new socio-political order. She narrates the intellectual and emotional upsurges in traditional Indian society very sensibly. She makes fiction blend imaginatively with reality. Her political novels search for national identity with faith in freedom.

Geetha Hariharan

Geetha Hariharan is a distinguished Indian woman novelist and a great story-teller. She frankly acknowledges that she is a feminist. In her novels she presents an honest representation of human condition in its various shades. Her novels show that she is concerned with women and children when they are victims of age-old social customs. She is found investing her talent in articulating the gaps and silences in women's lives. Three of her novels, viz., *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *When Dreams Travel*, and *Fugitive Histories* are filled with Hariharan's knowledge and experience of women's lives. They range from girls to elderly women.

Manju Kapur

Manju Kapur is a popular Indian woman novelist with a considerable impact of her writings on society. The central figures in her novels are women within the territory of home and



society. She depicts both the external and internal dimensions of female community in her novels. Three of her novels, viz., *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, and *Home* have the theme of female bonding. Women's psyche and their interrelations are explored by the novelist in these novels. Women's lives within the family, their relationships with the male and female members, their ambition for education, emancipation and independence, their conflicts with other women and men, men in their journey towards self-realization, their desire to have children, and their struggle for survival are some of the major themes in her novels. In *A Married Woman*, she describes woman as- "**A woman should be aware of self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood**". Manju Kapur emphasises on patriarchy, inter-religious marriage, family bond, male-female bond, and co-existence of past and present. As she says- "**There is a man within every woman and a woman in every man. When, manhood is questioned womanhood is fragmented.**"

Conclusion

The above observation shows that these women novelists transacted all spheres of human life to study the patriarchal set up of Indian society. Their personal experiences and factual observations of prevalent social strata have enriched them with vigour and enthusiasm to depict the real picture of Indian society. They represent all those suppressed women who are denied rights to speak, think, feel and observe as humans. On one hand, they respect man-woman relationship based on love and respect; on the other, they scold every action and tradition in which women are treated as inferior to men. They function as messengers of equality and champions of empowerment of women.

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