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INTERPRETING THE NEW VOICE: A REVIEW OF POSTMODERNISM IN
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH WOMEN'S WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Women's writing in India has changed to a great extent in the recent years. Indian Women's writers who write in English have altered their perspective and expression under the influence of the Western Contemporary Critical Theories. Their perception of the world transformed remarkably with their exposure to the Western literature and philosophy. The present-day women writers have dared to express what their predecessors have either ignored or shied away from expressing. The themes, the style, syntax, and even symbolism have been affected by their present space and time. The Postmodern women writers grew up in a world, which was becoming increasingly open and pro-individual. Indian women writers took up contentious issues like women's subjugation, women's sexuality, their desire for freedom, their need to just "be" and began a debate to end the status of women in their own small way. These women have dared to deconstruct the myth called "Bharatiya nari". Even a personally introvert person like Shashi Deshpande has created fierce women characters. Anita Desai's women confront the world on many levels, physical, psychological and even spiritual. Kamala Das's poems and autobiography presents the psyche of the oppressed Indian women in a very bold and unconventional manner. The Indian women are confined in the image of Sita and Savitri. The all sacrificing, all accepting, non-revolting human existence that is so very convenient for the patriarchal Indian world order. Any change in this is not only unwelcome but also strictly forbidden through social and religious codes of conduct.

Arundhati Roy challenged the very foundation of Indian social reality through both her language and content in *The God of Small Things*. She discussed the intensely tabooed subject of incest and created a stir that refused to die for a long time. Even the Diaspora writers like Jhumpa Lahiri has succeeded in creating fiction which re-examines the lives of the women characters using the tools of Postmodernism. We can identify many Postmodern traits in the writing of contemporary Indian Women writers not only in their content but also in their style and narrative technique. This paper is an attempt to highlight and discuss these very traits in this greatly expanding area of human understanding and expression.

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Indian English literature has been postmodern and postcolonial since its very inception. The very circumstance under which it commenced and sustained has a lot to do with the English education system

established by the British rulers. Starting from the mighty Indian English writers like the famous trio of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, to the most recent ones like Chetan Bhagat and Amish Trivedi have been influenced by the Western critical theories. By the time Indian women writers started creating literature these modern literary theories were as relatable and available as before. Most of these Indian English women writers have been students of English Literature. This too could have been the reason behind their close proximity to the Contemporary Literary Theories. These women wrote from a very different perspective than their vernacular predecessors. Women writing in the Regional languages have been revolutionary and unprecedented in many ways, but postmodernism as a theory to be applied for the practical purposes of creating literature is not as prevalent as it is in the Indian English writing.

Postmodern theories have shifted the literary focus from the objective to the subjective. Even if we vehemently deny, the fact remains that Indian society has been patriarchal for a very long time. This has prevented women from acquiring the space to express and explore their true desires and feelings. It is only in the Postcolonial world that they have found the space and time to express the yet not expressed. Women writers have accepted this change wholeheartedly, both in the regional and the English literary sphere. Elaine Showalter's Gynocentricism is as much present in their writing as much as Derrida's Deconstruction and Bakhtin's Heteroglossia. It is not necessary that these women have to have an in-depth knowledge of all these theories before they embark on the journey of self-expression. But the presence of these notions in the air and its existence in the writings of the men has subconsciously given a life-changing boost to the writings of these women. Also due to their exposure to World literature of both men and women has played an important role in charting their course towards a more open and inclusive literary existence. Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker describe the postmodern world thus:

For some, postmodernism signals a deplorable commodification of all culture, and the loss of tradition and value crucially embodied in the twentieth century in modernist works; for others, it has brought a release from the hidebound orthodoxies of high culture and a welcome dispersal of creativity across the arts and new media, open now to new social groups (Selden 208).

The Enlightenment that became the characteristic of Modernism made it an exclusivist club, with its insistence on going back to the traditional domain of themes and techniques. There was no space for anything new. The post World War I era left the scholars pining for the long lost world of order and symmetry. This order gradually became too confining and restricting. In India women had started writing but women writing in English happened almost simultaneous to the postmodernist movement. These women writers dared to reinterpret Indian women's social, psychological, and even personal identities. The search for a new different self became an unwritten code for all these women who personally had issues with their own identities. Right from Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal to Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Nair, Indian women writers in English have created milestones both in their themes and techniques. The enigma called Indian woman has been redefined and the myth of Indian womanhood reinterpreted. The hidden dreams, desires and fears of the 'real' Indian woman have found expression in the writings of these writers.

Bijay Kumar Das has discussed Jean Francois Lyotard's opinion regarding the importance of the shift from center to margin in his book titled *The Postmodern Condition*. Das writes:

In his seminal essay, "Answering the Questions: What is Postmodernism?," Lyotard gives an account of postmodernity which suggests the collapse of 'grand narratives' and their replacement with 'little narratives' because of the advancement of technologies which altered the notion of what constitutes knowledge (Das 203).

The contemporary Indian English women writers have been doing just this. They are busy creating their own 'little narratives' as a replacement of the 'grand narratives' dominated by the canonical writers. Anita Desai is one such powerful voice in the field of Indian English fiction. Her fiction gives us the glimpse of the inner world of not only her characters but also countless Indian women whose psyche has not been studied as intently as it should have been. Anita Desai's novels are postmodern as she creates her little narratives against the meta-narratives. Lyotard's definition of postmodern helps us understand Desai's writings, he writes, "I define postmodern as incredulity towards meta-narratives" (Lyotard xxiv). In *Cry the Peacock* Anita Desai attempts to

look into the issues of a woman's weak psychological makeup. Through the haunting story of the protagonist's world, Desai tries to unravel the hidden issues that plague the lives of many young Indian women. This novel discusses the over indulgence of love on one level while on the other level it takes us into the disquieting world of prophecies and clairvoyance. The west has long been looking at our country as the "land of snake charmers", and we have been trying very hard to prove them wrong by putting up our infrastructure and commercial successes as our exhibits. But isn't it time for us to just "be" what we are and not try to please the "others"? The story of *Cry the Peacock* takes us into a world poignant memories and unforgiving past. It takes us face to face with the issues of human relationships. It is a woman writing about a woman's madness, men have been putting mad women in the attic for a long time, but does the perspective change here? In this story without really being conscious about it the protagonist misses her mother more than she would wish to accept. It is only through her bonding with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law that she finds some solace. The female bonding that we witness in Desai's first novel is prevalent in many that follow. Women have traditionally been pitted against one another. But Desai dares to create a world where women stand by one another no matter what their relation. The death of Maya's husband does not alienate these traditional foes from the woman who killed their son/brother. In fact Maya's women in-laws are the one's who come to her rescue once she loses her sanity. This is a very postmodern characteristic; as such an association is possible only in the Postcolonial world. The postcolonial world has given women the space and scope to explore their Gender equations all over again. The contemporary feminist and Womanist theories of Elaine Showalter and Alice Walker can be applied successfully to Desai's very first novel. Foucault's views about insanity, reason and non-reason can be quoted here to understand the issues discussed by Desai in her first novel. Foucault writes, "What is originitive is the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason's subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease derives explicitly from this point" (Foucault x).

Selden and others have discussed Alice Jardine's term 'gynesis' that she has created in opposition to Showalter's Gynocentricism. They write:

Gynesis describes the mobilization of a poststructuralist analysis of the category 'woman'. Jardine observes that the crises experienced by the major Western narratives are not gender neutral. By probing the originary-gendered relationships of Greek philosophy, Jardine argues that the fundamental 'dualistic oppositions that determine our ways of thinking' are those between *techne* or time (male) and *physis* or space (female). Thus a key aspect of the postmodernist questioning of the master narratives of the West is an 'attempt to create a new space or spacing within themselves for survival (of different kinds)' (Selden 219).

Women writers in India have been creating such spaces through their writing. It was mandatory for them to create their own space in the male-dominated literary world. Anita Desai does this by creating literal and metaphysical space in her fiction. Her female characters defy the norms and rules set by the society. They live on their own terms; they deconstruct the established structures and create their own paradigms. These women do not hesitate to question the prevailing discourses, which are governed by the dominant section of the society. Nanda Kaul of *Fire on the Mountain* decides to live all by herself in a far off hill-station, because unlike other people of her age she treasures her solitude and has no wish to live with people who make her uncomfortable. Desai dares to question the religious marginalization of the Urdu language in her novel titled *In Custody*. She treads the tabooed path of communal tension and doesn't shy away from asking difficult questions. The novel is littered with characters that seem to walk straight out of our everyday existence. Some people might find them an exaggeration, but the truth, which the Postmodernist believe is always subjective and never objective, is that there are people who do accept the 'truth' as told by Desai. The great communal divide can be bridged only through our united attempt to address the questions that plague our nation. Desai attempts to do just that.

Postmodernism allowed women to create not only their own literature but also to create their own knowledge. Knowledge and power are two things from which women have been kept away from. The control

over these two important forces has given men an undue authority over women and their expressiveness. Selden and others discuss Patricia Waugh's views about this control as follows:

...Patricia Waugh (Feminine Fictions, 1989) views feminism as having 'passed through a *necessary* stage of pursuing unity, but as more recently producing alternative conceptions of the subject and of the subjectivity which 'emphasize the provisionality and positionality of identity, the historical and the social construction of gender, and the discursive production of knowledge and power' (Selden 219).

Indian English Women writers have upheld this paradigm and created an alternative idea about the subjectivity of women both as writers and as readers. Women writers like Shashi Deshpande has worked tirelessly to create a fictional world of full of women who dare to question 'the social construction of gender'. Though Deshpande herself is a very soft-spoken person, the women characters that she has created are fearless and unconventional women. *The Dark Holds No Terror* has Sarita as the protagonist. Sarita is a woman who fits into the sanctified role of an Indian wife and daughter. She grows up like a withered flower under the strict gaze of her unforgiving mother. Marries a man whose envy stifles her. Sarita seems to be caught in the never-ending web of family obligations and marital confinement. But even this seemingly submissive woman awakens to the inherent power of a woman. She does voice her desire to break free from all the bondages of family and marriage. This sensibility is a very postmodern characteristic. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh have quoted Jean Francois Lyotard's views in their book titled *Modern Literary Theory*, this very characteristic in their book on postmodernism. They write:

The postmodern would be that which, in the moderns puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (Rice 337).

Indian English women writers are busy creating such unattainable and unrepresentable desires and stories of many Indian women, who have always been dictated by the patriarchal forces. Women have not been allowed to think or act out of the box and attempt to do anything different. Shashi Deshpande has created many such defiant voices in her fiction. There are portrayals of women defying the religious dictum and eloping for love (*Small Remedies*), women deciding to stay unmarried and falling in love with a much-married man (*In the Country of Deceit*). She offers no explanation for the choices that these women make, she finds no reason to do so. Deshpande's purpose is not just to shock and stir her readers, but to awaken the conscience of her audience and make them sit up and take notice of the changing times. *Moving On* deals with female sexuality, a theme that is as contentious now as before. Women in India are not considered as individual sexual beings; they are just the means of sexual gratification for men. Family has been one of the means of subjugation of women, and so Deshpande has been creating women protagonists who not only question the dismal status of women in this institution, but also deconstruct the familial bonds and seek liberation from its stifling control. For Deshpande a woman's identity is locked under the powerful gaze of the male gods. A woman is identified only through her relationship with the men in her life; all by herself she is made to feel like an outcast. Many postmodern feminist critics have discussed this secondary identification including Judith Butler. Selden and others highlight Judith Butler's observation about the identity and subversion of this very identity,

Instead, Butler urges us to consider identity as a signifying practice: gender is something we 'do', and like all signifying practices, is dependent on repetition- the repetition of words and acts which make the subject culturally intelligible. The result is that not only are categories of identity such as femininity recognized as varies and contested (rather than fixed), but a subversion of identity also becomes possible (Selden 221).

It is this identity seeking which we see in the writing by these women. Kamala Das strived all through her life to create her own identity, which was different from the one, decided for her by the society. Gender roles have been so very much defined and solidified that to think of restructuring them would create a big vacuum in the social fabric. But yet Kamala Das did it with a bang. Her most important contribution was her autobiography, *My Story*. Her uninhibited memories became too hot to handle for all the male power centers. The authenticity

of her story has been questioned ever since its publication. Her poetry too met with a strong opposition for its quite unrestricted content and treatment. Just as Butler puts it, women's actions have been given its signification only through the act of repetition. They have been asked to repeat everything that the earlier generation has done, not try anything new. This repetition gives little scope for defiance or change. Kamala Das dared to present the hidden desires of women and tried to liberate Indian women from their sanctified positions. Women writers like Kamala Das gave Indian women a new identity, defined not by what others want them to do but what they themselves want to do. Shobha De shares Kamala Das's sensibilities in her writing. She appears to be an armchair writer, a writer without any political agenda, yet her fiction gives women the strength to live their lives on their own terms. If they fail in their endeavor then too the failure is acceptable as it is theirs to claim.

Writers like Arundhati Roy questioned the very base of our knowledge by creating new lexicon and generating new meanings through their writings. *The God of Small Things* is an experiment in many ways. Roy creates a world, which seems so unlike the Indian reality we live in. In fact she makes us question our own sense of reality. She interrogates the very fabric of our society by including issues like divorce, incest and caste intermingling. Roy creates a world that probes the psyche of women forced to live in a particularly acceptable existence. She doesn't shy away from creating a new lexicon to express the inexpressible. She creates new knowledge and vehemently defends it against the charges of the society. Donna Haraway's views about the struggle for meanings of writing are applicable to Arundhati Roy's attempts to create new and different meanings through her writing. Selden and others comments:

Haraway's argument picks up from contemporary feminist and postcolonial views that the struggle for the meanings is 'pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs', and cyborg politics is the 'struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the *one code* that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism' (Selden 222).

Women writers have struggled against all forms of translation that would confine them in the meanings created for them by the dominant others. With the help of their little narratives they have tried to create their own space in the sea of highly successful male writings. These women have shown absolute disregard for the conventions and traditions of the written word. They have successfully created a world of their own complete with its own language, its themes and its characters. Dr. Bijay Kumar Das quotes Robert Wilson's understanding of the postmodernism and its application to literature thus:

Self-consciousness or reflexivity, a putting of the conventions of writing into the foreground of the text, a disregard for the conventional forms of writing, perhaps an ever greater disregard for conventional expectations of readers, a delight in puzzles, riddles, aporia of all types, a continuous breaking down of barriers, a decanonization, and hence a willful, self-conscious mixing of literary levels, kinds of discourse and genres. In a word, post-modernism seems to be highly intelligent (at least about literature), rather disrespectful, even nose-thumbing, innovative and above all, playful (Das 210).

This above definition of postmodern literature perfectly describes the works of not only Indian women writers writing in India but also in the various other countries as a part of the Diaspora writings. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee have created a new wave of expression, which defies and challenges the conventional thinking and representation of women as subjects and as readers as well. Apart from the ones discussed above almost all contemporary women writers write in postmodern sensibilities. They have created such huge mass of literature that cannot be ignored or ridiculed any longer. The space and time needed for the flowering of the women writers has arrived with a bang and these women are utilizing it to the fullest extent.

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