

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 8. Issue.3. 2021 (July-Sept)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

FROM SILENCE TO SELFHOOD: WOMEN'S JOURNEY OF SELF REALISATION
THROUGH ASSERTION AND IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY
LITERARY SCENE

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Article information

Received:20/08/2021
Accepted: 26/09/2021
Published online:29/09/2021
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.3.199](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.3.199)

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to delve into the invariable identity crisis as experienced by a woman in patriarchy as reflected in contemporary Indian women writing and the need to reconstruct it so as to enable her to live as human, free from the clandestine modes of male exploitation. The term 'Identity' owes its origin to a Latin word *Identitus*, meaning sameness or likeness. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines the identity as 'the state or fact remaining the same as under varying aspects or conditions, the condition of being oneself'. The French Revolution radically changed man's world outlook in that a slight assault on his humanity was highly resented. This is one reason that there is a note of protest and rebellion and an appeal to recast the entire social structure in romantic poetry. However, the concept of identity is of recent origin rooted in psychology. The world of today is largely governed by an over-computerized culture in which man seems to be wrenched away from the traditional roots of existence. The identity crisis is no longer a subjective matter limited to an individual, it extends to a class or an institution as well. The crisis occurs when one sees nothing to identify with. The individual continues to enjoy the wholeness of the being so long as he feels rooted in the tradition, tradition of a particular society or culture. It leads to strangeness and alienation from society; the drift be conscious or unconscious. This paper tries to follow a pattern in the writings of contemporary Indian women writing where the female characters who are victims of patriarchy, refuse to be drowned out by the system and emerge stronger individuals by asserting themselves and creating their own world of self-realisation and self-growth.

Key Words: Women Writing, Self-Realisation and Assertion, Female Protagonists, Identity Reconstruction.

Introduction

The existentialists look upon man as inherently an alienated being for want of something to call his own in a world of shattered values. And thus, they advocate for creation of a meaningful set of values to overcome the identity crisis. The man of today finds himself in such an alien environment, like Camus's 'stranger' wherein

he suffers from a sense of estrangement and isolation in the midst of innumerable homo sapiens. The contemporary literature, particularly the novel, reflects the problem of identity crisis which is experienced by both man and woman and the factors responsible, ironically speaking, are the factors as nurtured and sanctified by man to sustain an illusion of superiority as Adam is shown in Paradise naming all objects God created, even the woman as Eve.

In a patriarchal society, the woman is forced to occupy the secondary place in addition to man which is similar to one occupied by the racial minorities in many respects, in spite of the fact that the women are the second half in number of the human race. The pattern of living in the earlier communities changed with the ideal of monogamous marriage coming in vogue in that it brought security and honour to womanhood but it did more damage to her identity when it sanctioned right of ownership to the master and she began to be looked upon as a personal property item. With the setting as such there clustered around it a number of misconceptions that man could conceive of to assert his supremacy. One is the concept of 'virtue' which man

exploited by linking it with virginity: virtue was what kept the master in good humour and not as what the scriptures defined. Hence, subjectivistic and dubious. The dilemma she was caught in was that her smiles and expression of individuality were looked upon as gestures of immodesty and silence of frigidity. In a world governed by male dominance, the manner in which the woman's virtue was put to scrutiny was highly demeaning, man preferred a free reign but the woman was bound up within the moral dictates which suited the master.

The position of a woman kept changing with the change in her role as prescribed by the patriarchs of the society. But what is disheartening was that man never treated her as his equal, simply for the reason that she happens to be 'different'. This myth of 'Otherness' and the resultant gender – discrimination finds the support in history, mythological tales, literature and religion. The woman is portrayed in unfavourable light in the ancient texts as if she is not a woman. On the one hand, she is painted as adorable creature, but on the other hand, she is shown as the fountainhead of evil and a natural enemy of man to devour him alive. The manner in which the priestly class interpreted the concept of sin and salvation has no warrant in theology. But since the point was to camouflage their ignorance and partly to keep their hold on man, they created a distortion. For example, what can be more devastatingly comical than their interpretation of the birth of a female child as judgement on one's evil deeds in their previous birth knowing that sex determination is all a biological phenomenon? Their ignorance is further exposed in their linking the concept of spiritual salvation of a father with a son without ever being sure of the 'this worldliness – other worldliness' complex. This is a wild demonstration of man's naked individualism and acquisitiveness, which for want of education and enlightenment blighted a woman's identity. The image as created to defining a woman's identity in terms of biological facticity is the creation of a perverted mind, like the seed – Earth symbology which is rooted in the ancient cult of Mother – Earth. It was a step to degrade a woman at sociological level : they interpreted the seed as male and the Earth female, the function of it is to nurture the seed to grow to fruition. Man provides the seed, the essence of the creation of the offspring; the seed determines the kind; the child's identity is derived from the father for the group placement. The role of the mother is just to receive the seed and through her own blood provide warmth and nourishment and help it to grow.

The image is less a glorification of the woman than a projection of her as commodity item to own and an object of sexual gratification. In other words in myths and legends as structured by cultural constructs she is never recognized as a being living a life of her own and thus her deification as goddess was also intriguing and a show of hypocrisy. Simon de Beauvoir quotes Aristotle and St. Thomas defining woman as one being 'afflicted with natural defectiveness' and an 'incidental being' respectively on the basis of which she began to be looked upon as one having no identity of her own in relation to man. The idea of female 'imperfection' and 'otherness' is equivocal, if measured by the scale of the Absolute. Beauvoir's analysis of a woman's predicament in a world which "belongs to man" and which is organized to the advantage of man is revealing. Her most celebrated statement that 'one is not born as woman but becomes one' is a reflection on man's male-chauvinism and brings out the gap between myth and reality. In childhood, she reads the heroic tales of men in which women are shown as victims. For no sufficient reason but perpetuating the myth of Eternal Female. Women are "exhorted

to be women, remain women, become women.” (1997, 13) How man has looked upon woman and how her identity is reduced to stereotypes and essentialization is well summed up by De Beauvoir. (1997,16)

“And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other.”

From Silence to Selfhood: An Analysis of the Contemporary Literary Scene

The times are ripe to study and analyse in literature the factors responsible for the marginalisation of a woman's identity in patriarchy and self suggest remedies to reconstruct it which is not romantic or utopian but highly pragmatic having a down-to-earth approach to reality. The simple plea which emerges from the study of contemporary women writers is that women are as much responsible for their victimization as man. Safeena Bano in her article on ‘Exploring Women Narratives in Indian Fiction: From Submissive to Post Modern Perspectives’ says “The evolution of women's narratives in Indian fiction, as explored in this paper, reflects the broader socio-cultural and political transformations within the country. From the violent realities depicted in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, the submissive yet politically active women in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, the assertive characters in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the feminist voice in Shobhaa De's *Starry Nights*, and the postmodern identities in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, these narratives provide a comprehensive overview of the changing roles and perceptions of women in Indian society. These works collectively illustrate the transition from traditional to modern and postmodern representations of women, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the redefinition of female identity in Indian literature. The analysis underscores the importance of literature as a medium for reflecting and challenging societal norms, and it emphasizes the role of women's narratives in shaping the discourse on gender, power, and identity in India.” In a Shashi Deshpande novel, for example, the woman struggles to define her identity in a world where male voice reigns supreme. The process of self- realisation is effected through silence, the meaning of which no longer suggests the age-long slavery and regimentation but transformation from fragmentation to whole. Silence is not wholly the creation of the system, it is as much positive and destructive for men as for women. A belligerent and aggressive attitude to life will not lead one anywhere, one has to watch the flow of life patiently and understand the meaning of living in togetherness and live up to its ideals. The novels of Deshpande are, therefore, the quest novels in the sense that they mark the passage of the protagonist's pilgrimage from ignorance to knowledge, isolation to participation. It is in stages that the woman ultimately learns to live as human being in face of the moral hazards threatening her identity. In the early part of the novel, the woman is shown as a sufferer of male chauvinism but the process of reconstruction of identity sets in with the unfolding of the action, she gains confidence in her own powers and creative energy, the romantic day-dreaming is replaced by self-discovery. The patriarchy has played its politics of gender discrimination and economics to assert its hegemony which finds support in the myths and legends. There a woman is projected both as adorable and emissary of evil. She is assigned a secondary position by the moral custodians on the plea that she is inferior to man which ironically isolated her from the mainstream of the social life. Since the beginning of the history of the evolution of Hindu civilization, the woman has been a victim of man's ambivalent moral code which is structured to suit the interest of men, not of women. A.S. Altekar has rightly pointed out that the spirit of a civilization, its excellency and its limitations are measured in terms of a woman's status in the society. In the Vedic age, he claims, the women enjoyed singular freedom. Their position was satisfactory. But there are references of gender discrimination : prayers are made for a son which puts a question mark on their honesty. During the subsequent periods, there has been a gradual decline in her status. In the Smriti period, the ‘dependence-syndrome’ of Manu aggravated her servitude, she was made to realize that at every step, she had no independent individuality, her existence was measured in relation to man. The image of her which is projected in the two epics is equally distanced from reality. Man expected a woman to go a Sita or Gandhari way so as to rise to the level of a ‘pativrata’ but what of a modern woman of today who sees in it the travesty of the ideal of woman-glorification and claims her right of equality by virtue of being independent in matter of economy. The rise of the two religio-reformist movements – the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj and the Indian Nationalist

Movement under Gandhi during the colonial period brought a radical change in their position. They were brought forward to participate in the political life of the nation which directly influenced their status in the society.

The point is not as to who is the victor and who is the vanquished, the real issue is the recognition of each other's identity as humans and evolve a philosophy of life based on sharing, love and involvement. A rebellion is meaningful only if it does not disorient the self. What is significant is the creation of the basic values by participating in the social mores. Her women are middle class educated career women who are poised between tradition and modernity they are sensitive to the changes which are taking place in the society and cannot stay immune to their influence. If they rebel against the socio-cultural inequalities, it is not that they are out to demolish the age long hierarchy of patriarchy. Rather it is a sincere search for being economically and ideologically independent which has nothing unusual about it. And if they find themselves caught up in a conflict between "their family and professional roles, between individual aspirations and social demands", it is so because the system is imperfect. But a compromise is struck, they learn that "new bonds replace the old, that's all."

Nevertheless, contemporary feminists reject the socially engineered misconceptions crafted by men and focus on the prejudiced mindset upheld by men, which they believe stems largely from ignorance and socio-economic circumstances. They perceive the way forward through education and financial autonomy. The more moderate feminists identify the roots of women's oppression in the psycho-cultural factors that shape their surroundings. As Wandell R. Carr accurately notes, moral understanding is attained through self-awareness. "A mere consciousness... could lead to a significant expansion of immoral sentiments." The solution they propose to confront the ongoing oppression and tyranny is 'enlightened womanhood': that is, women must cultivate the awareness that they are not merely dolls or playthings for men, but they possess their own individuality, agency, and the right to pursue self-realization just like men do. It does not require a massive revolution to emerge from a prolonged silence and embrace one's true self. What matters is establishing personal values to guide one's life while recognizing existing constraints. The sudden refusal of a slave to their master signifies not just negation but the affirmation that the ongoing situation will no longer persist. There are boundaries beyond which one cannot compromise with the impulses of existence. The individual has become aware of their humanity, which they wish to safeguard. Thus, when a woman's being rebels against her living conditions, it is not an attempt to dismantle the patriarchal structure, but rather a desire to assert her equality and freedom. This legitimizes the rebellion of the slave within her. "He rebels because he categorically refuses to submit to conditions that he considers intolerable and also because he is confusedly convinced that his position is justified or rather because in his own mind he thinks that he 'has the right to...'. Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that somewhere, in some way, you are justified. It is in this way that the rebel slave says yes and no at the same time... Thus he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being false that he is willing to preserve them at all costs. The refusal of a slave to the command of his master does not imply renunciation. "He is also a man who says yes as soon as he begins to think for himself." (Camus, 1962, 19)

Radical feminists acknowledge the economic factors contributing to women's oppression, but they prioritize biological realities, which have been exploited by men to classify women as a separate sex class. Consequently, they believe that identity crises stem from a conflict between genders rather than the divide between the affluent and the impoverished, focusing on 'reproduction instead of production.' (Beauvoir, 1997) They advocate for a sexual revolution that they argue will dismantle the long-standing myths surrounding female subservience. The root of the issue, they claim, lies in education that instils feelings of inferiority in women, when in fact, some radicals argue that women are biologically superior because they have the unique ability to bear children. Men, feeling envious of "women's ability to give birth, the ultimate creative art," (Shah, 1984, 14) fear that their own identities may become irrelevant, prompting them to exploit historical narratives in order to maintain their dominance over women.

Socialist feminists critique capitalism, which they believe is responsible for the oppression of women and the resulting loss of identity. The right to property is seen as a potent instrument of patriarchy that subjects

women in a world “structured according to male interests and to the advantage of men.” (Peck and Coyle, 1993, 170) Why is it that inheritance, which typically favours sons over daughters, is preferred in a patriarchal society?

The development of the institutional family has provided security and social awareness but has also fostered in men a desire for accumulation, which paradoxically has turned women into commodified beings. The family unit as an economic entity marked a transition from matriarchal to patriarchal dominance, which severely affected the societal communal framework. Rather than fostering understanding and harmony between men and women, it ignited economic conflict between the two for dominance, leading to “a struggle between the sexes previously unseen in pre-historic times.” (Marx K. and Fredrick Angels, 1973, 273) Thus, socialist feminists advocate for the elimination of property rights to liberate women from the burdens of materialistic life considerations.

Conclusion

The novels, especially of the contemporary Indian women novelists, project the image of a woman who is out to protect her individuality in face of the hell let loose upon her by the anti-feminist forces to threaten her identity. Shashi Deshpande's women are as much victims of certain false notions which, they feel, are an obstacle in their quest for the fulfilment of the self. They find themselves being placed in between the contrary claims of tradition with its clearly defined gender roles and modernity that prompts them to carpenter their own identity.. But for it, as the novelist shows, a woman has not to be hostile or violate the very essentials of femininity. The fact is illustrated by what happens to the protagonist during the process of self-realisation, she ultimately comes to compromise by way of participation and accommodation in the family. It is out of the long struggle against her own self that a woman develops the right attitude to man-woman relationship which is characterized by harmony and understanding of the mind. She emerges at the end a woman of determination out of the evolving value orientation of a society which is in the state of transition. The important point in the reconstruction of her identity is that she is making independent decision. Her reflections on the plight of a woman in patriarchy are human reflections. The self-arrives at illumination, “the darkness inside me was banished, replaced instead by a gentle, kindly dawn,” (Deshpande, 1983, 179) which is symbolic of the rise of a new consciousness. She seeks compromise between the conflicting selves and opposing ideas and overcomes the fears born of the illusory imperfections to assert her identity as an individual.

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