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Image of ‘New Woman’: A Study of Select Indian Novelist

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In the ancient history of India women have been deified, glorified and also regarded as myths; it is also existed in today’s ultramodern world. There was perhaps today also, a duality in the projection of the image of woman in literature. There are deified, archetypal images and portrays a few insurgent, protest against the existing ills. Today’s literature recognized virtues, merit and talent of woman and gender distinctions are not taken into account.

In Post-Independence India, when women’s education had already commenced and life had started changing, the New Woman started emerging. The spread of education inculcated a sense of individuality among women and aroused an interest in their rights. Women started becoming economically independent and there was a striving for the realization of their own aspirations. Though feminist trends appeared on the horizon, a set of new tradition related to a woman’s life is coming into existence but in India the New Woman is locating for an identity of her own. Women in India are still caught between feudal values and style of life. She caught between the burden of the home and the work-place, struggling with conventions. It is sad to say women have first to survive; question of equality, identity is far away.

In such transitional times, it is not only needed but extremely essential to do study of Image of New Woman in Indian English Literature which can give an experience of life stimulating the reader to think. Literature mirrors life and society. Indian history is changing from tradition to modernity, such an exercise we have to aware of the emerging new image of woman in our society. For this study I have select Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and Manju Kapur and their selected fiction.

In regard of these, *That Long Silence* award-winning novel has portray of convent educated middle class woman Jaya who is writer, living a vapid kind of married life which seems to have lost freshness. In accepting everything mutely, she thinks she resembles Sita and Draupadi. But realizes that it is useless she says,

“No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I cannot fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together. It is more comfortable to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?”¹

The protagonist shows disturbed state of mind but a brave woman. This novel strikes a new note in the fact that Jaya does not wish to blame anyone but her own silence on all occasions. At the end of the novel, she decides to break that silence.

“...it is no longer possible for me. If I have to plug that ‘hole in the heart’, I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us”.²

In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* the protagonist Saru is an educated, sophisticated, and professionally successful woman who not only completed her medical

education but gets married with an outcast boy against the wish of her mother in such a traditional scenario where think of such act was also crime.

“What caste is he?

I don’t know.

A Brahmin?

Of course not.

Then, cruelly... his father keeps a cycle shop.

Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?”³

Initially novelist introduced a happy family, two children, the two of us and two of ours. But patriarchic psyche influence their life. The dominance of wife spoils the husband-wife relationship. Anyone goes to keep relation by marriage keep in mind that if he is an MA she should be BA, if he is 5’ 4” she shouldn’t be more than 5’ 3”. If he is earning hundred rupees, she should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. It means that woman should be ‘A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband’. But the New Woman challenges all conventions of tradition.

The birth of a new order and new system became obligatory. Education too had a new form and a new function by acquiring international order. The induction of new technology in the fields of computers paved way for the escape of Indian minds and women too became integral parts of this new wave. Thus it becomes clear that the society was changed and the women were no exception to it.

The birth of a new woman in the old society practicing quaint orders and methods was the common phenomenon witnessed in all corners of the vast social set up. Devi the protagonist of the first novel of Githa Hariharan *The Thousand Faces of Night* returns to Madras after obtaining a degree from the USA and she returns only to fall prey to the resistance pressures imposed upon her by the old existing order. On the behalf of the protagonist, she has accepted and successfully paved new ways through the existing order and setup.

Manju Kapur’s *Home* is a portrayal of Nisha, as a new woman, a more assertive, self-assured; and confident one. By equally footing with men, she proclaims her womanhood in a bold manner. As a young college girl, she applies her power to work as a businesswoman. Her quest for identity, as Sehgal comments,

“whole new look at women- not as the property of father, husband or son...”. And she is really the representative of new women in the millennium”.⁴

Manju Kapur’s novel, *Home* takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations i.e. the first generation of Lala Banwari Lal, the second of his two sons, and the third of his grandchildren’s. The first generation of Lala Banwari Lal, the family head, runs a sari business in Karol Bagh, Delhi, where he settles after partition of India. As Nisha is mangli destined to match her horoscope with a similar mangli, she should wait unless a mangli could find. Ultimately Nisha is at the centre of interest and issue regarding education. After a dialogue with Sona, Rupa, an emerging new woman introduces:

If anything happens in the girl's later life, she is not completely dependent". She continues in a careful emotional manner: "It would be shame to not educate her further let her do English Honors, not too much work reading story books".⁵

Sona becomes convinced that there is no discrimination made as male and female in the context of education. Nisha joins Durga Bai College. In the college, she has the only best friend Pratibha, an ambitious girl, who joins NCC programme hoping that this would lead to a Government job with the police. Pratibha as a new woman also wants to create her own identity and an independent existence in the economic field. Like Nisha, she deserves to be mentioned as active, confident and thorough.

On the way to college, Nisha meets Suresh, a student of Khalsa College of Engineering. After their few meetings, Prathibha makes Nisha aware asking the details about Suresh i. e. his name, caste, family background etc, and says:

"If you are going to be a modern girl you have to be thorough".

Nisha just pretends and says: "You think girl and boy can't be friends"⁶

She is enough modern in her view. She does not discriminate biologically. To be friends, they are equal beings. After many meetings both Nisha and Suresh fall in love with each other. Nisha becomes such a bold girl to wonder here and there, roam the University lawns, sipping coffee in coffee houses with Suresh. It becomes her routine. On his suggestion, she cuts her hair like Suriya, a famous film star of the days. But she is equally attentive at her studies. When exams are around corner, she worries;

"I can't meet you. I have to study; I have to get second division at least"⁷

Suresh helps her with St. Stephens Tutorials which results in securing first division. It surprises all. Nisha now certain of her ability to do well begins to miss even more classes. By the end of second year, in her quest to establish her own and separate identity, she becomes more adventurous in her clothing, alternating her salwar kamees with jeans and T-shirts. In her appearance and temperament, she becomes a forwarded girl.

It means that women have been changed their lives in more than appearance. Society now accepted that women could be independent and make choices for themselves in education, jobs, marital status, and careers. Women's spheres had broadened to include public as well as home life. The "New Woman" is on her way.

References:

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