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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FEMINIST CONCERNS IN THE NOVELS OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA AND RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA

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Abstract

The novels of Markandaya and Jhabvala, seem to particularly assert the sexual difference between men and women,which is the basic tenet of gyno criticism.As women's writing reveals the possibility for a critique of language or patriarchal discussion, questions like how is a woman's writing different from male writing? or what constitutes the difference? crop up. Feminist intellectuals argue that it is this difference that constitutes one of the major means to interpret and subvert patriarchal domination.The uniquely feminine style of writing and language used in novels may be called écriturefeminine.The usual longwindedness an d the deficiency of form is considered to be an important trait of women's writing.The female authors, in regional languages as well as in Indian English, took up the opportunity to question the old patriarcha l practices through the means of the novel. Authors such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal,Sas hi Deshpande,Geeta Hariharan,Manju Kapur and Mahasweta Devi have written about the physical and psychological problems faced by women in Indian society.Language has always been looked upon as a powerful tool for studying male/female difference.In fact, more than in any other genre of literature, it is in fiction, particularly the novel, that women attempt to portray their contemplation realistically and unravel the cons truction of gendered identities in a male centred society.Markandaya and Jhabvala's narratives feature the elements chiefly associated with the persona of the "new woman" such as revolt, resistance, education and financial independence in order to examine gender assertion in India during and after the British rule. Women's inner-self, their agonies, their pleasures etc. are better and more truly depicted by the women novelists.

Introduction:-

Being women writers, the novels of Markandaya and Jhabvala, seem to particularly assert the sexual difference between men and women,which is the basic tenet of gyno criticism. The term, coined by Elain Showalter, seeks to construct a female framework for the analysis of works written by women, and prefers new models based on the female experience rather than adopting male models and theories. It is, in fact, a radical move to focus on female

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culture. As women's writing reveals the possibility for a critique of language or patriarchal discussion, many questions crop up unasked. For instance, how is a woman's writing different from male writing? or what constitutes the difference? Feminist intellectuals argue that it is this difference that constitutes one of the major means to interpret and subvert patriarchal domination. The French feminist theorists Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, have opined that a woman's language and writing differs textually, psychologically, linguistically and stylistically from that of a male writer. The uniquely feminine style of writing and language used in novels may be called ecriture feminine. Arundhuti Roy's The God of Small Things, may be called upon to bear testimony to this kind of writing for it retreatstwenty-three years, and the world is shown through the eyes of Rahel, an eight-year-old girl. Again, it comes to the present where life is presented as dull and decayed.

Similarly, in Jhabvala's Heat and Dust, the narrative breaks the linear logic of male discourse in the sense that the plot does not move forward in a chronological way. Markandaya'sSome Inner Fury moves full circle, the novel beginning at the very end. Helen Cixous opines that a woman can write without inscribing or discerning contours.In fact, the usual longwindedness and the deficiency of form is considered by Cixous to be an important trait of women's writing because, according to her, the womanly textual body is recognized by its absence of closing stages or termination. The female authors, in regional languages as well as in Indian English, took up the opportunity to question the old patriarchal practices through the means of the novel. Authors such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Sashi Deshpande, Geeta Hariharan, Manju Kapur and Mahasweta Devi have written about the physical and psychological problems faced by women in Indian society and have also suggested probable solutions to these problems.

For instance, Markandaya spoke about the sufferings of rural women in Nectar in a Sieve. At the same time, she offers solutions through the character of Doctor Kennington who exhorts women to speak up, or to visit doctors during sickness even if the doctor is a male and a European. Sarojini in Markandaya'sA Silence of Desireopenly shows her disgust at her husband's suspicions on her character and castigates him for following her. His complaints regarding the diminishing degree of care provided by Sarojini to him and the household due to her visits to the swami, is representative of the norm of placing women at the periphery in contrast to men because society dictates women to view time in relation to their bodies (wifely duties, menstrual cycles, childbirth and motherhood). Thus, like gender, time also proves to be a construct of social and cultural interactions. Thus, 'women's time' in a capitalist society remains largely unrecognised, unpaid and side-lined, relegating women to the lower rungs in the power hierarchy.The novels of both Markandaya and Jhabvala, may be considered as gyno texts which incorporate the idea of 'women's time'.

Language has always been looked upon as a powerful tool for studying male/female difference. Thus, the écriture feminine or the language of the female is supposed to be particularly suited to a woman's search for identity and space. In fact, more than in any other genre of literature, it is in fiction, particularly the novel, that women attempt to portray their contemplation realistically and unravel the construction of gendered identities in a male-centred society. Markandaya and Jhabvala's narratives feature the elements chiefly associated with the persona of the "new woman" such as revolt, resistance, education and financial independence in order to examine gender assertion in India during and after the British rule. Women's inner-self, their agonies, their pleasures etc. are better and more truly depicted by the women novelists. The presentation of women by Markandaya and Jhabvala is far more assertive, liberated and articulated in comparison with the novelists of the past. The two authors probe the unexplored female psyche, passionate love, erotica, extra marital affairs, predicament of middle-class quest for identity among other uncommon topics.

Both Markandaya and Jhabvala belong to the class of the metropolitan elite, who have always been a privileged lot. Similarly, they are also heirs to a culture in which Indian and British elements are infused. Their works have won great critical acclaim and popularity. Though neither of the novelists brought any great innovation to the Indian novel-writing in English, their careers have been long and sturdy. It is the emergence of these women writers in fiction that brought wholesomeness to Indian literature in English. The life of hardships and misery that an Indian is compelled to live and that is so repulsive to the western sensibility, builds resilience and is possible only due to the character's deep spiritual faith. These psychological and spatial journeys lead them to their deliverance and prove the true nature of the nation that is India.

Kamala Markandaya's writing career spans almost four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s. She is one of the major first-generation Indian women novelists writing in English. The themes of her novels range from contemporary social realities to the aspects of the emergent national consciousness. Her very first novel Nectar in a Sieve, published in 1954, immediately catapulted her to international fame. The novel was compared to The Good Earth (1931),a historical fiction novel by American author Pearl **S.** Buck and hailed as an 'epic' of Indian village life. Her successive novels Some Inner Fury (1957), A Silence of Desire (1961), Possession (1963), A Handful of Rice (1966), The Coffer Dams (1969), Two Virgins (1974), Pleasure City (1982) have projected an image of the changing women in the country post-independence. R.S. Singh applauds her "sense of involvement in the social life of India, her keen observation combined with critical acumen and the feminine sensibility." (136)

Though the influence of the western genre of the novel is easy to detect in her works, she does take up a wide variety of themes and subject matter. In her personal life, she worked as a journalist for a short time before dedicating herself to becoming a full-time writer. During this temporary hiatus, she also involved herself in social work, so that it can be confidently said that she had seen the problems in the life of women and the weaker sections of the society in India at close quarters. She allowed these raw experiences to give concrete shape to her imagination and create a remarkable range of diverse characters as well as a plethora of rich and engaging plots.

Markandaya belonged to a staunch but well-to-do Brahmin family steeped in tradition. However, she has successfully reconciled her traditional upbringing at home with the dynamics of her western education at school and college. In her novels, she shows respect for Indian spiritualism and mysticism but does not refrain from protesting or questioning the efficacy of backdated customs and values. Never does she seem out of her depth in delineating women characters. She is full of pathos for the unfortunate and hapless Indian women trapped in the wretched social and political circumstances.

The national events served to provide clarity of vision and direction to the writers of the time. As early as in 1936, it was believed to be the "duty of the Indian writers" to "fully express and depict the changing realities of Indian life" (Abbas 147). Markandaya was deeply concerned with the set patterns of women's life in the Indian society and probed into its ineffectiveness through her novels. She comes across as a conscious artist, displaying empathy for the poor, backward, illiterate, poverty-stricken men and women of her country. She concentrates on the examination of the imperialist doctrines that lead to unbalanced power relations between men and women, the colonizer and the colonized. Salman Rushdie considers this kind of writing an instance of 'empire' writing back to the 'center' as it is a two-way rather than a one-way conversation. (Rushdie 64)

Markandaya's choice of English was a natural one— a natural outcome of an English education followed by marriage to an Englishman and later settlement in Britain. Markandaya's sense of dislocation and the confrontation with an alien culture provided her with the raw material for fashioning her creative sensibility into novelistic shape. Her expatriate status gave her the much-needed perspective of an outsider and a detached view to explore the ailments that weakened women, especially Indian women. Being armed with two distinct social and cultural values, she was never at a loss for subject matter or for creating typical Indian women characters even when she was writing from outside India. She combined her actual 'lived experience' with an outsider's posture. This gives authenticity to her art. Markandaya's narrative works reveal not only her tremendous dramatic power but also her remarkable capacity for aesthetic control and selection.

Being an heir to two cultures and two languages, resulting in two world views, the colonial writer becomes trapped in a kind of "linguistic dualism" (Juneja 138). Although bilingualism and multilingualism are quite desirable for the colonial writer, perhaps, the two languages do not have the same status under the colonial condition. This compels the writer to participate in a sort of "linguistic drama" (Juneja 138). While R. K. Narayan appropriates the English language through "collocation" and "semantic shifts", Raja Rao does it by "hybridization", "style variation" and "language overlap", and Mulk Raj Anand nativizes English through "code switching" and "code mixing" (Juneja 146-47). Salman Rushdie's nativization of English, or what the European critics sometimes call, its "calibanisation"(Boehmer 202) led to the creation of a new genre of writing that has garnered tremendous popularity as post-colonial writing.Markandaya is conscious of her own hybridized sensibility in portraying Indian scenes. She utilizes this synthesis to create female characters who are natural and true to life. Sometimes, however, critics claim that she distorts reality to enhance the novel's appeal. For instance, the excessive philosophy put into the mouth of Rukmani, a peasant woman, in Nectar in a Sieve seems unreal and over the top. However, her use of English has a natural flow and spontaneity, and the use of a foreign language helps to check her verbosity. Samuel Beckett asserts:

"When writing in a language in which a writer had to concentrate on saying what he wants to say there is less temptation to be carried away by sheer virtuosity in language for its own sake." (qtd. in Chatterjee 4) A point to be noted here is that Markandaya does not show any signs of cultural schizophrenia resulting from her shift to an alien country. Rather, she displays an impressive understanding of the Indian society and the changes taking place in it and their effect on the individuals. According to A.V. Krishna Rao, Markandaya has "attempted to get beneath the social surfaces in contemporary welter, and discover a pattern of ordered experience in terms of the hidden, but living springs of human sensibility." (qtd. in Chatterjee 30) Her female Indian characters like Rukmani, Mira, Sarojini and Anasuya are not wooden or unidimensional. Again, her female European characters like Caroline and Helen are also convincing. Her mode of narration is usually the third person omniscient narration except in Nectar in a Sieve, Some Inner Fury and Possession. The majority of her protagonists are women, who demonstrate tremendous will power and courage in order to overcome the adversities in their lives. William Walsh appreciates Markandaya's strength "in delicately analysing" relationships and in "dealing with the problems of the educated and middle class, and she has a gift for delineating the self-imposed laceration of the dissatisfied." (19)

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has authored many novels in English post-independence. She was born in Germany from where her family fled to England when Hitler came to power. Her education was completed at the London University where she fell in love with the genre of the short story, and with a young Parsi architect, Cyrus Jhabvala. After her marriage, she moved to Delhi with her husband in the mid-1920s and lived as an expatriate in India for almost twenty years. Her marriage to an Indian followed by a prolonged stay in the country, gave her a hybridized outlook towards the Indian way of life. Living in Delhi for many years after Independence, she had the perfect opportunity to observe the developing India of the 1950s as well as come into close contact with the urban middle-class women's sensibilities, their idiosyncrasies, their affectations and their overpowering sense of respectability.

Further, she confesses that all she had read about India in the novels of expatriate writers had not prepared her for what she actually experienced after coming to live in India as she had had no prior acquaintance with Indian women. Interestingly, like Markandaya, Jhabvala also experienced dislocation. Her elementary education at a Jewish school was abruptly stopped when her family decided to leave Germany in order to escape the persecution of Jews by Hitler. Since this displacement and subsequent alienation had occurred in her life at a very tender age, they remained a lifelong trauma for her. At the age of twelve, she was admitted in an English school in London where she immediately started to write in English based on her knowledge of the fundamentals of English language. Undoubtedly, she had a natural flair for learning languages. One may find further proof from the fact that she quickly learnt to write in Hindi while she stayed in India.

Her second movement, that is, from England to India was equally joyful and easy. She says: "I was enchanted. It was paradise on earth. Just to look at the place, the huge sky, the light, the colours. I loved the heat, going round with few clothes, the stone floors." (Morehead 16) Thus, she seems to have accepted India as a whole. She herself declares that not even the beggars on the street bothered her then. Rather, they seemed to be an integral part of the scene. Her creative instinct found its outlet in this atmosphere and Jhabvala utilised the novel, the most flexible of all literary genres, to give expression to her unique experiences. She took up slices from Indian life and displayed them on a literary platter. Her sense of humour enriches each of her novels. Evidently, the people around her never ceased to amuse her. Her peaceful, comfortable life with her Indian family fulfilled her. She spent all her time in keenly observing the nuances of the Indian social life.

However, her novels show a strong European influence. She follows the English Comedy of manners to represent the Indian society and the rhythm of life in it. Indian life during this span was dynamic because of the rapidly transforming social and political climate of the newly independent nation. Industrialization of various sectors, generating employment opportunities, providing education and eradicating poverty were important agendas to be seen to. In her novels depicting the urban upper and middle class, she presents characters undergoing personal hardships in order to survive in the highly competitive world of Delhi. Herself a survivor, she portrays such characters with sympathy. Her western characters, just like herself, are deeply affected by India—be it the heat and dust, or its captivating sunsets or the yawning gap between the rich and the poor. However, their reactions and responses do differ. For characters like Judy in A Backward Place and granddaughter Olivia in Heat and Dust, the response is that of understanding, acceptance and commitment; while for characters like Esmond in Esmond in India and Etta in A Backward Place, there is only denial, fear and anger.

In Jhabvala's early novels, the plots often revolve round the dominant theme of the hunt for a husband or a wife, reminding one of the novels of Jane Austen. Having had a close look at the mad scramble for power and prestige in the city of Delhi in the 1950s and 1960s, she expertly presents the tension-ridden lives of daughters-in-law and of young girls at war with the backdated and traditional mores in the family. There is often a conflict between utilitarian marriages arranged by elder family members and romantic affairs. In the twenty odd years that Jhabvala lived in Delhi, she saw it metamorphosing from local to cosmopolitan, from traditional to conventional, from naïve to sophisticated. The domestic scene is her special forte. She explores the man-woman relationship within the societal structures of semi-feudal families. William Walsh says that "she is an expert analyst of domestic friction, but this friction emanates exclusively from the cultural clash and the secret of its appeal lies in the authenticity and lucid presentation." (163) She is equally adept at portraying female Indian as well as European characters.

The choice of English as the linguistic medium for her novels is also a natural one. Her first novel, To Whom She Will or Amritahad a glossary of Indian words attached at the end, which is rather an interesting fact. Not only did this glossary explain what the term 'sari' meant but also gave a detailed description on the different ways in which it could be worn. This was followed by a list of recipes. Thus, it is clear that her first attempt at novel-writing was for the western audience, particularly the women. Also, the language she uses is a bit distant from its subject matter. Staying aloof from her characters and subject matter, she views the Indian as well the westerner with a sharp poignancy. She is honest in her appraisal of Indian conditions and her own feelings about them: "We may praise Indian democracy, go into raptures over Indian music, admire Indian intellectuals—but whatever we say, not for one moment should we lose sight of the fact that a very great number of Indians never get enough to…eat…Can one lose sight of the fact? God knows, I've tried" (8) Often, we find the westerners like Lee, Evie and Chid disgruntled with western materialism, thereby seeking release in Hindu spiritualism.

Jhabvala herself has portrayed the swami or the guru as a fraudulent one trapping hapless and trusting European women for his own vested interest. There is only one thing that Jhabvala is sure of and she asserts that she "finds something spiritual in India, something incongruous with the wretchedness and degradation of Indian poverty." (Cronin 211) Shantha Krishnaswamy accuses Jhabvala of having a warped view when she says: "She writes exclusively from the point of view of her own dilemma, her temperamental alienation from her mixed background, her choice and her escape…This undermines the validity of her arguments in fiction, this taxes the credibility of her fictive characters and falsifies her examples of Indian life. A distorted vision, distorted by anger and revulsion distorts truth in such a way that it becomes falsehood…One can attack and denounce but cannot deny humanity to a whole nation" (337) However, it may be argued that this anger is only the flip side of the coin in the case of Jhabvala. Anger, like love, is also indicative of involvement or attachment.

Her personal response ranging from extreme love to extreme anger and repulsion seems unbalanced in its intensity and can only be explained as the failure to come to terms with the Hindu spirit. Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, the two major women novelists of the twentieth century, have an impressive corpus of fiction to their credit. M.K. Naik calls Markandaya an 'insider-outsider' because of her expatriate status while Jhabvala is called an 'outsider-insider'. Persevering to make their novels not merely a social and political chronicle of the milieu wherein they are set, each of the novelists sought to take up some major socio-cultural concerns of the age within the fictional format. Shakuntala Singla points out the similarities in the 'mixed' backgrounds of both the novelists and their attempts to assert that "increasing understanding and personal effort will make the twain compatible." (Bhatnagar 5)

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