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Contemporary Indian Women Writing in English and the Problematics of the Indian Middle Class

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The Middle Class in India – Some Characteristics and Contradictions

The middle-class in India is a vast and diverse social group. It is a rising, consumer-driven class bent on living the good life. It always seeks mobility, security, luxury and choice. It is consumerist class and in a privileged position.

The middle-class has evolved its own peculiar value system which enables it to combine traditional faith with modern conveniences born out of newly acquired prosperity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the highly ambivalent attitude of the typical middle-class patriarch who pays bribes and talks about the evil of corruption in the country.

A close examination of middle-class ideas reveals a number of contradictions. Middle-class in India simultaneously speaks of reason and sentiment, of the need to preserve tradition and initiate radical change, advocates liberty and authoritarianism, equality and hierarchy at the same time. All the public sphere projects of the middle-class are shot through with these inconsistencies and contradictions and these are constitutive of middle-class politics.

The middle-class responds to those issues which it co-relates to its own well being. There is almost complete inability of the well-to-do- middle-class citizens of Indian society to see or identify with anything beyond the narrowest definition of self-interest. Middle-class's criticism of the government for its inefficiencies and rampant corruption is certainly valid, but it does not occur to the average middle-class Indian that in a country where scores of millions do not have enough to eat, the government can have other priorities than only listening to their increasing demands. There is no obligation to think or act beyond the articulation of their requirements.

The Number of the Poor Going Up, Not Coming Down

In all these years after independence, the number of the poor has gone up, but, paradoxically and tragically, the middle-class's ability to notice them has gone down. It does not matter if there are so many middle-class ambitions and fantasies played out everyday, one third of the population has no access even to the basic amenities of life. Middle class lacks civic sensitivity.

Shift in the Values of the Middle Class

Pavan Varma in his book *The Great Indian Middle Class* laments at the fact that there is a shift in the values of the middle-class. The ideals of service gave way to individualism, austere ways of life came to be replaced by consumerism, and values of the middle-class, ironically came to resemble those reflected in the self-seeking actions of the politicians they so much despised.

On one hand, middle-class professes the greatest affinity to democracy, while on the other it has opted to remain, by and large, merely a critical onlooker to the increasing corruption in the democratic system. One reason, can be a sense of helplessness at the degree of corruption in politics, the other can be self-obsession in its own material pursuits so as to withdraw from anything that does not directly concern its immediate interests.

Ever in Pursuit of Becoming Upper Class – An Aspirational Class

Middle-class always aspires to get the status of upper class and can't tolerate to descend down to assimilate in lower class. There is middle-class ethos of acquisition and competition. Middle-class does not forego its possessions and beliefs easily. Maintaining the status quo is the trait of all middle-classes. It is an aspirational class, always pursuing the good things in life. The all time pursuit of self-interest gives rise to a sense of un-involvement, a kind of detachment. The drive to have more and more and to reach higher and higher is breaking down the essential restraints of the community life. The consequence is a growing neurosis, both at the personal and collective level. The poverty

and deprivation in the country is so much that those who have moved up the income ladder seek to distance themselves from its pervasive presence.

The Middle Class and Contemporary Women

The middle-class women have more access to the material comforts of life. They can take the initiative to change and to bring about the change in society. The middle-class should realize that their social concerns and self-interests can co-exist. The only factor that can make a difference is a change in the attitude of the privileged themselves. One has to keep the eyes and ears open, to observe, to really listen, to get involved and then do what is needed to bring about a healthy change.

Most of the contemporary Indian women writers in English belong to the middle-class and thus there is a keen penetration into the life of the middle-class in their novels. They deal with middle –class ethos and societal and individual problems of the middle-class. Their perspectives constitute and are constitutive of the middle-class ethos.

Contemporary Women Novelists

The contemporary women novelists seem to be acquainted with the attitudes, sensibility, traits, needs, hopes, fears, experiences and helplessness of the middle-class. They seem to make an excursion into middle-class domesticity. They understand the economics, the politics, the cultural milieu and the psyche of the Indian middle-class. Either consciously or unconsciously, the women writers depict reality as filtered through the middle-class consciousness. This reassures the reader regarding his basic beliefs and allows him to identify with the characters that represent real world. At the same time, their portrayal of other social classes becomes devoid of all essential content, it becomes a mere embodiment of ideas that the middle-class has of them.

The Goal of This Paper

The paper attempts to analyze whether these writers give a deeper insight into the middle-class ethos and culture. Is there a tone of protest to awaken the conscience of society? Are they able to project different, serious issues and problems existing in society or also try to offer a solution; whether they have told the realities or there are contradictions too. The novels of contemporary women novelists Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai and Anita Nair would be analyzed.

The Very Critical Attitude of Women Writers

The old and unhealthy traditions, rigid morality and institutional norms of the middle-class are outrageously criticized in the writings of contemporary women writers in India. While projecting different themes in the novels, these writers depict the motives of the

people and the changing dominant values in the Indian social order. They attempt to make their voice heard in the public sphere through their writings. They depict alienation of the down-trodden, the people belonging to the lower strata and the older generation. They raise the issue of economic-occupational exploitation by dominant castes, classes and capitalists. The writers also talk about the middle-class which is on the march to become rich and which adopts manipulative and corrupt ways and means to achieve its ends.

These writers not only document the reality of life and the conditions of people, but also put forward their own ideological views with reference to the prevailing social environment. The views of the novelists emerge from the social situation and cultural milieu in which they live. The ideological thinking of a writer is situationally determined. The writer gets affected by the type of socialization and intellectual orientation she has in the society. This in turn influences her ideological expression and creativity. The statements they make are connected with their thought processes and their world views..

From Urban Centers

Since most of these writers come from urban centers of education and some of them live abroad therefore their interpretation of India is from the vantage point of a middle- class, well educated, city bred individual. Though some of contemporary Indian women writers come from a rural background at present many of them have selected the urban locale in which they have settled down to pursue their writing. They have been brought up in an environment which inspired and encouraged them to develop literary tendencies. In their social life, these writers have social interaction not only with the people of their own class but also with other classes. And therefore, they have been able to portray it vividly in their writings. But the middle-class is their reference group.

These women novelists while speaking the language of middle-class people portray their ethos, emotions, problems and their day to day work. Writing has not become a full time occupation for most of them. They are rather salaried employees or have other sources of income. This anchors them in a fixed and stable status in the wider socio-economic order. It is a form of institutional patronage which frees these writers from financial worries. There are awards and they seem to be satisfied with their literary self and enjoy writing as they have acquired the desired literary status.

What Do They See and What Do They Portray

They write what they see in middle –class society. Generation gap, preference for boys, importance given to arranged marriage, discrimination of all sorts etc. can be seen in almost all the novels by these women writers. The secret behind the success of novels by contemporary women writers is their simple and life like characters. They usually hail

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from middle-class families. This is one of the techniques the writers employ to make the readers involve and subsequently the novels become quite absorbing and interesting.

These writers deal with some common themes but their treatment of these themes is different. Some adopt mocking tone and make tongue-in-cheek remarks, while some seem to be seriously dealing with issues. Some are critical while some are just analytical and judgmental. These women writers give urban Indian women tales they can identify with. Some of them seem to passively obey the orientals' taste of the western readership thus producing novels full of clichés about Indian society. This kind of literature seems to be a perversion or commercialization of women's writing.

The women writers of today, belonging to middle-class, are representatives of the new generations of middle-class Indian – highly talented wealthy, cosmopolitan and comfortable with people of all religions and caste backgrounds. They talk about the need to protect Indian culture and its religious heritage from the less attractive aspects of global culture – the break up of families, disrespect of elders, excessive consumerism, and abandonment of religious values and worship of money.

A Deficiency - Sometimes Observing From a Distance

These writers try to paint the picture of Indian society in their fiction but sometimes they seem to be observing the society from a distance, and so appear uninvolved and unrealistic. Exhibiting the middle-class trait they seem to observe everything but maintain distance, hence offer no help or solution. While the best writings make an emotional connection. Though at times, we find a trace of correspondence in the personal and fictional experiences of the women writers.

Most of the women writers belong to economically secure middle-class families or politically powerful ones. As such they have not felt the need to protest against the system aggressively. They sometimes seem to exaggerate things and adopt a comic or ironic view to describe everyday realities of middle-class but this way they show that there is no sincere involvement on their part. They have enjoyed the luxury of middle-class. They have not suffered or encountered the problems themselves. No longer trapped or diminished by gender, these women writers enjoy the liberties and they seem to see no reason to transcend their comfortable urban locations to engage with the poverty or inequality that trap both urban and rural women at the lower level of the economy. Not much has changed for impoverished rural women. When they make fun of middle-class attitudes, manners and life style of people, they try to maintain a level of superiority, though they themselves are a part of it. They exhibit typical middle-class trait of projecting different kinds of issues and problems and expecting others to come out with a solution.

Manju Kapur and *Difficult Daughters*

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Contemporary woman novelist, Manju Kapur arrests attention when she deals with everyday issues faced by everyday people, especially of Indian middle-class in her novels. The most prominent aspect of her novel *Difficult Daughters* is its being rooted in the milieu, in which the novelist herself was born and brought up. Since her first novel *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur has established herself as a chronicler of Indian middle-class manners and ethos.

Manju Kapur in her first novel *Difficult Daughters* uses realism as a strategy to be able to present the lives of women in a middle-class joint family. The theme of the novel describes the independence acquired by the nation and the independence desired by the protagonist Virmati. Every detail of these changes, turmoil in the nation and Virmati's life is described in a very realistic way. The aspirations of the girl to be free are linked to the values of a traditional middle-class joint family; a very significant aspect of Indian social life. Virmati rebels against the patriarchal set up to pursue higher studies and marry Professor Harish. The Indian middle-class values and culture are prominently depicted in the background of Arya Samaj.

In the novel *Difficult Daughters*, the novelist shows that marriage is a very central issue in every Indian middle-class family. Education is important and educated boys prefer educated girls. It is, therefore, important from the matrimonial point of view.

Manju Kapur has portrayed middle-class ethos through the character of Virmati. She has shown that women labour under various compulsions, enjoy less social and psychological freedom than men and live in the shadow of patriarchal oppression. In the end of the novel, Virmati makes a compromise with life in resigning herself to whatever happiness, there is in store for her. This is again a characteristic of the middle-class – the joyous acceptance of a situation which is not within the purview of an individual to change.

Joint Family Culture

The joint family culture in middle-class, which symbolizes communal living is another aspect hinted at throughout the novel. The elder generation feels comfortable in having the common property, joint business and shared space but joint family system begins to show cracks, when individual interests creep in. On a parallel, the breaking of the patriarchy and the joint family is reflected in the trauma the partition of the country causes to the common man.

She examines what generally happens. In all the novels of Manju Kapur, women give up their desire for assertion. Women belonging to middle-class have to compromise, though they seek some personal happiness. Astha in *A Married Woman*, Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* and Nisha in *Home* do compromise to save their families or marriage.

Kapur does not seem to sympathize or feel for these women, she remains detached while observing them. There is different feel, a different sensibility operating, which stems from distances.

Manju Kapoor's *A Married Woman*

Manju Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* is a kind of narrative on a woman's incompatible marriage and frustration and contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. Here, Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman's experience.

A Married Woman is more like reportage; Ram Janmabhoomi – Babri Masjid issue is presented in a realistic, imaginative reconstruction. She expresses her serious concern for the political leader's declaration that religion is above politics, nation and the court and does so with a fine sense of documentation and detail, insight and precision.

Astha's education, her health, her marriage are her parents' burdens and liabilities. Just like any middle-class parents, they are very conscious of them and they want Astha to realize it. Later on when she is a married woman, she realizes that even if she earns, money spending is decided by her husband, not by her. Her inability to buy an art-piece in Goa exhibits her economic dependence in spite of being an earning member of the family. Astha's impression that with good job comes independence is proved wrong. She is surprised at the reaction of the family and society when they are not happy at her daughter's birth but gets an overwhelming approval of motherhood after the birth of her son.

Manju Kapoor's *Home*

In Manju Kapur's third novel *Home*, again the canvas is the familiar one; the ordinary middle-class joint family. It is about the pressures and experiences of living in a traditionally extended but close knit Indian family of shopkeepers. The novel describes the easy acceptance of everything by women, their submissiveness, the pressures on them to produce children – boys for preference – and the disgrace if they fail to do so, their being status-conscious and the power struggles within a family. It is a saga of middle-class Indian family.

The novel shows modernity threatening the solidarity of the joint family and every hint of individual expression is substituted with deadened conformity. The novel asserts emphatically, that in a middle-class family the interests of business come before personal concerns. Kapur documents the lives of people she is most familiar with -the lives of middle-class women.

Sexual Abuse and Disease

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Kapur's ability to chart sexual abuse and disease in the same detached style in which she narrates daily adventures can be easily noticed. She describes how in this middle-class family, honour comes above all individual aspirations and a woman's status in the family is solely judged by her ability to give heirs. The long explanations of Karwa Chauth and the mythological tale of Savitri and Satyavan gives a feeling that Kapur is perhaps trying to cater to expatriates who cling to the idea of India being untouched by time and still rooted in age-old traditions. She makes fun of the middle-class housewives, who ask their unmarried daughters to undertake fasting for the well-being of their future husbands.

In an interview, Manju Kapur herself says that she aims to show rather than tell. The book is descriptive of what goes on. The reader is left to gather what he wants from it. This is a little bit disconcerting because it makes the narrative dispassionate and detached even at places which could do with some sharp satire. We feel that Manju Kapur remains an observer by the road-side of the political and social happenings in the country.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

Anita Nair, during a train journey, discovered that some middle-class women talked freely and turned the coupe into a confessional box. Their frankness, their subversive ness, their subtle strength and courage inspired her to write *Ladies Coupé*. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* explores women's identities and their conflicting relationships with tradition, male dominated society, gender discrimination and class and caste constraints. It is a novel where fiction merges with reality and where female voices are authentic. Her fictional women can be seen as patterns for real women in everyday life; self-effacing and self-sacrificing women, one can meet anywhere in Indian middle-class society. Most of them experience the burden of tradition. They all are expected to get married and bear sons, regardless of their socio-cultural backgrounds. .

From Ordinariness to Greater Heights

Anita Nair confesses in one of her interviews that she had a very ordinary existence with no literary pedigree. Ordinariness is the hallmark of her family and she has had a very middle-class existence. She writes for the sheer joy of writing not to make a statement. She doesn't write to shake the system or the society. She is not an activist. She says that she doesn't wear her ideology on her sleeve. She has often been criticized for being reticent and she believes that what she writes should speak for itself. Anita Nair merely holds up a mirror to the middle-class society, she never intends to start a social revolution.

Arundhati Roy - Through Small Things to Greater Insights

Arundhati Roy writes with an agenda and a purpose. In her novel *The God of Small Things*, she sees herself on the side of the suffering, the marginalized and the dispossessed. She is critical of the adults who mistreat the children. This criticism extends to the Indian middle-class. The novel comes across as an angry statement.

The novel focuses on the issues of caste and class in Indian society. Roy expresses her disillusionment towards the social conditions of post-colonial India where the untouchables still face a hostile society.

Here she deals with the “small things” in a lower middle-class family engaged in the pickles-business for survival. She focuses on the irrationalities and injustices in middle-class society in the State of Kerala. Her assaults, on the lopsided values of a male dominated society, are characterized by humour seasoned with irony, wit, exaggeration and sarcasm. She turns to the mode of humour to register the protest against patriarchal systems of oppression and exploitation. Her novel with its sharply functional and vibrant brand of humour solidifies a tradition which is capable of articulating and confronting social and political issues from a vantage point. She, however, would leave it to her readers to draw their own conclusions and evolve their own perspectives.

Avoidance of Sentimentality

Arundhati Roy eliminates sentimentality from the narrative and it enables her to look objectively at situations which arouse extreme indignation for example--after their nocturnal trip into the sanctified world of Puranas and epics which ought to purge them off baser instincts, “The Kathakali men took off their make-up and went home to beat their wives.” (p.236).

The novelist seems to suggest that tyrannizing over women is common among the rich as well as the poor. Several passages with a hint of scathing irony and humour highlight the political, social and religious conspiracies against the subaltern. The untouchables are not allowed to touch anything that the touchables touched. The novel portrays the seemingly exaggerated yet real predicament of the untouchables who had to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints in order to prevent the upper castes from defiling themselves by accidentally stepping into their footprints.

Use of Irony

Arundhati Roy makes use of irony to flavour the narration and keep her distance from it. She uses pure irony while describing characters. Her purpose is not to provide solutions to the problems but to pin-point the existence of these problems. Roy presents a serious picture of society. She portrays that segment of society which takes every possible step to stop change. *The God of Small Things* questions people’s attitudes, patience and ability

to accept everything. In an interview, she says that she is thankful to God that she had none of the conditioning that a normal middle class Indian girl would have.

Kiran Desai and *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

Kiran Desai has handled the dreams and aspirations of an Indian middle-class family with a keen sense of humour in the novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*.

The Guava Orchard becomes the epicenter of all the characters when Sampath Chawla, a middle-class, good for nothing, post office clerk, tries to escape his failures by climbing a guava tree and gaining the reputation of a hermit. He spends his free time reading the mails of the people of Shahkot, and after climbing atop the guava tree reveals amazing and interesting facts to those very people. Mr. Chawla, Sampath's father is reminiscent of middle-class opportunist fathers, when he tries to commercialize his presence atop the tree. Sampath is joined by many followers and businessmen who try to sell their goods to the visitors of the orchard.

After some drunken, dreaded monkeys, also join him in the orchard, he is re-named as "Monkey Baba". Monkeys turn everything topsy-turvy in their hunt for more liquor. Real Hullabaloo begins when civilians, military-men, policeman – all try to get rid of the monkey menace. Waves of impending chaos are felt throughout the novel. On the other hand, befooled people listen to Sampath's words of wisdom. Visitors bring gifts that Mr. Chawla can sell, the family bank account begins to grow and he looks at investment plans.

Several Levels

The novel can be read on several levels – as a fast moving comic tale full of rich descriptions and cartoon like characters, but also a deeper study of the pathos of familial misunderstandings, the ridiculousness of hero-worship, the unpredictability of commercialism and the inefficiency of officials. Desai gives us much cause to ponder the disjoint between what people actually hear and what they want to hear.

In an interview, Kiran Desai says that she has been interested in and conscious of the way that the middle-class of India, that she comes from, betrays other Indians. She mocks the common, illogical ways of middle class people in this ironical, satirizing novel.

Although no one can deny the grotesque details of our society, nevertheless the novel appears to be a slice of India served to the west. But the novel makes us think. Loving our own selves is easy but analyzing, criticizing and accepting our weaknesses is difficult but well achieved by Kiran Desai.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Her novel *The Inheritance of loss* is a brilliant study of Indian culture in its transitional phase. Changes are brought out by craze for western values, manners and life style; impact of modernization, consumerism and globalization. Sense of loss is an integral part of every character's life. The characters fail to assimilate new culture and give up original culture in totality. Desai's use of Indian vocabulary, metaphors and imagery etc. are very supportive for the portrayal of middle –class sensibility.

Contemporary women writers cast themselves in the role of liberal narrators who see something in suffering human beings beyond what the world can see. There is this smugness. The sensibility and location of the writers create a certain audience with limited access to the real lives of oppressed individuals. The authors being Indians articulate certain issues as insiders who know all. But by stressing their own distance and alienation from such society distort reality and simultaneously reinforce their position as the outsiders. They offer sights no insights. They offer no challenge to the reader.

Ideology and Experience

The ideological plane from which the real world is viewed coincides with the ideological plane that seeks to rationalize and reinforce the inauthentic values in the writings of these writers. Either consciously or unconsciously, these writers depict reality as filtered through the middle-class consciousness. This allows the reader to identify with the characters that represent the real world. At the same time, their portrayal of other social classes becomes devoid of all essential content. It becomes a mere embodiment of ideas that middle-class has of them.

While a society's canonical texts can and do mould popular consciousness. This can create patterns of thought as well as attitudes. Their serious writings can be instrumental in bringing about positive changes in society .In their novels they should criticize what they consider defects in the society and should suggest remedies. They can inspire millions of others to take up the cause in the common interest of all.

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