

Contemporary Indian Women Writings in English: Reading and Publishing Trends

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Abstract

This research paper considers how readers respond to contemporary Indian women writings in English and how publishers market the same. It primarily investigates issues pertinent to women writers writing in English and the manner in which this literature is marketed to its readers. The paper gives a brief overview of the workings of the publishing industry and the role of publishers in order to explore how writings by women are chosen for publication. It has been observed that a fairly significant number of publishing houses are making intensive efforts to publish the writings of contemporary women writers and to promote this genre. Once in the market, the sale of the books written by Indian women in English rely on a large number of factors ranging from reviews, publicity, author's status, commercial promotions, price, literary trends, time and place of release, and so forth. The market is undoubtedly influenced by publishers' decisions, but the decisions of the publishers are also in turn at least partially based on the probable marketability of the books they finally publish.

Therefore, as much as the literature appears to be informing the culture, especially in the case of the contemporary Indian women writings, the reception to the literature affects the literary and publishing trends of the genre.

Key words: Indian women writings in English, publication process, marketing

Focus of This Paper

The paper gives a brief overview of the workings of the publishing industry and the role of publishers in order to explore how writings by women are chosen for publication. It has been observed that a fairly significant number of publishing houses are making intensive efforts to publish the writings of contemporary women writers and to promote this genre.

Such publishers include Penguin, Harper Collins, Women's Press, Kali for Women, TSAR Publications, amongst others.

Indian Women Excelling in the Writing of Literary Works

Earlier, literary critics ignored the dynamic vitality in women's writing and treated it as recreational and decorative. Till recently publishers, editors, critics and the markets harbored the same biases against women writers. They picked only those topics for women to write on that did not disturb the decorum of society. Now, one notices an evident shift in Indian women's writing in English. It displays narrative skill, stylistic boldness and thematic innovation. It offers a renegotiation of issues of public importance, and foregrounds this renegotiation as a necessary stage in the process of self-realization and self-representation.

Variety of Issues Dealt with

The issues that have fallen under the creative critical scanner of contemporary women writing include exigencies of India as a multi-cultural nation, experiences and aftermath of partition, issues of economic and social sustenance and empowerment, public health and other existential issues related with basic survival and dignity of the margins, the ideological and cultural configuration of the middle class, the commercialization of the society and renegotiation of the discursive, ideological and aesthetic spaces.

National and Global Concerns

Woman's creativity, thus, emerges as a significant ideological, rational and narrative site for exploring the public sphere. Contemporary women writers have been very much conscious of the importance of selecting the angle of vision from which they will be able to illuminate and interpret their material. Their works show global concerns through the presentation of multi-cultural reality. The changed nature of their concerns and expressions has resulted in their ever-increasing readership.

Pressure for Innovative Writing

The varieties in contemporary Indian women writings have changed the tastes and expectations of the readers. There has been a sudden rise in the production of writings and a kind of pressure on writers for innovative writings can be noticed. Some of the writers work on their novels as a project given by certain publishers. Keeping in mind the demands of their

readers, contemporary women writers display a tendency to include varieties in their works that corresponds with the expectations of the readers.

Manifestations of Cosmopolitan Practice, Heterogeneous in Strategies

The novels by contemporary women writers can be read as manifestations of cosmopolitan practice; their diverge and multiple explorations of Indian life from an elite standpoint are at once self-representations and announcements demanding that their Indian educated readers also reflect on their own identities and relationships to the nation and consider the difficulties and complexities of looking back to the nation from a cosmopolitan elite advantageous position. The genre is much more heterogeneous in terms of its narrative strategies, its orientation towards nation and its ideological positions.

English Is a Tool

Contemporary women writers have no reason to feel self-conscious in handling the English language. It is simply a tool for them, which their education has placed into their hands, and which they have thoroughly mastered, with the typical Indian flair for language.

The innovative use of language tends to make their works popular. Contemporary women writers are coining a new language. These writers use devices of literal translation, coining of proverbs, new compound words, single phrases, idioms or a number of sentences which follow each other to resemble the sequence of vernacular conversation. There is vigour in the experimentation and an eagerness to convey a certain mood. They invent new words to get the desired effect. In order to establish a new narrative to break away from the colonial mindset, contemporary Indian writers adopt new narrative patterns to put through their notions. Some writers are not even aware that they are experimenting, yet this effort deserves notice because it reflects an important change of attitude towards the English language. These authors have been successful enough to maintain the unique flavor of their region in their works yet in the arena of international literature; contemporary Indian women literature occupies a place of pride for its originality.

Instrumental and Influential Role of Publishers

Publishers are instrumental and influential in the shaping and encouragement of forming of annals of contemporary women literature. These annals are designed to provide

the Western readers with the position of the privileged spectator, viewing cultures portrayed as the other, and emphasized as being different, distant and exotic. The canon of literature selected by publishers is only partially based on what they perceive as representative of the genre; the commercial factor in this business cannot be overlooked. There is no doubt that publishable material is selected as such partially based on its marketability and likelihood of profit. The depiction of constructed reality instead of the representation of reality brings their works close to the art forms manufactured as a commodity.

The Commercial Aspect

The changing tastes and reading behaviour of the people, the commodification of art and commercial interests of the writers have brought about a change in the writings of women writers in contemporary times. This commercial aspect makes the writer write-market and reader friendly writing. It is said that these texts are commodified, because literary decisions come together with marketing strategies and assessments of readers' appeal ranging from interest in the unfamiliar to feminist solidarity to foreground certain texts and repackage or silence others.

Publish or Not to Publish

It is thus very clear that the decisions to publish or not to publish, to run reprints or not to run reprints are crucial in the process of determining what is eventually read and what is not, as to which writings remain available and which fade into obscurity.

These decisions lie in the hands of the publishing houses which exercise immense power and hold influence over the literary market and consequently, over the literary world, holding as they do, the key to the availability of the reading material and access to the reading public. There is no doubt that publishing is a commercial as well as an intellectual undertaking.

The costs involved in publishing a book are easy enough to estimate, but the income derived from the sales of the book is much harder to predict precisely. The tastes of the readers are shifting and considered inconsistent. Based on an estimate of the potential market, the publisher takes decisions on whether or not to publish a given book, whether to publish it in hardcover or paperback, what cover design would attract most sales, what format

to print it in, how many copies to print, what retail price to set, how to obtain suitable and sufficient review coverage, and so forth.

Identifying the Segments of the Market

Publishers' decisions are also based on other factors such as an estimate of prospective sales, the tradition and image of the firm, and as far as works of fiction are concerned, which is the segment of the market Indian women's novels fall into. The reading public is perceived to have conservative tastes, and readers are inclined to choose and stick to buying books by authors they are familiar with, or of whom they have heard. In some cases the back cover does not carry any reviews of the novel itself; instead, it carries reviews of an earlier novel by the author.

Seeking Safety in the Established Popularity of the Author

Publishing houses show a preference for publishing known authors and thereby seek safety in the established popularity of the author, but it also indicates that readers may be more likely to purchase other books by authors whose books they have already read. This reader-loyalty which appears similar to brand-loyalty does not make it any easier to introduce a new author onto the literary scene. Because of the conservatism of the readers, both publishers and booksellers are also inclined to be fairly conservative in their production and promotion of books. Literary publishing is finely dependent on a finely judged balancing act between the demands of literature and commerce.

The Role of Publication Trends

Publishers have to follow trends in the publishing world. The advertising of each book is to be handled very carefully because unlike most other industries, each book is perceived to be almost a new commodity. Reviews are of crucial importance, as are book tours which authors take to promote newly published books. Back covers of paperback novels by Indian women writers generally carry a synopsis of the plot rather than reviews. It is apparently much more difficult to get reviews for paperbacks than for hard covers. Some back covers include quotes from the book, information on literary prizes or awards won by the author or by the book, and even information on short listings for literary awards. Hardcover novels usually feature reviews on the back cover, either by newspapers or by other authors.

The Role of the Media

Media plays a significant role in promoting the sales of different novels by women writers. And the big publishing houses with an easy access to the means of production and advertisement seem to play a decisive role. The appearance of reviews much before the publication of the work and social status of the writers are the tactics to enhance the acceptability and popularity of the work. The readers' decision is influenced thus.

Mediums such as the TV, the radio, cinemas and the Internet all help to boost sales of books. However, because each book is almost a new product, it is relatively difficult to conduct market surveys which could estimate how well it would be like. However, in practical terms, the major distributors of books are bookstores.

Reduced Significance of Bookstores

Bookstores which are well stocked are mostly found in big cities and in university towns, but with the growth of e-commerce, the Internet has also become a supplier of books. This medium of distribution has been growing in significance for women writers in India, who for decades have demonstrated a preference for publishing abroad. This preference is usually based on such factors as better advances, more congenial publishers, better protection of their authorial rights, and better support from editors, a global market, and the scope for higher financial profits.

There is an expanding readership for contemporary Indian women writers writing in English in India and abroad. Publishers agree that the recent success of such authors as Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Anita Nair, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy and others who have won major literary awards, has made Indian Writers more visible in the West. It may also have had the effect of inspiring other Indian women writers in their careers. It has also been noted that there is a growing interest of the readers of other countries for stories from Indian women writers writing in English.

Nevertheless, even with the clear trend of a growing demand in the market for Indian women's writings, publishing houses claim that the acceptance or rejection rate of writings of Indian women writers are the same as those of writers from other countries. But no one can

deny the notable dominance of Indian women writers on the literary scene in contemporary times as is reflected on bookshelves of bookshops.

Publicity for the Author and the Book

One major factor in the marketing of the books is the publicity the book and author receive, and a vital part of this package is the cover of the book. Book covers are also specifically and carefully designed to advertise books, suggest their genres and types of reading, and thereby further appeal to potential readers. The covers have to be attractively eye-catching and are usually designed to be signifiers.

Recommendations, reviews, and previous experience with the genre or the author may all be influencing factors in a reader's decision regarding purchase, but the cover is amongst the most immediate of a book's attractive characteristics. Whether in hardcover or in paperback, the covers of books are intended to attract attention to the books and to persuade the potential reader to buy them. Because books are commodities, commodity sales and marketing techniques are employed by publishing houses and booksellers. Bookshop displays are arranged to be eye-catching, and the importance of cover designs should not be underestimated.

The Cover Images

A jacket or cover may or may not succeed in persuading a potential buyer to purchase a given book, but it is the first, and in some cases, the only way in which the reader's attention is attracted and the book advertised.

Book jackets not only carry images or photos, but also the title, the name of the author, and occasionally a small quotation either in praise of the book, or a quotation from the book. All these items are designed to make the book appear interesting and desirable and to persuade a potential buyer to pick up that particular book and read the review or synopsis on the back, or on the inside front cover. It is clear that images of Indian women are being marketed in a specific manner in order to suggest the unhappiness, fear, and suffering of young and beautiful women, who are somehow helpless, submissive, fragile and vulnerable. Not only are these images deliberately exotic, they also emphasize exotic victim hood.

Role of the Titles

Even the titles of the novels are dramatized and eroticized. It is seen as a circular process whereby publishers are largely responsible for selecting the genre and shaping the form in which the genre is promoted and presented, and the readers then learn to associate certain forms with certain genres, subsequently influencing the market supply of literature with their specific literary demands.

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