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**Issues of Social and Ideological Empowerment in  
Contemporary Indian Women Writing in English**

**Seema Rana, M.Phil.**

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**The Novel and the Society**

Literature often provides social evidence. We can learn about any society through novels which can give an insight into its culture. The study of society through novels deals with a deep understanding of the socio-economic and political life of the people living in a particular milieu. Novel form is the critical and realistic examination of a society's claims and practices. The novelist has the perception and the analytical mind of a sociologist who provides an exact record of human life, society and the social system. In order to understand a society through fiction, it is essential to find out what issues and problems the novelists raise in their works. These may be social, religious, economic or political issues.

**Contemporary Women Novelists Close to Earthly Reality: Challenge to Patriarchy**

The contemporary women novelists are closer to the earthy reality, to the subtle nuances of social behaviour, to the complex structures of man's and woman's inner life, and to the use of a language that varies from the pedestrian and prosaic to the poetic and ornate. Nevertheless, what seems to be a uniting link among the contemporary English women novelists is that they are all emancipated and have all had at least a cross-cultural,

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experience that had liberated them from the narrow grooves of a highly stratified and traditional society with its rigid codes and orthodoxies. And yet they carry the indelible imprint of Indian sensibility and culture in their consciousness. Their writings are marked by freshness, originality and solid, cultural vigour and sensibility that are recognizably Indian and yet international in their implications and significance.

Indian women-writing in English is notable for the extent to which it has challenged patriarchy and the State and opened numerous ways of questioning and interpreting social life.

### **From Our Own Milieu**

What we get to read today is straight from our own milieu. Even the West has begun to accept it. The reason for the Indian variety in modern fiction is that most of the authors hail from different professions and are ready to experiment. For instance, Kaveri Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* is a doctor's reflection on life, both in a rural and urban South India. Kiran Desai studied creative writing .Anita Nair worked as the creative director of an advertising agency. Arundhati Roy studied architecture and Manju Kapur is a teacher of English literature.

### **The Focus of This Paper**

It is with the intention of critically examining the variations within an overall pattern that I have chosen to study a few novels by different women writers. I have selected those novels in which the writers have interestingly handled the variety of themes beyond domesticity. The selected novels are: Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and Kaveri Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*.

### **Highlighting Social Issues and Possible Solutions: Novels of Social Commitment**

The different novels highlight different types of public and social issues and different possible resolutions. The author's attitude to the entire problem of Indian society, expressed implicitly or explicitly through the text, will be an important point of examination. While exploring the writings which have depicted Indian society in its myriad phases, the study establishes the inter-relationship between the novelist and the society.

These novelists under review are committed writers who, while projecting existing social conditions, provide a new framework, ideology, ethos and world view, to create a new social consciousness in the minds of their readers.

These can be termed as the novels of social commitment. Thus, they are committed to the task of giving a direction to change in the social set up.

### **Women Writers as Social Critics**

These writers play the role of a social critic, as no writer can isolate herself or himself from society, the violence, the system, the injustice around her. By giving voice to the discontent among middle-class women, and creating characters who move from victimization to self-assertion, these writers provide a pattern for the consciousness of the contemporary Indian women. Through the variety of weighty themes, they handle Indian women writers in English rightfully claim recognition.

The novels by these women writers cannot destroy repressive social structures; but by raising questions, suggesting re-assessment and re-thinking, they can help in formulating a consciousness which can ultimately bring about a constructive and healthy change in society. The novels explored here have in their own way, created such a consciousness.

The characters in their novels have often become mouthpieces to voice the writer's own self, thoughts, attitudes, ideologies and at other times her experiences, incidents, events and problems that have been seen in her social milieu.

### **Documentation of Hard Realities**

These novelists have presented a documentation of harsh realities, such as the oppressive system of the rural-urban society. In the social field are included the issues of the socially-deprived and out-caste people, who are at the mercy of the dominant caste and class people, the rigidity of caste discrimination, the low status of women etc. In the economic field, they have dealt with problems of occupational exploitation, unemployment, denial of property rights to women, corruption, manipulation, embezzlement etc.

### **Varied Protest**

In the political field, colonial power, political movements, protests, have been highlighted. These writings have accented the tone of protest in the form of rejection and revolt against certain values which are irrelevant to the contemporaneous social order. This protest is mainly expressed by attacking age old, out-dated norms and values which have a damaging effect in the society, by attacking the rigid morality and by attacking the power of colonial rule, feudal and capitalist set up. The protest is rooted in certain values and ideologies that the writers believe in. There is a tone of revolt against exploitation, dehumanization, depersonalization and oppression of the masses in the society. They seem to say that all is not well in Indian societies. There have been gross failures in several areas.

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## Reality, the Key Feature

The socio-economic and political problems in the novels are not painted imaginatively nor in abstract theories but rather there is a portrayal of the reality within the Indian social framework. These novelists have direct contact with the middle class, so they have depicted and explored their world with full confidence and have used the language of the people to express the local colour of the middle class. Thus, they launch upon various problematic areas to bring forth change and improvement in the existing conditions of the society. There is a gradual acquisition of new values and ideologies related to liberty, equality, nationalism, a rational outlook and a zeal for social justice. There is a vital link between the novels, novelists, social movement and social change further reinforcing the idea that the thoughts and experiences of the contemporary women novelists are socially conditioned and determined.

For instance, Anita Nair in her novel *Ladies Coupé* through the intimate conversation among the women of the *Ladies Coupé* portrays a fairly large part of society of all socio-economic levels and age groups. The moral dilemmas of women trapped in social and emotional circumstances, struggling against oppression and a hostile fate are very well interpreted.

The novel has the central character Akhila and her five co-passengers which the novelist draws out – these are Janaki, Margaret, Prabha Devi, Sheela and Marikolanthu. Each one is chosen for a specific facet to be projected, each exerting a deep influence on Akhila's decision to marry or stay single at the age of forty-five.

Akhila, in *Ladies Coupé* feels trapped in a confining Hindu Brahmin society but never displays open rebellion even when her younger siblings take advantage of her. This sense of being trapped and isolated is due to the fact that she never tells her family members anything about her hopes, plans and needs.

The realistic picture of the humble and miserable lives of urban domestic help, their destitution and injustice is presented through Marikolanthu. In the sad, toilsome and exploited life of Mari, Anita Nair exposes the practical motives which govern human actions bringing a touch of brutal honesty to the complicated lives of women. Anita Nair has delicately brought up the issue of child abuse when fourteen years old, Sheela wonders why one of her friend's father behaves like that, touching her and why Ammamma forbids her going there.

Anita Nair gives her observations on society. The central character's interaction with the others helps her understand herself better. Through introspection and analysis, she enters a new phase of self-realization and assertion. This train-journey ends in self-discovery

and more radically with her self-assertion. It is a creative expression to the complex emotional states that characterize the basic dilemma of modern Indian women.

### **Marital Status, Womanhood, and State of Women in Society**

Can a woman stay single and be happy? Can a woman do whatever she wants to do without bothering about social approval? These are the questions hinted upon to examine the validity of the rubrics of conservative value system which dictates the way women should lead their lives. Akhila is a clerk in the Income Tax Department and she is the breadwinner of the family. She is the cash cow, but nobody takes care of her or her needs.

At the end of the journey, Akhila learns that it is in her hands to create happiness and nobody would come and bring satisfaction in her life. She learns to change the course of her journey according to her wish without bothering about social approval. She understands that those who are ready to pin-point a person when a rule is broken will not come forward in times of need. So, there is no point in following its out-dated and meaningless rules. That's why, at the end of the novel, Akhila calls up Hari, once her lover, and almost eight years younger to her. At one time Akhila respected the values laid down by the society and rejected the idea of marrying Hari. Now, she understands that she need not follow social conventions when they don't owe her joy and pleasure. She feels empowered and what really matters to her, is that, now "she throws her head back and voices her triumph" (p.275).

### **Faith and Life**

Another theme that has fascinated Indian women novelists is the place of faith in the socio-cultural life of India. Adherence to rituals, and a simple faith in the superior wisdom of a Guru, shapes the action and conduct of many people especially of the Indian middle class. The ascetic has always been held in reverence in India, what really matters is not the real or imaginary powers of the guru, but the phenomenon of faith and attitude of mind implied in such situations. While the blind faith of the people represents a kind of moral weakness as well as a very elemental strength, the people who make a business of spiritualism certainly present an aspect of sin or evil.

### **The Hullabaloo for Dazzling Faith**

Kiran Desai's first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a light ironical novel mocking the common, illogical ways of Indian society. The essence of everyday existence in Indian society is caught by the novelist in a satirical vein. It openly makes fun at our sense of propriety and logic. Here anything sells in the name of religion. So called holy men and their followers are on an uncontrollable rise.

These Godmen are found in every religion, city, and township in India and they are not accountable to anyone.

While reading the novel, what strikes home is the absurdity of blind faith and fanatic beliefs.

The 'babas' authority stands unchallenged and they bathe in milk, eat good food and maintain hefty bank accounts. They can occupy government land. There are business tricks involved in the trade. Production, advertisement and selling are in operation. One feels that spirituality is the most lucrative business in India. Kiran Desai has skillfully brought out the modus operandi of the making of a saint.

The Story of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is simple. We are transported to the town of Shahkot. Shahkot stands for an average Indian town with market, schools, a degree college, government offices, banks and its inhabitants.

### **The Quirks of Wisdom**

The protagonist Sampath Chawla is an eccentric youth who works in a post office. He fills the dull hours by reading others' letters. One day, on behaving wildly at the marriage of his boss's daughter, he loses his job at the post office. Then he is continuously tortured by his middle-class father's cynical remarks. In desperation, he climbs on top of a tree in a guava orchard in the outskirts of the town. When people come to convince him, he leaks out personal details of the lives of some of the visitors, as he had the unethical habit of reading others' letters at the post office.

Ironically, his words are taken as the vision of a godman. His cowardly escape is considered as his lack of interest in materialism and this world and he is transformed into a 'baba'. Sampath's father, Mr. Chawla smells a great business opportunity in this and so he advertises the newly-found spirituality of his son, though he is well aware of the reality of his good-for-nothing son. He gets fame, money and respect. Sampath is called 'Monkey Baba' as monkeys also dwell in that orchard.

Later on the monkeys develop a taste for liquor and create havoc in the orchard. Mr. Chawla wishes to get the orchard free from the monkeys. A monkey protection society is formed to save the animals as they are considered sacred in Hindu religion. People are shown wasting their time, money and energy in futile fights.

### **Crazy Talk and Babbling as Signs of Mystery and Spirituality**

Meanwhile Sampath's answers the questions of his devotees' symbolically as it covers his mental deficiency in layers of mystery. He keeps on uttering crazy sentences. People

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try hard to grasp the meaning of these sentences and the Monkey-baba is regarded as a great mystic.

The mob is in the trance of spiritual waves, an atheist is sent to Shahkot to make enquiries and to gather facts against the fraud. He follows Sampath's mother, Kulfi, when she goes to nearby forest to gather herbs and spices. His curiosity takes him to a tree just above the huge cooking pot of Kulfi, when there is the final hullabaloo in the guava orchard, he falls inside the boiling cooking pot and the pot is covered by Kulfi.

### **A Satire**

The author conveys that reason and rational thinking in Indian societies are put to death, while fanaticism is prevalent. So the novel satirizes the Indian sense of religiosity. Exposing the religious imposter has an aspect of social reform.

The author also satirizes endless transfers of civil servants, frequent illegal arrangements of electricity supply or water supply through the incidents in the novel. She narrates a funny tale recounting the corruption, the mess and the chaos. She writes about the habit of people stealing the public property like wire fencing near the post office. The people of Shahkot on seeing the wire, were reminded of its need in and around their houses, slowly but surely, the poor fencing stands broken. In the novel, the novelist has also satirizes people's tendency to scribe names on historical monuments or upon the bark of a certain tree.

### **Description of Our Habits**

The minute delineation of peculiar Indian habits forms the core of this novel. Government service and afternoon naps are totally interlinked to each other. When elections are announced, all the political leaders get ready to lure people. Our frequent elections, election promises and slogans have been ridiculed in the novel: "Not one of the street lights worked, and they wouldn't work, everyone knew, until the next local election. Then there would be a flurry of excitement, with fine and ten-point plans... to send Shahkot and its residents bounding into the twenty-first century." (p. 16).

Our patriarchal set up, the edge the boys enjoy in matrimonial settlements, the way the Gods are appeased for a male child or the recurrent wrong numbers in Indian phone system are well written in the novel. Thus, India with over population, stink, dust, lack of space, sweat, heat, with all her darkness, is the background of the novel.

Certainly, the novel makes us think, while we analyze, criticize and accept the weaknesses in Indian society along with the novelist.

### **Killing Baby Girls**

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Kavery Nambisan, in her novel *The Hills of Angheri*, is vocal in her critiques of urban centered health planning. She is critical of the ills plaguing the Indian healthcare system and the problem of female foeticide. She feels that artists have a role as important as doctors in society. One has to be closely in tune with what is happening.

In *The Hills of Angheri*, the protagonist Nalli, defies all taboos prevalent in society to become a doctor, escaping the fate of an early marriage and the burden of preconceived notions.

Nalli is reproved for her ambitions. Her elders tell her that if God wanted her to be a doctor, he would have made her a boy.

Nambisan admits that such words were said to her when she wanted to become a doctor. She says that in conservative families, girls do not do medicine, they do something easier. But she was determined to be a doctor and wanted to work in rural areas.

### **How Dreams of Girls Are Being Thwarted**

Nambisan's dreams, fears, joys and sorrows in her life's journey are reflected in Nalli's journey from a little village girl to a confident doctor on the pages of the novel. Nalli fights her family in pursuing her dream of becoming a doctor and setting up her own hospital at Angheri, along with her childhood sweet-heart Jai.

Nalli is not deterred even when Jai agrees with everybody that even if she becomes a doctor, she will wear the medical degree as an ornament around her neck and ultimately she will be somebody's wife. Such is the fate of village girls in some societies in India, when their dreams are squashed by such cruel words.

When her brother Budhi gets jaundice, Angheri's vaidyar comments that their village needs a doctor of the right kind. Nalli's appa, the village school-master, starts thinking and Nalli gets an ally in her quest.

Throughout the six years of pursuing the medical career, her longing for Angheri's hills continues. On completing her course, Nalli wants to become a surgeon. Appa borrows money to pay for her tickets to England. Through the training in Liverpool, she learns fast, gains confidence and fights racial discrimination when a patient does not want to be treated by an Asian doctor. She learns that as a doctor she does not have the luxury of making mistakes. In her profession, there is no place for indecision or doubts. She also learns that to be a successful surgeon, one should not expect someone to hold your hand.

Then there are Dr. Shankar and Shanta, in England who dissuade her from returning to India.

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“He cited grim examples of friends who were languishing in the Public Health Centres in remote villages, or frustrated in cities. The roads were treacherous, the filth disgusting; we can do more for our country by staying on here and being successful.” (P. 251)

“Listening to him, I was eager for home”(P-251) is Nalli’s firm response. She decides to go back home.

On returning home, Nalli learns that Jai has married Bela and has moved to Bombay to set up a thriving practice. Nalli reminds him of their dream of a hospital in Angheri, but he argues that Bombay and new specialities like endoscopy need him and he will be a misfit in Angheri. He wanted the villagers to show him that they can keep a surgeon busy. He says: “I want to help the village. but let the economy pick up, let the roads improve. Let the people feel they can afford us.”(p-388)

Nalli returns to Angheri to face the truth that the village does not need her services as a doctor. She takes up two jobs, the first one in a charitable hospital and the second one in a corporate hospital in Madras. But in neither she is able to find fulfillment. Eventually she realizes that Jai is not going to support her and the novel ends with Nalli returning back home to pursue her dream.

### **Is Woman Really Free?**

It is thought that women have become empowered through collective reflection and decision making, also by building a positive self-image, understanding the conditions and causes of their subordination, developing ability to think critically and ensuring equal participation in the process and bringing about change in society.

In studying the problematic of women’s empowerment, we are faced with questions like – Despite all claims that woman takes charge of her destiny, is she really free? The fact is that questions of women’s empowerment arise specially in those societies that are labelled as under-developed.

The contemporary women writers can help in the significant task of deconstructing, redefining or demolishing the gender archetypes that their society has created through centuries.

### **A New Idiom and a New Language**

Earlier, women were suppressed through the language of culture and language of politics, which were male-dominated, but a lot has changed since the days of Freud and one has to see how do these women writers use literature to break this nexus as empowerment is not possible until they break this nexus. Women writers have moulded the patriarchal

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language. They subvert the old norms and system and create new language. So language is a tool in their hands that has equipped them with a capacity to act and impact and it makes them empowered. Due to this empowerment they successfully deal with burning social issues. They have been successful so far because they do not replicate men writers. They write in a unique manner.

They 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. When these writers use idioms consistently in a novel, these illuminate a sentence with vividness. This is how they convey through English, situations, moods and expressions that are essentially Indian. They use literal translation of idioms, direct use of Hindi words and misspelling of English words. There is vigour in the experimentation and an eagerness to convey a certain mood. They invent new words to get the desired effect.

The use of idioms serves its purpose in its context, and idioms are more vivid and effective than any other accepted English expressions that might have been used in their place.

They have the feel of language so they are better equipped for challenges. They are assertive, committed and determined as they have a sense of self worth and value. Their artistic and literary works not only record the social reality of their time, but, in several ways, transcend it to project the realm of future possibilities. That is the secret of the trans-temporal and trans-spatial appeal of their works. Their creative imagination, even though conditioned and shaped by the entire socio-economic, political and cultural ethos is able to create a world of aesthetic, ethical and human values that can find their relevance in time to come.

### **Choice of English as the Preferred Medium of Expression**

Contemporary women writers' very choice of writing in English language indicates an awareness of and exposure to western culture apart from their own. They are thus empowered as they are made aware of their Indianness as well as of the difference in the two systems of values: one is acquired and the other inherited. Such writers are likely to be very sensitive in their responses.

The inter-cultural nature of their own being becomes a theme of profound interest for these writers. The duality of culture as it exists in India today can be a source of strength to the writer but writing about a society in which different sets of values flow into each other; each at a different level of internal change, can be a difficult task.

These writers have realized that their strength lies not in the reproduction of imitative voices and tones of colonial hangover, but in finding the strength and fertility of their

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own cultural sensibility; the amusing and exciting style of their native idiom, and the vigour and resilience of their own socio-cultural experience. This resulted in the production of a rich spectrum of literature that could boast of a remarkable intellectual maturity and stylistic sophistication.

These modern novelists 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.

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Seema Rana, M.Phil.  
CRM Jat College  
Hisar  
Haryana, India  
[Sima7269@yahoo.com](mailto:Sima7269@yahoo.com)