

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN POSTCOLONIAL/THIRD WORLD WOMEN'S FICTION: SOME PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: Empowerment helps women to challenge the patriarchal ideology and male domination. An empowered woman has the courage to decide her choice of life and the ability to identify her ambition and to focus on the activities to achieve equality with men thereby reducing the gender biased discrimination in the patriarchal society. Thus empowerment breaks the stereotyping of women as submissive, invisible, weak, dependent, self-effacing and liberates her to overcome the social and economic discrimination based on gender. The Postcolonial women writers focus on major issues relating to women such as her awakening to the realisation of her individuality, her breaking away with traditional image, her relation with man and her aims and objectives. However, the feminism they adopt is not based on revolt against the difference, inequality and oppression but on the rhythmic, mutual, complementary and welfare oriented approach. This paper focuses on the representation of women in recent works of the Postcolonial women writers – Adichie from Nigeria and Anita Nair from India - signifying empowerment through the transformation of the idealised woman into an assertive, self-willed woman searching and discovering her true self.

Keywords: Empowerment, Individuality, Patriarchal Ideology, Self-Effacing, Welfare Oriented.

Introduction: In the present scenario, the phrase 'Empowerment of Women' is being used very often in different contexts. But what exactly does the phrase mean and how does it transform the life of women to face the challenges in life? To elaborate further on this topic, I would like to define the phrase, 'Empowerment of Women'. It means increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of women as individuals thereby improving their capacities which will help them to achieve independence, and to have a say in marriage, motherhood and employment.

Empowerment helps women to challenge the patriarchal ideology and male domination. An empowered woman has the courage to decide her choice of life, and the ability to identify her ambition and to focus on the activities to achieve her goal.

Empowerment in the Literary Works of Postcolonial Women Writers: The Postcolonial women writers try to break the traditional images of women of being as devoted wife and mother. Their writings are mainly equipped with women's liberation and new images of women with different perspectives of life. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changes that occurred all over the world due to industrial and political revolution. These changes are reflected in Indian writings due to the Western education. The great novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De and Anita Nair besides numerous unmentioned authors handled themes which show their questioning attitude and reasoning ability towards the injustice that was accepted by the society passively for ages. In the wake of feminist movement in India, themes like woman's search for identity, quest for selfhood,

relocating the self, and awareness to seek a balance between tradition and modernity became popular in the works of female writers of Post-Colonial Indian English Fiction.

The Postcolonial female writers portray myriad faces of the new woman who gradually learnt to fight for her rights and lived not only as a wife, mother or daughter but also as an individual. These women give a tough fight against the established order and often come upon new concepts of morality, sometimes they fall rebellion and go too far against the accepted code of morality that they sometimes enter into extra marital relationships. No doubt, the female protagonists of these Indian writers have to face many vicissitudes of family life but they keep abreast of all hurdles which come in their way in their marathon struggle for seeking their identities in the patriarchal society. They fight for their emancipation and empowerment. Education that has been their eye-opener has made these oppressed and suppressed women aware not only of their duties but also of their rights. The Postcolonial women writers have been dealing meticulously with this emancipated 'new woman' and her efforts to face challenges and also how she, while living within the bounds and bonds of marriage, frees herself from the inhibitions of society, culture and her own conflicting emotions.

When we compare Indian fiction with that of African fiction, the role of woman has to large extent been looked at from within the perimeters of home as mother, wife, lover or prostitutes. While African women writers have documented a truthful picture of the plight and suffering of women from their own experiences, attempting to examine the African institutions affecting the interests of women, and rejecting of those which are detrimental to their

progress, African men writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka are more concerned with the social and moral aspects and they identify women with tradition and the self-denied role of mother in the family; in the same as Indian men writers like Raja Rao, R K Narayan etc.

Nonetheless the Postcolonial women writers endeavour to subvert the androcentric world of men writers using “literature as a weapon” to quote Senegalese Mariama Ba, in their effort to define their individuality and to assert their economic, social and cultural independence (quoted in Chukwuma 2002). Contemporary women writers through their fiction have chosen to talk back, moving from silence into speech and standing for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. As women writers earned a place in literary histories of these countries, which was denied to them just because of gender, they attempt to dismantle the gender codes inscribed in the male tradition.

In a post-colonial context, whether African, Caribbean or South Asian, English language carries with it a whole history of patriarchal myths and symbols whether originally instituted by the colonial power or later by primarily male-dominated movements towards nationalism and independence. There are obvious parallels between the experiences of women’s oppression in previously colonized territories or the Third World countries and women’s oppression worldwide. The portrayal of woman in Third World/Postcolonial women’s writing as the silent victim and up holder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. The contemporary women writers from many African nations and Indian women writers are striving against the age old slavery and suppression.

Third World women’s writing represents diverse female narratives and voices through different themes and styles. Shared concerns involve a commitment to portray women’s narratives of oppression as structured by various powers, given that the female experiences represented in women’s literature are functional in Third World feminism, which attempts to deconstruct the global sisterhood model and the figure of the “universal woman” in order to acknowledge women’s heterogeneity in theoretical and literary discourses. It depicts women from several developing cultures adopting reconstructive methodologies in order to theorise and challenge oppression. Female liberation and social change can be located in the discourse of Third World women writing which links socio-political practices and local identities to issues of female

specificity and writing. The Third World feminists seek cross-cultural solidarity and a framework that focuses on issues of grounding the local and the universal, on women’s roles in redefining their identities, and on differences as a way of promoting solidarity. They do not simply accept Western concept of mother, but question obligatory motherhood and the traditional favouring of sons. They see utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygamy as they show concern for children and for sharing household responsibility.

The third generation Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* shows women with contradictory behaviour about African customs and traditions. Mama Beatrice and her sister-in-law, Ifeoma are the antithesis to each other. Adichie portrays Beatrice as conforming to the patriarchal dictates of their society that place value on men and their role in the society. Despite the violence her husband, Eugene, inflicts on her body and psyche, Beatrice praises Eugene for not listening to the members of his *umunna* (extended family) who wanted him to have more male children. Eugene punishes Beatrice and his children when they fail to live up to his impossibly high standards. Adichie portrays Beatrice as conforming to the dictates of a patriarchal society that affords a woman respect only when she is married. Beatrice internalizes the patriarchal dictates of her society, which views women without husbands as inadequate or incomplete. Ifeoma a widow, though contributes to the society as a university lecturer, her achievements are undermined based on her gender. Bewildered and failed to understand the idea of a woman achieving personhood without a man, Beatrice is obviously appalled by the idea that a woman can even think of existing without a husband because culturally that is unacceptable and unheard of. In other words, what Beatrice means is that it does not matter even if a woman is being abused in her marriage. As long as she has a “husband to crown her life” (*Purple Hibiscus* 75), she has to endure all the pains and confines of that marriage. Beatrice, whose social and economic existence is tied to her abusive husband, is trapped in a patriarchal order which does not give her economic and social empowerment to break away from her oppressed status in life. Eugene’s religious fanaticism and overbearing hand results in imprisoning and weakening those whom he professes to love the most. In the end, the most decisive actions come from the least expected sources and his life ends up in his wife’s hands. Eugene’s behaviour is a good example of male domination reinforced by patriarchy. Beatrice sees futility in breaking away from Eugene because of her over dependence on him in all respects, whether economic or social. She is also afraid of losing respect as a married woman and also for leaving her

prominent husband. Adichie's novel therefore hits at the glaring inequalities so as to produce the required change likely to bring equity among husbands and wives. The character of Beatrice and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* is a case of women asserting their positions in their societies and challenging patriarchy with its several manifestations.

Beatrice's fear of starting afresh on her own reminds us of similar dilemma that disturbs Indian women, which makes them to live a life of self-negations, compromises and adjustments. Focussing on the themes of silence, gender differences, passive suffering, and familial relationships, Anita Nair explores the man and woman relationship in her second novel *Ladies Coupe* in which she deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies inequality in relationships. Her novel as a microcosm of female world raises questions about the role of woman in contemporary postcolonial India. The women characters in the novel go through the gruelling experiences of domestic oppression at the hands of the repressive forces of society but finally they revolt against the oppressions and resolve to discover them and establish them in society. Akhila, the protagonist of the *Ladies Coupe* is a 45 years old single woman working as an Income Tax officer. Born in a conservative Brahmin family Akhila was brought up in an environment in which the society had the supreme power and the people living in this society would never ever dare to rewrite its unfounded norms.

Akhila's mother belonged to the old school of thought, sometimes through her actions and sometimes through her words she taught Akhila that a perfect woman is the one who blends with the environment. "There is no such thing as equal marriage it is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove ones equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on the man's role. Or the Gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage" (14) is what her mother tried to drill into her mind. But this very mother of Akhila on becoming a widow expected her daughter to play the man of the house. So from playing the role of the daughter Akhila progressed to being the provider and continued playing different roles all through her life. Sometimes a sister, sometimes an aunt but she never got to be herself. She never was Akhila until one fine day when she realised that she has got nothing from life not even memories to look back to. To change the course of her life Akhila decides to do something she had never done before. She buys a one-way ticket to Kanyakumari to escape from the norms that stopped her from being Akhilandeswari.

On her way to Kanyakumari, Akhila meets five different women, her fellow passengers. Each with a story of her own but all of them had one thing in common and that was their search for the real meaning of life. Akhilandeswari, the protagonist listens to the story of each woman and seeks in them a solution to the question that has troubled her all her life: "Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete?" Akhila being an elder daughter has taken up the responsibility of the family after her father's death. Though she shoulders the responsibility of educating younger brothers, Narsi and Narayan, they never felt it was their duty to inform Akhila about their marriage plans. Even they did not feel that their sister should get marry before they establish their own families. Akhila waited for Amma or her brothers to say something about her marriage but they never asked, "What about you? You've been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don't you want a husband, children, a home of your own?" (*Ladies Coupe* 77).

Though Akhila had done her duties as head of a family, caring brothers and sister and mother, she was not recognized as the real head, just because she was a woman. Amma expected her to get permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour as she says, "Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first" (*Ladies Coupe* 150). When Akhila argued that she was their elder sister and why she should ask their permission Amma simply says, "You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family" (*Ladies Coupe* 150). Akhila's encounter with her school friend awakened her spirit to think of a life to live her own. But even then there sprouted the patriarchal domination. When Akhila boldly told Padma about her decision to live alone, she without reluctance says, "Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they'll let you live alone?" (*Ladies Coupe* 204). When Akhila defends herself, "For heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent" (*Ladies Coupe* 204), Padma mocked at her telling, "They are the men of the family" (204). Everyone including Padma, Narsi and Narayan were strongly rooted in the patriarchal structure and hence were unable to bear the thought of a woman living alone. But Akhila's defiance was stronger than theirs that she boarded the train to Kanyakumari.

As we read the story of Margaret Shanthi (a Chemistry teacher with good credits), one of the five women on board of the train in which Akhila is travelling, it is obvious how women are dominated by man-power. She marries Ebenezer Paulraj at her own choice, but was failed to understand his egoistic nature of dominance. Ebe is simply a male chauvinist when he takes the power to ask Margaret to abort the baby off, when she conveyed him the good news with all

happiness. Not only in that, but he continued to thrust upon his supremacy over her in deciding her higher studies, career and even simple things like choice of food and her hair dressing. As Ebe was becoming more and more egoistic, domineering and hypocritical, Margaret was unconsciously compelled to teach him a lesson. She chose flattery as the weapon to bring down Ebe's self-esteem. She flattered and flattered and fed him with fatty food since dawn till night, till fat found its home on him, and turned him into a fat man, a quiet man and an easy man who sought her for food and sex. Thus she gains self-esteem by eroding Ebe's self-esteem. Margaret succeeds in achieving her emotional fulfilment keeping the family ties intact, and her success shows that the woman could vanquish the domineering man. Janaki, one of the co-passengers of Akhila believed that to be a good mother and a good wife are the only two duties of a woman and she made her home her Kingdom. It was too late to amend her life when she realised that even a strong and independent woman can make a good wife and a good mother.

The writers Adichie and Anita Nair and their characters - Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* and Margaret Shanthi in *Ladies Coupe* - are the epitomes as stated by Elaine Showalter "In women's hands—in women writers' hands—lies the regeneration of the world". Both the writers Adichie and Nair portray traditional women conforming to the patriarchal dictates of their society that place value on men and consider women as inferior beings. Adichie depicts Beatrice being trapped in patriarchal order lives a miserable life and afraid of losing respect as a married woman for leaving her prominent husband. Similarly, Anita Nair uses certain characters like Akhila's mother, to express how women are strong conservatives of the patriarchal structure that has framed strict social, political and economic limitations on women. Akhila's mother is a devoted wife with her own theory that a wife is always inferior to her husband. She is the sort of woman who never takes decision on her own but left all decisions to her husband for she believes, "He knows best" (14). According to her, "A good wife learnt to put her husband's interests before anyone else's, even her father's. A good wife listened to her husband and did as she said. It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one's station in life and live accordingly" (14). She taught Akhila, "A true wife is she whose virtues match her home" (49). However, Akhila expresses her contempt for mother because in her insignificant existence, she finds the reflections of her own futures. All the other women characters - Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu lead stereo-typed roles, into which

women are moulded by patriarchal society, but they all hope and strive to break free from that mould.

Through these wonderful novels, Adichie and Anita Nair have presented an increasingly common concept of patriarchy in which women are constrained by tradition to be dependent on men, crippled to realize their own strength but at the end have given them a gesture of defiance against patriarchy. The similarities between these two writers are glaringly obvious as they tend to depict the elder women characters as collaborators of patriarchy with their high regards for husbands as Beatrice believes "a husband crowns a woman's life" (75), whereas Akhila's mother in *Ladies Coupe* strongly opposes the equality between husband and wife as she believes "...it is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband" (14). However, these writers have shown their younger women as intelligent, questioning women who are not silenced with the injustice and rebellion against them, but they raise the question of their way of life consolidated by patriarchy, and see it not only as the site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of battle to vanquish their oppressors. Their approach "to subvert male oppression confirms that despite the struggles, women assert themselves in a world dominated by men through education and female solidarity and their novels suggest a social transformation by which the different forms of oppression, exploitation, exclusion and silencing that promote gender inequality can be confronted by women" (Hajira 2016: 91).

These writers draw one's attention to women's exploitation, and discrimination and they show their characters as a great example for women empowerment and depicted them as beacons of hope to the oppressed ones and answer the questions relating to women's place in society. They show how women empower themselves and successfully redeem themselves from a web called patriarchy. To conclude, this study identifies sustained efforts of women writers in crafting possibilities of liberating women's future from hegemonic power in Postcolonial societies and states that Postcolonial women writers have moved away from traditional conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterised and defined simply in terms of their victim status. Their works are 'spaces of strength' as opined by Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 68) as they chronicle lives of empowered assertive women who defy marriage and motherhood in their efforts to realise a meaningful life on par with men. "Their works are weapons" as opined by D'Almeida (1994: 102) to destroy the ideas that perpetuate subjugation and inequality. In their own way these writers have shown "There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women" as

opined by Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations and the recipient of Nobel Peace Prize 2001.

My study concludes appreciating the efforts of these contemporary Postcolonial women writers for their continuous challenge and resistance to the hegemonic power discourses in postcolonial societies and empowering women to speak and listen to each other creating the liberating tools like “safe spaces” through their gender sensitive writings to redefine their identities. Further this study identifies the

pioneering work of profeminists who are creating “a new social awareness, consciousness and awakening which is changing the mind-sets of young minds to reject male superiority and to create new self-definitions that liberate masculinities from patriarchal, homophobic and capitalist power” (Kopano Ratele and Mbuyiselo Botha, 2014:14-19) and aims to bring justice to all women and men striving to redefine masculinity, acknowledging how traditional gender roles have been detrimental to women and men.

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