

Women's Fiction: What's in the Name?

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The term Women's Fiction is normally aligned with the writing by women and is supposed to address issues related to women. It touches upon women's hopes and fears, aspirations and fantasies. Another interpretation marks this kind of fiction with having women as the target audience. Still others view romantic novel or the chick-lit as the in-thing in Women's Fiction.

All these, however, are found to be delimiting and conservative approaches, and the term Women's Fiction seems to be directed at propping up the women an otherwise male-dominated domain. However, the notion of gender construction has removed what was hitherto considered woman-specific and the stereotypes of women have become unrealistic. Similarly, the subject matter in fiction written by or for women need not conform to any stereotype. In the fiction produced by women, the writers have successfully handled varied themes like individual psyche and family, social and political problems, thrillers and mysteries, science and history, etc. This paper surveys a number of Indian English novels produced by women since 2000 AD and points out the multiplicity of themes and styles and the volume of production, all of which impels us to have a re-look at the nomenclature 'women's fiction'.

Some novelists like Linda Goodnight take the patriarchal viewpoint for granted. Advising prospective writers, she says, "Women's fiction almost always belongs to the female. The male point of view can be included, but the issues, and thus the story, belong to the female." Another critic describes women's fiction as "literary fiction told from a female perspective" And most of the fiction falling in this category is taken to be chick-lit or romance fiction! (Flood). But, as Eric Enders comments, "I don't have to be the one to tell you that novels that get slapped with the labels 'chick lit' or 'women's fiction' carry with them a pretty bad reputation. These books are looked upon by literary readers as the book choices of bored housewives and basic bitches, and writers and readers of women's fiction can't seem to get a break from judgement." (Enders)

Now that is surely a very uncharitable remark. If one looks at the subject matter and the depth in fiction written by or for women, one will find that it does not necessarily conform to any stereotype concerning love and romance or home and hearth. As pointed out above, the women writers have successfully handled varied themes like individual psyche, familial relations, social and political problems, thrillers and mysteries, science and history, etc. and have thrown fresh light on them.

The viewpoint need not be woman's in Women's fiction and vice versa. We have a good number of cases like Samuel Richardson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sharatchandra writing like women and Charlotte Bronte, Jhumpa Lahiri et al writing like men! Again, it would be preposterous to believe that it is women only who read this kind of fiction and men abstain from enjoying fiction produced by women. What is of especial interest is that their literary output matches well with that of male writers. For case study, I have taken up the genre of Indian English novel produced by women since 2000 AD and analyzes their thematic and stylistic concerns and the volume of production.

In order to be more focussed with regard to the volume of production, I have marked the novels written by Indian women writers in the first decade of the 21st century and found that out of the total 397 novels produced between 2000-2010 – and these do not include of short stories or works translated from regional languages into English -- 168 have been produced by women writers which is 42.3%% of total

fiction produced. ¹ The figure of 42.3% is a sizeable segment and cannot be called a fringe by any stretch of imagination so that the nomenclature Women's Fiction comes out as misfit.

Now, if we consider the thematic variation in the fiction produced by women, we find that the perception that women's fiction is only chick-lit or romance fiction is also a gross mis-judgement. As this paper will show, the multiplicity of themes is a potent characteristic of a broad, anti-stereotypical women's writing. Then, there are certain stylistic markers which are considered specific to women's writing, like open-ended narratives, which is true of male writing as well. The much-touted Point of View too, need not be feminist. It may be male-centric as we see in Pulitzer awardee Jhumpa Lahiri's novels. The well-known Indian writer Shashi Deshpande says that her novels are not intended to be read as feminist texts. This is evident from what she says : "Is writing by women only for women? . . . when I sit down to write, I am just a writer – my gender ceases to matter to me. . . . We are different, yes, but once again the factors which unite us are far more important than the gender differences which divide us . . . I'm a novelist, I write novels, not feminist tracts. Read my novel as a novel, not as a piece of work that intends to propagate feminism" (Deshpande 2003 : 143). To start with, let us take up first the novels written by women and dealing with women's exploitation. This enquiry however, begins with the caveat that similar treatment is to be found in novels written by men also.

Family and Feminism: A large number of novels relate to women's experience in the Indian context. The plight of married women in our country is far from satisfactory. Incidents of heinous crimes against women are almost daily reported in newspapers, but more widespread and unreported is the suffocating atmosphere within the family where one finds suppression, marginalization and neglect, thanks to the patriarchal system. Even in the matriarchal societies as in Kerala, the women's exploitation is not absent as brought out in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This phenomenon is quite old and novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, et al have very ably dealt with this theme.

The feminist proclivities of Shashi Deshpande are well known. Of late, she seems to have forsaken her earlier focus on Indian reality. In *Small Remedies* (2000), Deshpande explores the lives of two women with different tastes and aptitudes who come close as they break away from their families to seek fulfilment in public life. Now, breaking away from families for the sake of fulfilment of one's talent is a revolutionary idea for Indian women. Deshpande's novel *Moving On* (2004) dwells on societal expectations from women which pays scant regard to their needs. The novel *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) is the story of self-realization by the protagonist Devyani who leads life according to her own notions and without caring for social restrictions. Deshpande delves deep into female psyche to underline the agony of suppressed women at various levels, yet there are a number of male characters, particularly in her later novels because of which her concern transcends the gender barrier. Her latest novel *Shadow Play* is all about relationships. Three generations of a Brahmin family with extended relatives are described here.

Manju Kapur is known for challenging the traditional family values in her writings. In *A Married Woman*, her protagonist Aastha revolts against maladjustment in marriage and establishes lesbian relationship with another depressed woman Pipeelika. In Kapur's novel *In Custody*, the custody of children is contested between contending divorced parents. The novel has a take on Shagun's extramarital affair with Ashok, the boss of her husband Raman that leads to divorce and the consequent union between Raman and Ishita, also a divorcee. The feelings of suffocation felt by Shagun and of insecurity felt by Raman along with the commodification of children is masterly portrayed in the novel.

Namita Gokhale has depicted various women characters tenderly and authentically. While Paro has a female seducer of upper class gentry as its protagonist, her novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmothers* puts

spotlight on a religious-minded woman whose abode becomes a temple. Shakuntala re-writes the legendary tale. *The Book of Shadows* takes up the plight of an acid attack victim. The sister of a college lecturer, who committed suicide, throws acid on the girl who has spurned Ananda. However, the major part of story takes up the later life of this girl with a deformed face – something not common as protagonist of a novel.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* is set on the writer's humanist profile. Here is a good Samaritan who foregoes her own pleasures of life. In her novels *Vine of Desire* and *Sister of My Heart*, she confirms her faith in cooperation among women as the solution to their predicament. Shobha De shows the inside story behind the making of a heroine in the celluloid world in her novel *Starry Nights*. Anita Nair in *Ladies Coupe* calls upon women to recognize their inherent powers and lead an authentic life. She has also written a murder mystery titled *Cut Like Wound*. Namita Devidayal, like Manju Kapur has written of a business family that is obsessed with money in her novel *Aftertaste*.

For one, the analysis of these works shows that the dominance of patriarchal ideology in fiction produced by male writers is sought to be corrected through the depiction of strong women characters and their point of view. In this, these works are in line with the current feminist trends, according to which issues related to women, re-writing of old classics/myths from the standpoint of female characters and attempts to bring fiction close to literary theories like Gynocriticism are taken up.

Individuals/Relationships: Anita Desai is well known as a trend-setter in Indian fiction through her portrayal of women characters with a psychological conditioning. But if Maya, Monisha, Nanda, Sita and others of their ilk are the women characters, then she has also crafted Nirode, Deven et al – well known male characters with a different mindset. *The Zigzag Way* (2004) ushers in a pleasant change in that the setting and characters are non-Indian. Eric is an American who locates his roots in Mexico. Eric learns about the festival of the dead spirits and sets out to locate the grave of his grandfather but has a mystical meeting with his grandmother who recognizes him as Paul (Eric's father). The meeting appears as hallucination or dream image only. Desai brings into play the Indian humanist sensibility while describing the travails of Eric's grandparents who were miners destined to die toiling in pits.

Kiran Desai is among the Indian English writers who have taken up the life of the immigrant as the focus area of their fiction. It is not that the characters are not part of the family life, but the stress is on their individuality rather than their status as part of family. In her Man Booker awarded novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, we find that the family is either not built up or does not sustain. The novel has a wide canvas stretching from India to U.S. and encompassing the lives of the middle class elite judge as also of the poor servant and his starry-eyed son Biju who returns to India and inherits loss in the form of his dream career while Sai does in the form of loss of parents as also her lover. Acclaimed for its impressionistic style and a mix of literary-colloquial language, it puts a question mark on the fruits of a globalized world.

Individuals can have a life of imagination, so Ramchand, the protagonist of Rupa Bajwa's novel *The Saree Shop* dreams of settling down with her dream girl after learning a bit of English. The loneliness of individual existence is the theme of Anjum Hasan's debut novel *Lunatic in My Head*. One also includes the bildungsromans like *The Toilet House* by Daisy Hasan which has four characters based in Shillong. Similarly, Dona Sarkar's *How to Salsa in a Sari* targets the adolescent reader and goes through the travails of high school life in a privileged American school. Clearly, the characters in such diasporic works would be of mixed blood. Sarita Mandonna's *The Tiger Hill* portrays a contemporary character who casts his life in the mould of the ancients. Assamese writer Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* is a bildungsroman which is entangled with the myth of Poseidon and Pelops. The novel was shortlisted for The Hindu Best Fiction award 2015.

History: Indu Sundaresan has made her name as a historical novelist. Three of her novels, viz., *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2004) and *The Shadow Princess* (2010) deal with the lives of Mughal era princesses Meherunissa, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahan Ara respectively. The novel *Splendor of Silence* (2007) is the love-story of the British era. The narratives are well-researched and succeed in transporting the reader to the bygone times.

Jaishree Misra, though adept at churning out romantic novels, has touched upon historical theme in her novel *Rani*, which is based on the life of Manikarnika aka Rani of Jhansi. Another novel in which she has made use of history is *A Love Story for My Sister*. As the title indicates, here is Pia trying to find out why her sister did not leave her captor even when she had chance. In order to find answer, she studies the journals of one Margaret, who, during the 1857 turmoil in Kanpur, was abducted by a Muslim soldier whom she eventually married due to what has come to be known as the Stockholm Syndrome. Thus, there is parallelism drawn with a historical event touched from the New Historicist angle.

Madhulika Liddle, who hails from Assam, has written four novels which fit in the category of murder mysteries. What is more, she recreates the 17th century and enlists the services of a Mughal era detective, Muzaffar Jang. He features in Liddle's all novels, viz., *The Englishman's Cameo* (2009), *Engraved in Stone* (2012) and *Crimson City* (2015), as also stories.

Socio-political: By her own admission, Gita Hariharan's main concern has been the study of power politics. Her novel *In Times of Siege* (2003) revolves around the life of a professor of history. Apart from focussing on the process of recording of history, she also rakes up contemporary issues like religious fundamentalism, freedom of speech etc. Her *Fugitive Histories* (2009) is woven around the Godhra carnage and has political overtones. The narrative relies on memory rather than history. In that sense, the approach may be called postmodern. Nayantara Sehgal published her *Lesser Breeds* (2003) which surprisingly talks of non-violence and politics rather than race, gender and sex which formed the themes of her earlier works.

Kota Neelima's *Shoes of the Dead* is the third novel by the US based writer of Indian origin. Devoid of digressions like sub-plots, it is a quite focussed novel that makes an intensive study of the problem of insolvency of farmers leading to suicides in a large number of cases. Set in the fictional Mityala district, it is the story of Sudhakar Bhadra, a peasant, who commits suicide because he cannot pay loan on land due to the draught. It is left to his brother Gangiri Bhadra, an educated government employee, to unravel the truth of the politician-moneylender nexus aimed at grabbing agricultural land for selling it later at much higher rate to MNCs. Interestingly, Gangiri employs blackmail to trap the evil forces, and though he also commits suicide finally but not before converting the villain to the right path.

Suravi Sharma Kumar's novel *Voices in the Valley* is suffused with ecological overtones as it highlights the topography, climate, flora and fauna of Assam in a big way. Besides, there is a sharp focus on local customs, food and dress habits, taboos, etc. The protagonist of the novel is Millie, a young girl, who lives in an Assam village with her joint family that includes three brothers, their wives and many children. This is a family of priests whose duty is to foster respect for religion, rituals and traditions. But not all children toe their line. As they grow up, the young birds crave for freedom and experiment with their lives in different ways. Millie joins student politics and rises to be an M.P. The problem of influx of Bangladeshis and the consequent ethnic strife, rise of militancy are touched. However, the novel has a loose structure and references to too many problems take their toll on its unity.

Multiculturalism: Bharati Mukherjee who shot to fame with her novel *Jasmine* depicting the coming-of-age of an innocent Punjabi immigrant from India in America, deals with similar problem in her novel *The Tree Bride* even as she links it to Indian history. But before this, her novel *Desirable Daughters* had

autobiographical element. Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist comes from the Bengali *bhadralok* family steeped in conservatism. Married to an Indian expatriate in the U.S., she is stung by the American cultural bug and goes in for a makeover, divorces her conservative husband, takes on an American lover, winks at the gay proclivities of her son but after sometime when she meets her ex-husband, the deep-rooted Indian sensibility asserts itself, hinting at the incompleteness of the cultural metamorphosis. Bharati's eighth novel *Miss New India* depicts the life of a contemporary working woman Anjali Bose, who shifts from a small town in Bihar to Bangalore and re-invents herself there.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing* (2010) tells the story of nine persons gathered in the Indian embassy to get visa. Suddenly, a quake demolishes the building and all of them are trapped. Without any hope of early escape, Uma suggests that they all share one amazing thing from their lives, to pass time, a la *The Canterbury Tales*. The characters are a mixed lot – Indian, Chinese, American, English et al. However, the ending is inconclusive. Divakaruni is committed to dissolving boundaries between people of different backgrounds. The latest novel *Oleander Girl* deals with Korobi, a Bengali girl brought up by over-patronizing grandparents, who faces adversity while trying to search her father and identity.

Anita Desai has done in-depth studies of the psyche of characters placed between two or more than two cultures. In *Bye, Bye Blackbird*, Adit, the Indian youngman married to a British girl Sarah, looks forward to being part of the British life, what with his education and years of stay in Britain, but no, he finds, to his horror, that his wife also becomes a persona non grata socially in England as she has married an Indian. Similarly, Hugo Baumgartner of *Baumgartner's Bombay*, a German Jew is unwanted in his own country because of his race and unacceptable in India because of his colour. The existential trauma of such characters provide a potent ground of study to Desai. One has yet to find an equal among male writers of Indian English literature! Anita Desai has stayed on in America for a long time now and her latest novel *The Zigzag Way* ushers in a pleasant change in that the setting and characters are non-Indian. Eric is an American who locates his roots in Mexico. Like Desai's earlier novel *Journey to Ithaca*, this one also deals with the occult.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003) weaves a story covering three decades of the Ganguli household in the USA and displays a fine-tuned sensibility along with psychological realism. The Ganguli couple's immigrant experience is contrasted with the acculturation of their America-born children. In her second novel *The Lowland*, Lahiri gives equal space to the Indian and the American locales when she draws the character of her Bengali protagonist Gauri. There is wide coverage of the Maoist insurgency rocking Bengal and the effect it has on the youth. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* gives a riveting description of the beauty of Nagaland. It also takes up the lifestyle, beliefs and cultural mores of the people of this region. The novel was shortlisted for the Hindu Best Fiction Award 2015.

Popular Fiction (SEX); A large proportion of popular fiction hinges on love, romance and sex. The subject of sex was a taboo for women novelists. No longer now. The trend setter is Shobha De. The Sethji of the eponymous novel penned by Shobha De recently is a politician whose daughter Amrita is put in charge of things when these go out of control. There are the Bollywood producer MK and a godman. Sex and violence provide the bulwark for this novel.

Namita Gokhale's protagonist Priya of the novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* is shown as having a crush on her boss, the great B.R. He is also attracted to her leading to a brief fling, but within a month, B.R. marries Paro who is a from Delhi. Priya herself gets married to a small time lawyer from Delhi, Suresh. The two of them try for 'contacts' with the rich and the mighty. This Priya returns in the second book *Priya in Incredible Indyya*, 25 years later as a middle-aged woman with two sons of marriageable age. Her husband, Suresh, is a junior minister now. The other set of characters is also there. It is Poonam now

who steps in Priya's shoes. The novel gives the reader a glimpse into the artificial life of the high society in Delhi.

In her novel *The Immigrant* (2008), Manju Kapur tells the story of a thirty year old English lecturer, married to an Indian settled in Canada. The novel touches in detail the sexual life of her husband who is administered treatment for deficiency by female therapist who also acts as a live stimulator. Kapur boldly portrays action in titillating detail. The present generation writers have touched upon the theme of sex in all its variations and depth. Some of the titles are tell-tale. The novel *Of Course I love you..! Till I find Someone Better* written by Maanvi Ahuja jointly Durjoy Dutta does not rise above the level of soft porn.

Romance: Journalist Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor* is a novel of chick-lit category, high on romance between an advertising executive and a cricket player. *The House That BJ Built* is the story of high class swashbuckling, philanderers and equally spirited women of different ages. *Right Fit Wrong Shoe* by Varsha Dixit is a racy thriller of contemporary liberated lifestyle. Swati Kaushal's *Piece of Cake* has an Indian working girl as the central character in an interesting plot that is imbued with humour. The category of Chick-lit subsumes many of Jaishree Misra's novels like *Secrets and Lies* and *Secrets and Sins*, though a murder mystery gives a different turn to the former.

At the young age of 24, Nikita Singh has seven novels to her credit, written in the short span of last four years only. These are: *Love @ Facebook*, *Accidentally in Love... With Him? Again?*, *If If it's Not Forever... It's Not Love* (co-authored), *The Promise*, *Someone Like You* (co-authored), *The Unreasonable Fellows*, *Right Here Right Now* and *After All This Time*. She has co-authored two novels with an equally popular novelist Durjoy Dutta. Preeti Shenoy has established herself as a fine story teller with four novels: *Life is What You Make It*, *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake*, *The Secret Wish List*, and *The One You Cannot Have*. These deal with the theme of love in its various mutations: innocent first love, extramarital affair, abandonment of wife many years later, search for love long lost, etc., etc.

Thrillers: Manreet Sodhi Someshwar has created a female protagonist Mehrunisa Khosa in her thrillers -- *The Taj Conspiracy* and *The Hunt for Kohinoor* published by her. Orvana Ghai has co-written a novel *You were My Love! Till You said You Love Me* with Durjoy Dutta who has become the heartthrob of young readers. It may be mentioned here that Manavi Ahuja and Neeti Rastogi had also joined hands with him to write novels. Monabi Mitra has produced two murder mysteries: *FIR* and *The Final Report*.

Fantasy & Myth: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has also dabbled in fantasy as in a trilogy based on the 'Brotherhood of the Conch'. In *Shadowland* (2009), the last offering of this trilogy, fantasy and time travel combine in a thrilling adventure. Talking of fantasy, Nilanjana Roy's *The Wildings* is an illustrated fictional work in which the world is seen through the eyes of a cat. Namita Gokhale, the driving force behind the famed Jaipur Literary Festival, has six novels and an anthology of short stories to her credit. She took up myth for her early novels like *The Book of Shiva* and even the later ones like *The Search of Sita*. In the first novel, she also describes the twelve jyotirlingas dotting the Indian landscape. Besides, she also wrote *The Mahabharata*.

The science fiction segment is gaining popularity steadily. Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* is a futurist tale about life on the planet Jupiter. It has been longlisted by the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and shortlisted by The Hindu Prize for Best Fiction 2016. Aayushi Pandey's *Okozbo: The Fights* also talks about other worlds.

Conclusion: It can be seen that there is no limit to the themes and styles chosen by women novelists. There is no area which has solely been dealt with by male writers. The stereotypical view of women's fiction being tied to women's concerns does not hold true. There is indeed consternation in feminist

circles on this count. “If there is women's literature”, points out Joanne Harris, the writer of *The Gospel of Loki*, “Why not men’s literature?” (Flood) It is as simple as that. The question is why does fiction have to be gendered if not for the outdated approach of looking at writer through the prism of sex? What it means to suggest is that men are the norm, but women form a sub-category!

The well-known Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande comments in this connection: “My writing has been categorized as ‘writing about women’ or ‘feminist’ writing. In this process, much in it has been missed. I have been denied the place and dignity of a writer who is dealing with issues that are human issues, of interest to all humanity” (Jain 37).

There is, it seems, the market compulsion to project the women’s writing as a distinct category. In fact, the publishing houses have been forcing women writers to fall in line with the old viewpoint. For example, “if you want to publish on Amazon, you must pick a category from a wide-ranging list of possibilities that includes 10 subgenres of women's fiction and zero that are labeled ‘men's fiction’” (Flood). This is corroborated by a number of writers including Yael Goldstein Love who comments about presuming a writer to be male if the book drives in a particular direction: “If [...] the bold, typeface-dominated design you find on men’s book covers, but rarely women’s, declares, ‘This book is an event,’ then you can see why publishers might shy away from pairing that design with a woman’s name. Sweetness and light is a better tact to take, rather than risk putting off readers with a promise they might find presumptuous even before they crack open the book.”

NOTES

¹The calculation of number of novels in Indian English Fiction for the time period 2000-2010 has been done on the basis of the document appended to the ‘Introduction’ section of the book *21st Century Indian English Novel in English* edited by the writer of these lines.

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