



### EMPOWERING OF INDIAN ENGLISH FEMALE NOVELISTS: A JOURNEY

Narishakti was, is and will be the main source of power in the various theoretical and pragmatic disciplines in India. During the days of Vedas, India favored the equality of females in all the spheres of life. According to the Hindu theology, the god of creation Brahma created a progeny that was half man, half woman or **Ardhanarishwara**, possessed of both feminine and masculine energies. The word **`Ardhanarishvara`** is formed by the combination of three words **`Ardha`**, which means half, **`Nari`** which means female and **`Ishwara`** which means lord. Together, it is a reference to the Lord/God, whose half part is of Nari/female. It is believed that the God is Shiva and the female part is his partner 'Parvati', the symbol of Shakti. The Ardhanarishvara represents a constructive and generative power.

(<https://sites.google.com/site/nithyanandafamily/insight/ardhanarishvara---concept-and-significance>)

Philosophically, this form is associated with the Grace of God. Shiva and Shakti is one and the same Supreme. Poet Kalidasa hails them as inseparable like the word and its meaning, the letter and its pronunciation. (<http://www.shaivam.org/siddhanta/maardh.html>)

Since the classical ages, females have enriched the Indian episteme through their varied and vivid contributions. In Vedic times women and men were considered equal in spheres of education and religion. A number of Vedic hymns are attributed to their names. For instance, hymns are attributed to women such as Apala, the daughter of Atri, Ghosa, the daughter of Kaksivant or Indrani, the wife of Indra. During the Vedic Times, women had the male privilege of receiving the sacred thread and studying the Vedas. According to the ancient work, the *Haritasmrti*, Brahnavadinis, a class of women, remained unmarried and spent their lives in study and ritual. Panini's distinction between arcarya (a lady teacher) and acaryani (a teacher's wife), and upadhyaya (a woman preceptor) and upadhyayani (a preceptor's wife) indicates that women at that time could not only be students but also teachers of sacred lore. Kathi, Kalapi, and Bahvici were the scholars of the past times. The Upanishads refer to several women philosophers, who disputed with their male colleagues. There are a dozen names of woman revealers of the Vedic wisdom, such as Visvavara, Shashvati, Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Ghosha, and Aditi, who instructed Indra, one of the Devas, in the higher knowledge of Brahman, the Universal Spirit. ([http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Women\\_in\\_Hinduism.htm](http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Women_in_Hinduism.htm))

Louis Jaccoliot, the celebrated French author of the Bible in India: Hindoo Origin of Hebrew and Christian Revelation said: "India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we

seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience." He also said: "What! here is a civilization, which you cannot deny to be older than your own, which places the woman on a level with the man and gives her an equal place in the family and in society." (Jaccoliot, Louis).

The colonization of India by British resulted in exploitation of India but exposed us to the foreign language. It either destroyed or derogated the Indian traditions of the classical times. The equality position of the Indian females also suffered a set-back from the patriarchal cultural attack of the English people, culture and language. Till date, the Indian female has passed through various phases of marginalization to equality to superiority in a number of spheres, Indian English Literature being no exception in it.

The rationale for this paper is to bring to light the various landmarks achieved by Indian English female novelists to illumine the world by Narishakti. Along with this, the paper addresses a variety of fictions by these female authors and a critical analysis of the multitude of the female characters delineated by them.

Indian English fiction by women writers started with the work *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* by Krupabai Sattianadhan in 1887-88 in a serialized form in the famous *Madras Christian College Magazine*. The title and the plot of the first Indian English novel revolve around a female, Saguna, a converted Christian. She is a fusion of both the old and the modern. She possesses the gifts of western education and culture like intellect, open-mindedness and fearlessness. With this, she also brims with the essence of Indian life. Saguna is a native Christian girl, educated and modern with exposure of the modern period and its aspects. She is going to England to study medicine. But she is not tempted by the material success desired by the westerners or their favorers. She attains her love in a man whom she considers fit. In a sense, she decides what is apt for her and comes out at the end as the New Woman.

A number of female fiction writers of Indian English came to the scene and gave their contribution. Each is unique in their depiction of Indian females. The works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Shobha De and Manju Kapur and many more have left a permanent stamp on the readers of Indian fiction in English. Through the arduous journey, the Indian English women novelists have carved a niche for themselves.

Anita Desai is considered as a prominent female novelist in the Indian English literature. Right from *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) to *The Artist of Disappearance* (2004) she has shown myriad women characters and their quest for identity and freedom in a patriarchal society. The important female characters under study, in this paper, from Anita Desai's novels are: Uma, Aruna, and Anamika in *Fasting and Feasting* and Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*.

The novel *Fasting Feasting* is the story of a group of female characters: Uma, Anamika and Mira Masi. Uma is suppressed by the dominating Mamapapa who control her right from her birth. The scenario worsens with the birth of a boy, Arun. Uma is forced to leave her education and take care of her brother. In a literal sense, she takes the role of an ayah in the family. She is upset with these developments and wishes to escape from such patriarchal world of Mamapapa. She finds her respite in the company of Mira Masi, who tells about the stories of Hindu legends.

According to L. Volna, with Mira Masi, Uma feels that she is admitted into the same sanctuary that had been previously closed to her" (Volna, Ludmila.). Uma is able to identify her self in the company of Mira Masi. She finds peace and solitude, which is absent in the world of Mamapapa. In fact, the combined identity of Mamapapa makes it a domineering patriarchal world. The character who is in complete contrast to Uma is that of Anamika, a mix of beauty and brain. This is considered as a rare in females, as they are labeled as brainless in the cultural world of India. Being beautiful and knowledgeable is not enough to break the bonds of the patriarchal Indian society. Anamika is not able to adjust to the wishes of her in-laws and suffer death in the hands of her in-laws.

The empowerment of females is not only hindered in such scenarios but they are literally destroyed in the name of culture. With this, there is no respite from such situations. All Umas are not privileged enough to enjoy the company of Mira Masis. At times, when such company is devoid to them, they face the fatality in their lives as in the case of Anamika. The case of Maya in Anita Desai's another novel *Cry, the Peacock* is worth to be analyzed. When such cushions of a female-support are not available to females, they revolt.

*Cry, the Peacock* is the first novel of Anita Desai. It is the story of Maya, a girl who was too much pampered by her father. Being a motherless child, she has got all the focus and attention of her father. Father's over-protective love and affection hampered her free growth. She grows up physically but mentally she is almost childlike. All her wishes were being fulfilled by her father. He made her princess of a toy-world. That world was "like a toy, especially made for me, painted into my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes." (Desai, Anita.)

Maya is married to Gautama, who is a realistic man mainly involved in his professional life. Maya wished that Gautama understand her emotions, like her father did. But there was an utter disappointment on her part. She was very close to her dog, Toto. The death of Toto made her upset. When Maya looked upon Toto's dead body she, "screamed and rushed to the garden top to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house". (Desai, Anita.) Gautama was not much affected by the entire incident. The sorrow of the death and detached behavior of Gautama forced Maya to retreat in the memories of her childhood,

where she was comforted by her father in all difficult times. But there is no one to care about her emotions. Maya wants her husband to take the role of her father, as it was pre-ordained according to the cultural perspectives in which she grew up. But being a pampered daughter, she is not ready to accept the situation meekly. She is not the helpless female i.e. the *ablanari*, which fits most of the Indian patriarchal mind-set. She is not the Victorian 'Angle in the House', (Patmore, Coventry.) an ideal wife/female in the domestic household. The growing distance between Maya and her husband, Gautama, hurls her into the abyss of nightmares. She is not lucky like Uma of *Fasting, Feasting* to enjoy the company of another female. She tries to connect to her friends but in vain. In fact, their problems disturb her. She is not ready to make any kind of compromise. Maya loses her sanity completely and she kills Gautama by pushing him off the roof, and she herself descends irrevocably into the world of past. Many male-minded would call her psychological abnormal but who would like to stand in her shoe. If the male finds her female partner not adjusting to his needs, she is mal-treated, beaten, forced to comply and even killed as in the case of Anamika of *Fasting Feasting*. No such standards for females are ever thought about. In case of a void, the path taken by Maya seems the only option she is left with. She depicts her inner strength to break the taboo of considering her *pati* as *parmeswar* and kill him like a Shakti, Nari Shakti slays the evil.

The female protagonists of the novels of Shobha De suffer from same emotional detachment from their male counter-parts. They resort to another form of revolt. The novel *Snapshots* depict a group of urbanized, self-sufficient, confident and economically independent women discussing their sex life. They break the social norms and moral codes set before them by the patriarchal society. They are empowered by expressing their sexuality. They gain an identity from such acts. Reema loves Raju but he is not rich man. Hence, she marries rich guy but continues her affair with Raju. Swati accepted the offer of Juan Mendonca, a rich industrialist, without giving a second thought, as she was interested in his money and not his old age. Reema had a discreet relationship with her brother-in-law Randhir just for mere sexual pleasure. Her husband was completely unknown to the affair. In fact, she made a sort of arrangement for sexual pleasure whenever Randhir came to India. Aparna does not love Prem, her employee but she readily makes love to him in the public on the beaches of Goa. She is neither ashamed of it nor feels the shame of betraying her husband. For her, 'Prem was a convenience. A cold blooded one.' (De, Shobha.)

Another novel *Sisters* by Shobha De narrates the story of two step-sisters Mikki and Alisha. Mikki/Mallika returns from USA on the funeral of her parents. Her father's name was associated with a multi-crore scam, which results in damaging their company's reputation.

For De's women a husband has to be one who can be of some use to his wife. Mikki needs someone who can help her save the Hiralal Industries. Naveen, her fiancé, fails to revive her company. She breaks off the engagement and gets attracted towards Binny Malhotra. He is famous as a womanizer but she thinks him fit as the one who can save her company. She marries Binny, who helps her revive her company. Binny starts to dominate her in the traditional role as a husband. Mikki is not the tamed Indian woman. She revolts and leaves the house of Binny to stay at her father's house. Mikki wished to be an active partner not only in the life of her husband but also in business. To achieve her objective she is ready to take steps, which are beyond the norms and codes of a traditional Indian wife. Thus, the female protagonists of Shobha De highlight the New Woman who cares more for her freedom and empowerment. She is not only the free woman of Virginia Woolf, with a '500 pound a year and a room of one's own.' (Woolf, Virginia.) She holds powerful dominating control over her and her husband's life. She wants to control everything as a way to empower herself. To conclude, I quote K.K. Sinha, who rightly states, "Shobha De stands for equal and normal treatment to the woman in this hurly-burly world of ours....She stand for the New Woman – casual looking but ambitious, professional focused and in control." (Sinha, K. K.) Thus, in this short but symbolic study of Indian English fiction by female writers, one can whole-heartedly accept the fact of empowerment of women. They have gone beyond the chains of society so as to empower them in their own ways. They have succeeded in 'Killing the Angel of the House' (Woolf, Virginia.) image, which was imposed on them since ages.

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