

Contemporary Women Writers and the Problematics of the Nation

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ABSTRACT

The intellectual trajectory of female aesthetics has taken a turn, from a concentration on women's literary subordination and exclusion to women's separate literary tradition. Women writers have moved on to encompass the political, national and universal. A closer look is required at the negotiations of women writers with bigger subjects like nation and its politics in the creative and critical field of English writing in India. Women writers have had significantly different negotiations with the nation since its inception. The writer has to glorify her nation or express the maladies of her nation and prescribe the ways and means to eradicate them.

KEYWORDS

Women writers; Struggle; Politics; Maladies

Indian women writers have recently been having their own say about who constitutes the nation. The leading women writers deal in a direct way with the situation of the nation, problems of the nation, middle-class life, different cultures that make up the nation and the question of the place of women in the national community.

National life profoundly influences a country's literature and is, in turn, profoundly influenced by it. Life and its problems, society and its evils, and politics and its controversies, all are expressed in the literature of the country. Literature thus becomes a mirror of national life, reflecting the nation's aspirations, struggles, problems and misfortunes. At

the same time, literature has the power to mould a nation's life and direct it into various channels suggested and urged by various writers.

Many contemporary Indian women novelists have turned to the past to trace the mood of nationalism and cherish the memories of the bygone days. The writers' preoccupation with some event of national import and readers' interest in it has wide repercussions. They not only reach the minds of the people through their writings, but also subject every institution of the nation to a specific political philosophy, and through that, they propagate their point of view.

The post-colonial women writers from India are intent on speaking their

identity through narrative, and they also write a space for themselves either within or even on the margins of the post-colonial nation. These women writers have succeeded in addressing issues that have both national and trans-local resonances, sometimes establishing cross-border affiliations as they write. There is an involvement with the changing national scene or concern for the destiny of the country. Several writings are a sincere attempt at recording and interpreting a period of Indian history. Many of the novels derive their material largely from the national and political scene of India. The effect of national life on literature and vice versa may be illustrated by examples from women writing in India. Some of the writers are committed, who are ardent believers in the ideology they are writing about, while there are others, who write as observers and chroniclers. The distinction between committed and uncommitted writers becomes meaningful only when we examine particular novels.

The paper focuses on the engagement of contemporary women writers Manju Kapur Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai with the problem of the nation and its attendant issues.

Set against the backdrop of the partition saga that divided India and Pakistan into two independent sovereign nations in 1947, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is both a love story and a coming of age tale. The central character of the novel, Virmati, is based on Kapur's own mother, who was a difficult daughter living in a joint Hindu household in Amritsar. The family's tenant, a progressive (and married) professor, fell for her independence and interest in education. Needless to say, her family was hostile toward the situation, and the state of the nation mirrored this hostility.

In her novel, *Difficult Daughters* (DD), Manju Kapur has an unusual angle on the involvement of women in Gandhi's Swaraj agitations. In 1930, Gandhi began to

encourage women to participate in civil disobedience actions. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, some highly educated independent women were active members of the nationalist movement. Such progress overlapped with profound backwardness. The contradictory progress and backwardness of women are one of the great contradictions of Indian modernity, and it's one of Manju Kapur's central preoccupations in *Difficult Daughters*.

The novel is set at a time when India fights for freedom from British rule. The central character Virmati who is the difficult daughter of mother Kasturi, desires education and fights for the freedom to live life on her own terms. In this struggle, she loses a part of herself, similarly, India attains freedom but at the cost of partition, at the cost of thousands of innocent lives lost in the fire of communal hatred. In the novel, Kapur emphasizes the contribution made at that time by women, who while demanding equal opportunities for themselves, were a visible force in the non-violent resistance to British rule.

Some women became politically active, participated in conferences, demonstrations, and rallies and wore white khadi. Kasturi, Virmati's mother is often seen spinning. The program for women was devised in such a way that women could remain at home and still contribute to the movement by the boycott of British goods and by spinning and weaving khadi. Both these methods were eminently suited to the constraints of women. Voicing the flip side of a national movement, Shakuntla, Virmati's cousin says: "How much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry and nothing else." (DD 15).

Kapur is critical of the hierarchical structure of the Indian society in which females are doubly dispossessed by the oppression of patriarchy, on the one hand,

and of colonialism, on the other. In the novel, Kapur also suggests the tension between modernity and tradition. The novel presents the social and gender constructs that arise because of modernity. Virmati tries to achieve a level of modernity through education and social mobility but stumbles on traditional values. The novelist uses the novel to criticize the politics of partition and post-partition events, especially contemporary Indian issues. It is suggested that Hindu Nationalism works within the existing patriarchy, which can further limit the woman's sphere.

Instead of creating a feeling of communal harmony and societal unity, Indian nationalism creates hostile discourse, because of political, national and religious affiliations. Kapur associates religious communalism and nationalism, as the result of patriarchal and colonial constructs. She feels that nation is being pushed into a false notion of nationality and religion. Women in the national imaginary were placed in a high position but in reality, their difficulties and discrimination were hardly discussed. *Difficult Daughters* remains a powerful portrait of a society.

Manju Kapur in *A Married Woman* (MW) focuses on the complex portrayal of the social and communal unrest, the Hindu-Muslim conflict as crystallized around the Ayodhya /Babri Masjid issue. The novel is set in an India of the late 1980s and early 1990s, poised on the verge of its globalization-powered take-off. It explores two controversial subjects: Hindu-Muslim confrontation and same-sex intimacy between women, against a backdrop of respectable middle-class Delhi life. In the novel, history enters the contemporary setting through the presence of a highly changed symbol of ancient India today appropriated for new purposes namely the City of Ayodhya. Kapur describes the notorious event – the demolition of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu

extremists with a fine sense of documentation.

The personal histories of the two women Astha and Pipeleeka unfold in the larger context of a changing India. Kapur here has interrogated reductive and communalist views of Indian history when she boldly takes on the subject of the historical and political controversy of the Babri Masjid. Ayodhya is a city with major symbolic resonance as both a mythical space of the Hindu cultural heritage and a very contemporary post-independence trouble spot.

In recent times, Ayodhya has become a location where, on 6 December 1992, an army of several thousand Kar Sevaks tore down the Babri Masjid with their hands, brick by brick, and where Hindu activists have since tried through the courts, thus far unsuccessfully, to gain approval to build a new temple to Rama, on the site of the Ram Janambhoomi. Ayodhya is thus a signifier of both ancient and contemporary India, of both the co-existence and the opposition of the Hindu and Muslim faiths.

So the key to the plot of the novel is the Babri Masjid episode. On one side the nation is falling apart because of religious differences and the dynamics of power politics and on the other hand, Astha's marriage is falling apart because of differences that somehow cannot be bridged. The novel beautifully describes the socialist generation of India post-independence, dealing with self-imposed limitations and socio-economic hardships. It expects the acknowledgement of oppression and the inability of the individual to affect change in the circumstances.

Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things* (GST) questions the power of politics and attempts a kind of reform through the power embodied in the art of storytelling. Here she deals with the problems of the nation. The rapid growth of the national economy has made the

unsolved social and cultural complexities, inconsistencies and contradictions within the country more invisible and obscure. For Roy, India as a nation in unity is barely an illusion. She exposes India to its problems with class and society. Till today the values of the caste system are held strongly in India. The novel talks about various hierarchies on which Indian society is structured-hierarchies that are repressive and hence invite reaction.

Rahel and Estha both suffer from a cracked psyche due to their unreasonable separation after their parent's divorce at the age of seven. This decision was made in the court of law that stated that monozygotic twins couldn't be separated but dizygotic could, thus hierarchies of reason over emotions; Velutha is disowned by comrade Pillai, his own party leader, and finally he loses his life because of his Paravan identity, the identity of an untouchable-thus hierarchy of upper caste over the lower castes; Chako gets away with his illicit relationships with women in the factory, whereas Velutha is punished brutally for his relationship with Ammu-thus hierarchy of rich over poor; Rahel and Estha crave for love from relatives while Sophie Mol gets it all-thus racial hierarchy; Ammu is denied college education against her wishes-thus hierarchy of patriarchal society over female individuality.

The three focal points around which the novel moves are the caste question, environmental issues and gender inequality. The problems of patriarchal domination and female subalternity are rooted in the geo-cultural reality of Ayemenem and Roy attacks the patriarchal notions of Kerala's touchable society. Velutha's technical expertise and newly acquired religious status as a converted Christian could not save him from being a victim in a casteist society. She directs her anger against the Communists, the rich elite of Ayemenem, and the public administration. It is an articulation against the established order and social hypocrisy.

Roy's novel records the dislocations between the 'Small God' of individual lives and the 'Big God' of the nation. Indian history and politics shape the plot and meaning of *The God of Small Things* in a variety of ways. Some of Roy's commentary is on the surface, with jokes and snippets of wisdom about political realities in India. However, the novel also examines the historical roots of these realities and develops profound insights into how human desperation and desire emerge from the confines of a firmly entrenched caste society. Roy reveals a complex and longstanding class conflict in the state of Kerala, in India, and she comments on its various competing forces.

For example, Roy's novel attacks the brutal, deep-rooted, and systematic oppression at work in Kerala, exemplified by figures of power such as Inspector Thomas Mathew. Roy is also highly critical of the hypocrisy and ruthlessness of the conventional, traditional moral code of Pappachi and Mammachi. On the opposite side of the political barrier, the Kerala Communist Party, at least the faction represented by Comrade Pillai, is revealed to be much more concerned with personal ambition than with any notions of social justice.

Even the most progressive of democrats, irrespective of their political party or ideology, are unwittingly continuing social inequality, religious intolerance and racial discrimination.

The God of Small Things acknowledges the condition of the nation around us and that too without any distortions and aberrations. Roy does not retain an unmistakably national pride in her country. She allows herself to support a redefined nationalism. Her political activism suggests that the nation can be mobilized on behalf of minority groups, including women groups disadvantaged both by tradition and by the transnationalism associated with globalizing capital. Significantly the nation is

constituted in cross-border, trans-local, and even positively international ways through activist networks and environmental causes. She interestingly explores the impact of the nation or post-colony on women. The adult Rahel's sense of being removed from her history is partly occasioned by changes the global tourism industry has brought to Ayemenem. For Roy, the nation reclaimed for women as a differential space can become a ground on which their subjectivity may be expressed; a political vantage point from which demands for social justice and equality can be voiced.

By exploring the different modes, through which resistance may be expressed, her novel deconstructs the one-dimensional equation of the post-colonial and the transnational and probes its politics too.

Arundhati Roy as a committed writer has played a significant and effective role in the presentation of culture and the reconstruction of society by expressing and depicting the thoughts and ideologies which would speak of new values.

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (IL) is about modern issues that beset all nations-globalisation, multiculturalism, terrorism and insurgency. She also explores complex issues such as colonialism, racism, immigration and the myths of both India and America. Here she makes clear her intentions to expand her reach from the narrow boundaries of home to the global arena.

She takes us to the north eastern Himalayas, where a rising insurgency Hence the GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) was formed which would gain Gorkhas their birthright. The Gorkha activists argue that the Gorkha inheritance so far has been of loss with a little gain. The British Army and then the Indian Army used the Gorkhas as soldiers paying a meagre salary. The GNLF Movement promises a change.

Although the story has as its backdrop, Kalimpong and the Gorkhaland agitation, it is actually about loss – the loss of identity, nationality and loyalty, and the realizations of this loss – the Gorkhaland agitation is merely a catalyst for the loss. The loss in the title is chiefly the loss of faith in India felt among the people who overstay tourist visas and become illegal immigrants in the U.S. The theme of loss is everywhere in the novel and governs largely the lives and actions of almost all the characters in it.

Desai effectively explores in this novel, the post-colonial chaos and despair as she deals with all levels of society and many different cultures.

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai is undoubtedly a saga of modern society at the global level. The images of the distortion of the natural environment and its impact on the survival of man have become an integral part of the text. Here the novelist has tried to show how a few persons may easily disturb the balanced, eco-friendly lifestyle of a larger population. Terrorist activities, motivated by political reasons, easily turn heaven-like nature into hell. The growing discontent, anxiety, persistent insecurity and faithlessness are the natural consequences of the ravishing scenario of nature. Besides mental imbalance, physical health is in continuous peril in the face of increasing anti-human and anti-ecological activities.

Sometimes our ecosystem gets disturbed in the name of national security. Those who used to live in a place in complete harmony with nature are turned off by big political jargon, especially in areas of high sensibility.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is a text with new alertness to the present-day need for ecological balance in the country. Kiran Desai through her novel affirms that the plight of modern man is integrated not only into socio-political concerns but also in a manifestation of

man's growing insensibility towards nature.

Such eco-centric texts can at least sensitize people to think seriously about these problems and find out a solution for them.

Writing about the problematics of India provides precious insights into local struggles and grants visibility to subtle sources of tension. The committed feminist

writers have a very important role to play here, creating sensitivity to different problems and denouncing the weight of rich traditions whose negative aspects have been deemed acceptable because they have been endured. These writers' intellectual works are a form of raising awareness, identifying problems, and of resistance and negotiation.

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