
TRANSCENDING THE MARGINS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN'S WRITING

Dr. Syed Hajira Begum

*Assistant Professor and HOD, Department of Studies in English
JSS College of Arts, Commerce and Science
Affiliated to University of Mysore, B N Road, Mysuru- 570025*

Received: Sep. 2018 Accepted: Oct. 2018 Published: Nov. 2018

Abstract: Transgression is a manifestation of a revolt against the societal norms, its codes and ideologies, a contestation and a refusal of the social taboos and values to achieve liberation. The female resistance against a patriarchally maintained culture found in various Postcolonial women writings irrespective of the countries these women belong to. This study focuses on contemporary fictional writings of Indian Women writers and Women writers of African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Diaspora writers of these countries to interpret their works using deconstruction and subversion bringing out their feminist points of view. The arrival of the 'new woman' in these works, who views herself as the object of cultural/social oppressions attempts to rebel against them, consciously or unconsciously, within her 'living space'. However, at times, she reflects the inability to reject her cultural/social background totally and hence fails to transcend the horizon depicting a revolutionary spirit. She therefore stands at crossroads, caught between tradition and modernity. However, writers like Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair from India, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from Nigeria, and Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana have shown that contemporary women are not at cross roads, but are capable of living their life going against to the so called traditions and customs which are detrimental to their self-realization.

Keywords: Cultural/Social Oppression, Diaspora, Female Resistance, Living Space, Subversion.

Introduction: Transcending barriers of cultures and focusing on the awakening amongst their female protagonists, the Postcolonial women writing presents the image of the 'New Women' who embark upon a journey into their self and recognise themselves as individuals with the power to choose. Each woman protagonist interrogates her life defying all conventions and chooses a strategy that involves a journey into herself within a psychological and geographical context. The postcolonial women writers explore their protagonist's journey into herself as a means of self-knowledge through an exploration of personal experience, whereby they project a new empowering image for woman. In an attempt to reclaim and write against the representation of postcolonial women as the exoticized other, these novels seek to define the multiple voices of the previously marginalized other and establish a claim to woman's cultural identity.

Transgression is a manifestation of a revolt against the societal norms, its codes and ideologies, a contestation and a refusal of the social taboos and values to achieve liberation. Modern era has brought an entire change in women's life and existence. Although they have always been the heart of family life through their roles as wife, mother, daughter, sister, etc., living for the family values and its unity, but now at present time with the various political events with different ideologies "women have contributed more in terms of nationalism than men, and they have a great sense of service to their country" [Cormack, 169]. Yet their work goes unnoticed in the patriarchal world. Women writers today, reveal the disconnection between what the women said and what they wrote, between their spoken words and their silences, between women as the subject matter of writing and women subjects and writers, between language, literature, and social movements and the emergence of women's voices. Thus contemporary women writers through their fiction have chosen to 'talk back', 'moving from silences into speech', as a gesture of defiance which makes new life and new growth possible, and it is no mere gesture of empty words, but an expression of a movement from object to subject - the liberated voice.

Rethinking Of Family Relationships: The Postcolonial women writers have portrayed women's issues realistically and psychologically in their novels. They broke the literary and social norms of the past to dwell deep into psyche of their characters, project various images of women and their status in society. In fiction, some women characters have attitude of rejection and negation of life while others have an affirmation and acceptance of life with a compromising attitude leading to deep sense of fulfilment. In this sense, the Postcolonial women writers created a pattern of new study because they have subverted the myth of a male dominated social system and laid a firm foundation in the realm of female study. Implicitly in all Postcolonial countries, there is common contemporary issue of women facing the identity crisis and alienation though living among the people in a family. The Postcolonial women writing thus seeks to "reinstating the marginalised in the face of the dominant," focusing on the themes like indifference towards gender issues, quest for identity.

It is noteworthy to see how most of the Postcolonial women writers like Flora Nwapa, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Anita Nair and many more upcoming new writers portray myriad faces of 'new woman' who fights for her rights and lives as an individual. These women give a tough fight against the established order and often come upon new concepts of morality and show the ways in which they empower themselves through the rethinking of family relationships. The 'new woman' according to these writers is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society and tries to improve it. She is contemplative about her predicament and chooses to protest and fight against the general, accepted norms and currents. What is new and different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. Their protest is not for equality only but for the right to be acknowledged as individuals – capable of intelligence and feeling. They do not look for freedom outside the house but within too, without painting their lives in various artificial shades of sentiments. This 'new woman' may not be 'ideal' or the 'best' woman. She is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society, and in exploring her true potential, along with the struggle to fulfil her urges and needs. However, this does not imply that women today wish to disturb the existing social and economic parameters. They are aware of their exploitation, conscious of their rights and willingly though assertively compromise with situations. Contemporary 'new woman' is necessarily pro-woman but not anti-man. Her concrete step moves towards better human relationships. Postcolonial women writers have caught the new women in this flux and have portrayed them realistically in their novels, like the one we find in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, where we come across the character of Nnu Ego, who suffers for the family until her death. She symbolizes a faceless wife and mother, devoting all her life for children and husbands, but dies "with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her" [Emecheta. 224].

The novels of some contemporary male writers do not subscribe to this image. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, Bhabhani Bhattacharya, and Elechi Amadi have not given us any significant portrayal of women in their fictional worlds. Wherever they have tried to characterise women, it has been in the traditional mould upholding their respective cultures. Raja Rao and Chinua Achebe spiritualizes and glorifies the concept of mother in their works. Chinua Achebe, the father of African literature, offers a glorious account of supreme motherhood in *Things Fall Apart*, the novel that considered as a world classic. Uchendu, the protagonist Okonkwo's maternal uncle, offers a glorious explanation of 'supreme motherhood', in an effort to reconcile his nephew to the punishment he has received for accidentally killing a village boy in a ritual ceremony. Uchendu also explains that a "child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family" [142] and yet mother's supremacy resides in her role as protector. Just as a "child seeks sympathy in its mother's hut, so a man finds refuge in his motherland" [143]. However, Achebe is not critical of the contradiction in the mythic concept of supreme motherhood and the limited status of the woman, who is required to do her husband's bidding in her day-to-day life. Similar societal set up we find in Indian men writings too. The silent, suffering nature of woman as a wife is emphasised by Mulk Raj Anand in *Coolie* and Bhabhani Bhattacharya in *Music for Mohini*. Bhattacharya's novels stress the traditional qualities of women like gentleness and adaptability. R K Narayan too projects the image of a

suffering wife in his novels *The Dark Room* [1938], *Mr. Sampath* [1949], and *The Financial Expert* [1952]. It is only in his *The Painter of Signs* [1976], that we get the picture of a liberated woman as we find Beatrice in Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah* [1987]. However, Cyprian Ekwensi and Elechi Amadi, the Nigerian writers, have focused on the corrupting influence of westernization on Nigerian woman and addresses themselves to the task of presenting women who have given up their traditional roles of mother, wife and daughter for other options. They portray woman as the "death principle" with pernicious influence of female sexuality threatening to destroy the social order. Amadi reinforces the patriarchal ideology that women's life is nothing without men and shows Ihuoma, the central character of the novel, *The Concubine* [1966], a death snare as the plot of the novel revolves around Ihuoma's successive attempts to seek fulfilment in marriage and on the attempts made by three men to woo and marry or bed her.

These men writers never tried to show the transcendence of women positively. They consider transcendence in women is for momentary pleasure or for quick money. Cyprian Ekwensi has depicted Jagua Nana in his novel *Jagua Nana* [1961] as the negative image of woman, showing that she takes to the life of sin leaving the responsibility of married life for momentary pleasure. R K Narayan's novel, *The Dark Room* represents a woman not being able to assert herself in a patriarchal household leaves her family and home, however finds that the world around her is equally oppressive, decides to return back to the exploitative domestic world, which arguably represents her assimilation into the patriarchal order. The fact, which arises from the traditional social structure that places female as a second-class being, illustrates a significant factor in the silencing of the female voice, and making her faceless as well. As observed by Nnaemeka [1994],

"the sexual politics and Victorian ideals of colonial education have created a hierarchy, privileging men by virtually erasing any meaningful female presence" [139].

Nnaemeka's remarks holds good even for Indian women and their condition in patriarchal Indian society.

The Indian woman, as appropriately presented in the modern and postmodern fiction written in English by Indian women novelists, behaves unlike her Western counterpart in her evolution from the 'feminine' to the 'female'. She is progressive and conscious of her rights like the contemporary Western counterpart, but she quickly compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family-unit with her male counterpart, which she must sustain and protect and not ignore or neglect due to the false notion of being 'liberated'. Simone de Beauvoir said in *The Second Sex*,

It is not regard for the opinion of others alone that leads her to give time and care to her appearance and her housekeeping... She wants to retain her womanliness for her own satisfaction... That has always been basic in her dreams of independence. She has no intention of discarding them when she has found liberty by other roads" [694-95].

She further says:

Today the woman who works is less neglectful of femininity than formerly, and she does not lose her sexual attractiveness. This success, though already indicating progress towards equilibrium, is not yet complete [695].

Viewed in this perspective, the novels of postcolonial women writers carefully portray the contemporary woman with crisis and conflicts unknown to her predecessors, the major one being her oscillation between the two opposite poles of human experience: urge for sex (erotica) and the spiritual quest. These writers are successful in realistic portrayal of women as suffers in day-to-day oppressive life in patriarchal societies, but never as under dogs, or appendages attached to their male counterparts rather as icons of female resistance. Their works also reveal the implications of transgression in women's lives as they challenged societal roles, negotiated tradition, sometimes transcending feminist aesthetics proclaiming the paradigm shifts in Postcolonial Women's writings. Consequently, they reconstruct previous notions of women in stereotypical and subjugated positions, charting the growth of female characters and the ways in which female protagonists emerge into agency and independence.

Challenging Patriarchal Dominance: As female characters challenge their familial relationships, they develop their sense of personhood, reclaiming wholeness, authority and female subjectivity, changing prescribed roles and structures. The representation of the dominant male has long governed the Third World literary canon where the patriarch of the family decides the family's daily actions and holds the power to influence their thoughts. Daughters often depicted as commodities rather than persons, taken under their father's authoritative wing until the time happens on that responsibility to their husbands. The works of contemporary women writers portray female characters challenging two forms of domination, one perpetuated by the father figure and the other by the husband who continues the practice of subjugation and female subordination. The challenge involves a process of metamorphosis where female characters' experience conflict between their expected passive obedience and their search for individual agency and personhood. This metamorphosis is in line with Walker and Ogunyemi's womanism, which theorises the key elements and experiences faced by women of African descent in developing their empowerment and female identities. Ogunyemi highlights that the philosophy that distinguishes womanist theory is "the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive integrative endings of womanist novels" [28]. This is an important component towards integrating and understanding contemporary women's writings, in which characters like Kambili [*Purple Hibiscus*], Ofunne [*Sky-High Flames*], Enitan [*Everything Good Will Come*] and Lola's [*Imagine This*], Uma [*Fasting, Feasting*], Ammu [*The God of Small Things*], Ida [*Difficult Daughters*], Nina [*Immigrant*], Akhila [*Ladies Coupe*], struggles and triumphs reformulating contemporary female representations.

Female Metamorphosis and Self-Actualization: By drawing on the figure of the young girl-child / woman, Postcolonial women writers offer a complex account of the hybrid spaces these female characters can locate themselves within, countering patriarchal repression and feminine submission. The traumatic events experienced within the patriarchal dominant relationships lead female characters towards self-identification and womanhood. In the wake of their realization, a paradigm shift can take place from the roles played within their family relationships either as obedient daughters or as submissive wives, to a new emphasis on personhood [Ogundipe- Leslie]. The concept of beginning is an interesting concept explored by these writers, creating new spaces for changes in female characters' lives despite their challenges. The female quest for empowerment, agency and self-identification achieved at the end of these texts, allowing the newly developed female personhood to lead a life filled with new opportunities. However, the idea of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a sea change in modern society. As rightly noted by Bijay Kumar Das, "Indian readers must not seek the prototypes of Sita or Draupadi in the contemporary society" [2007: 98].

Conclusion: The Postcolonial women writers draw one's attention to women's exploitation, and discrimination and they show their characters as beacons of hope to the oppressed ones and answer the questions relating to women's place in society by showing how women empower themselves and successfully redeem themselves from a web called patriarchy. 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]. *The Me Too Movement*, which is an independent outgrowth, influenced by the international campaign against sexual harassment of men in the workplaces gaining prominence in India, recently in 2018, as more and women coming forward speaking out their experiences and making allegations of sexual harassment by the men involved. The movement has since resulted in major social consequences for several of those accused, such as firing or resignation from their jobs. However, this movement being considered as elite and metropolitan in nature or the result of 'mob mentality' [Seema, *The Citizen*: 2018] yet it has shown the strength of contemporary Indian women that they are capable of transcending the margins through female resistance to safeguard themselves against patriarchal Indian society.

References:

1. Cormack, Margaret. (1953). *The Hindu Woman*, Bureau of Publishers, Teachers College, Columbia University.
2. Emecheta, Buchi. (1979). *The Joys of Motherhood*, New York: George Braziller.
3. Achebe, Chinua (1958) *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
4. Nnaemeka, Obioma. "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and The (Re) Inscription of Womanhood." *Research in African Literatures*, 25, 4 (1994).
5. De Beauvoir, Simone. (1949). *The Second Sex*, Translation and Ed. H M Parshley, Vintage, 1997.
6. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of Contemporary Black Female Novel in English (1985)", in Layli Philips, ed., *The Womanist Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2006.
7. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie. (1994). *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, Trenton, Africa World Press.
8. Das, Bijay Kumar. (2007). "The author and the Text: A Study of Shobha De's Snapshots". *Critical Essays on Post-colonial Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
9. Hajira Begum, Syed. "Deconstruction of Gender Identities: A Study of the Novels of Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie". *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 3. 1. (2016).
10. Mustafa, Seema. "Whoa #MeToo, Hold Your Horses..." *The Citizen*. Retrieved 2018-10-17.
