



# International Journal of Social Sciences Insights

A Globally Recognized Quality Refereed (Peer Reviewed) &  
Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Social Science Research

Web: [socialinsights.in](http://socialinsights.in)



## THE PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIAN-ENGLISH WRITINGS: SOME REFLECTIONS DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Prof. (Dr.) Geeta Goyal<sup>[I]</sup> Dr. Roopa Gupta<sup>[II]</sup>

[I] Professor, Department of English, RKSD College, Kaithal

[II] Associate Professor, Government College for Girls, Palawal, Kurukshetra.

### Article info

Received – 28 August 2025  
Received revised -10 September 2025  
Accepted -15 September 2025  
Available online -25 September 2025  
Pages: 8-11

**Keywords** : Women's struggle,  
predicament, patriarchal system, dual  
standards, dilemma, dignity

### Abstract

From depiction of India's struggle for Independence and feeling of nationalism to showing the social reality in the Post-Independence era including hunger and despair of village life, religious myths and realities – the journey of Indian-English writing has been quite long and wide. In the post-independence era, the main themes have been man-woman relationship, socio-political consciousness and the conflict between scientific growth and traditional values. The present paper proposes to bring out the predicament of women as depicted in Indian-English writings during the second half of the Twentieth Century. The focus has been on the condition of women, their dilemma and struggle in the wake of changing times and their response to the Indian social milieu as portrayed through different writers.

© N.K. Publishing .All rights reserved.

Corresponding Author:

Email-id: [geetaktl@gmail.com](mailto:geetaktl@gmail.com)

Prof. (Dr.) Geeta Goyal

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The journey of Indian-English writings has been quite long and wide. Covering diverse issues and multiple themes, it has become representative of the age, class, country. In the post-independence era, the main themes of Indian-English writers have been man-woman relationship, socio-political consciousness and the conflict between scientific growth and traditional values. Referring to the writings of this period, Ghosh opines, "...the novelists of the post-independence period have succeeded in projecting the growing trends of change in attitude, outlook and aspirations of a nation committed to ameliorate the lot of crores of people living below the poverty line, subjected to economic constraints and orthodox social obligations."<sup>i</sup> It is a fact that down the ages a woman's life has been a series of ordeals. She is considered "to be an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humanity, faith, knowledge."<sup>ii</sup> Despite the fact that several laws and policies have been framed and implemented to support and uplift women, gender bias has been observed in terms of sharing responsibilities at home, at workplace or in case of women working at the top positions. Though woman today has become more career oriented and has been playing a vital role in the nation's growth; yet she still has to assert a lot to overcome the orthodox mindset. To quote Shashi Deshpande, "Gender is undoubtedly one of the most important factors of our lives. ...Our lives are, to a great extent, shaped by our gender... I also realised that in a world dominated by male values, while the class and the class-struggle are taken seriously, the gender struggle is not."<sup>iii</sup>

Indian-English writers have dealt with women's issues in numerous ways. Many of them have brought out the pain and misery women undergo due to dual standards prevalent in society for a long time. Others bring out the restlessness and the existential struggle faced by women because of their assigned roles and sense of self and space. "The image of a cabined, cribbed and confined woman"<sup>iv</sup> has been delineated by many Indian novelists through their works. R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praraw Jhabwala, Kamla Das, Vijay Tendulkar, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Namita Gokhale, Arundhati Roy and many others have tried to establish women's identity in a patriarchal society. Their works emphasize women's freedom in respect of societal customs, traditions and value systems.

R. K. Narayan made a distinguished contribution to Indian-English writings with his voluminous work including fourteen novels and more than 200 stories. Centred at the fictional town Malgudi, Narayan's writings encompass Indian customs, traditions, value system, middle class moralities and status of women in contemporary times. *The Guide* (1958) by Narayan is a seminal work which redefines the position of women in Indian society. The protagonist, Rosie, struggles between traditional norms and her desire for liberation. Born in a family of temple-dancers, she searches for love firstly in her marriage with Marco and later in her relation with Raju, the guide. She wants to fly and enjoy life like a bird. To quote, "She ran like a child from plant to plant with cries of joy, while the man looked on with no emotion. Anything that interested her seemed to irritate him."<sup>v</sup> A strong-willed woman, Rosie resists "a single ideological position defined by the male world. She moves within and beyond the physical world to discover inner power and hidden essences."<sup>vi</sup> She challenges her socially stigmatized identity by acquiring a university degree in economics. Her decision to marry Marco, a man of academic interests, is primarily motivated by a desire to come out of the Devadasi fold and lead a respectable life. But she becomes a victim of patriarchal hegemony. Even after marriage, she doesn't get love and care from her husband which becomes one of the reasons to leave him, "I'd have preferred any kind of mother-in-law if it had meant one real, live husband" (*The Guide* 85). The interests of husband and wife are far apart. Marco hates her dancing skills and equates it with prostitution. Whereas he is passionate about ruin-collecting activities, Rosie is passionate about her dance. Defying cultural traditions, Rosie moves with Raju to pursue her passion. Raju supports her all along defying the traditions of his family, but with Rosie's success as a dancer, a gap starts emerging in their relations. Gradually, Rosie becomes tired of the mechanical life of giving performances round the clock. She feels herself like "a bull yoked to an oil-crusher that keep going round and round, in a circle, without a beginning or an end" (*The Guide* 76), like "one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey..." (*The Guide* 203). When she attains her height as a dancer, Raju starts using her art for monetary gains. Raju wanted to earn maximum money out of her dance performance. In his words "My philosophy was that while it lasted the maximum money had to be squeezed out." (*The Guide* 195). Despite his help in every possible way, he is unable to understand Rosie's emotional self. Their relationship finally fails due to Raju's over-possessive nature and emotional vacuum felt by Rosie. *The Guide* explores the tension between tradition and modernity. Here reference to another novel *The Dark Room* (1938) by Narayan is also important. Though there is a gap of twenty years in both the works, both offer valuable insights into Indian society and culture and deal with themes of woman's identity and societal expectations. *The Dark Room* focuses on the constraints placed on women in Indian society and deals with "the traditional male attitude towards women, which treats them as dolls, mere puppets; not as human beings."<sup>vii</sup> Savitri, the protagonist of *The Dark Room*, remains a passive sufferer all through her life tolerating her husband's insensitivity and relation with some other woman for the sake of her family. Through her, the "inferior status of women has been pinpointed again and again"<sup>viii</sup> as the novel symbolises her helplessness and deep mental agony. Rosie, on the other hand, is strong enough to defy tradition and move ahead by making her own decisions. Whereas Savitri breaks away temporarily to revolt against her husband's unjustified ways, Rosie, in her struggle to lead a respectable life, doesn't compromise either with her husband or with her lover. Passing through difficult phases she is finally able to realise her dream of establishing her identity through art. Though portrayed as a strong character, she too craves for love and belongingness all through her life just as Savitri.

The theme of women's search for belongingness has beautifully been depicted by Anita Desai. She is one of those writers who gave a new dimension to the theme of man-woman relationship as her novels are generally existentialist studies of individuals. To quote, "Marital discord, inability or unwillingness to communicate, the

agonies of sensitive and sometimes neurotic protagonist living in an insensitive world- these themes constitute the focus of attention of her fiction.”<sup>x</sup> Due to hypersensitive nature, her characters are unable to connect to their partners which results in husband-wife alienation. In her first novel-Cry the Peacock published in 1964, Desai depicts the fragmentation of the protagonist’s identity. Maya longs for her identity realized in terms of marital harmony but never succeeds. The same sort of problem is faced by Monisha in her marriage to Jiban in a conservative Hindu family in *Voices in the City* (1965). It is again the problem of incompatibility where there is lack of intimacy or sharing between a husband and wife. The novel deals with the problem of self in a metropolitan city Calcutta. She feels a terrible isolation in the joint family at her in-law’s house. She has no sharing with anyone, not even with Jiban. “Her husband’s inability to fathom her need as well as the general hard-headedness of his family members contributes to her isolation.”<sup>x</sup> She has to suffer more and more because of the oppressive environment of the city. With a thick quilt of pungent blue smoke, Monisha sees “another face of this devil city, a face... a dull, vacant, hopeless face. The rickshaw coolie, the street sweeper, the tanner, the beggar child with his limbs cut off ... they share one face, one expression of tiredness, such overwhelming tiredness...”<sup>xi</sup> The charge of theft in her own house is a big blow to her self-esteem. “...I passed on my way up to the room. They didn’t allow me to enter it... Jiban’s mother called out. ‘Money has been stolen, you know, Jiban’s money... I will not have a thief in my house. Who is to tell who this thief is? After all you were the only person who were in the room all day.’” (*Voices* 137). Her barrenness causes her humiliation and embarrassment. She feels insulted when her husband’s family talks and discusses about her organs and the reasons she could not have a child. “...my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to their scrutiny.” (*Voices* 113). She feels strangled as she has no freedom to talk to anyone, not even to her brother. She becomes lifeless and passive. Unable to relate to anyone, she finds her life meaningless and gradually becomes hysterical. The repression of desires leads her to nervous breakdown and she turns to painful death by burning herself. To quote, “Monisha’s tortuous journey towards her horrible death presents her spiritual and physical transformation in black, mourning colours. Monisha is transformed from a quiet, sensitive, mild, self-centred, beautiful girl into a barren, neurotic, diary-writing woman.”<sup>xii</sup> Thus, Anita Desai has depicted the interior call of Monisha who has always self-negated her desire of self-fulfilment. The title of the novel also refers to so many voices to be heard in the city that one’s voice goes unheard and life looks meaningless, futile, unchanged and unimproved.

Another writer who gives a realistic picture of women in contemporary society is Vijay Tendulkar, a Marathi playwright. In his play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) he exposes the dual standards of society and brings out the trauma of a woman in the name of social norms. Leela Benare, the protagonist, undergoes pain and humiliation caused by her fellow colleagues, who intentionally target her in the name of mock trial. Benare is a self-assertive woman who wants to live life on her own terms. “...My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those—no one! I’ll do what I like with myself and my life! I’ll decide.”<sup>xiii</sup> A popular and dedicated teacher in her early thirties, she dominates her associates belonging to Sonar Moti tenements Progressive Association Amature theatre troupe in Bombay. As a teacher, she earns the respect of her students and is committed to her profession. As the play proceeds, she becomes the target of her fellow colleagues who cannot tolerate her open lifestyle and don’t accept her way of living. The play depicts how she is trapped by her associates. In the name of a mock trial, her professional/ personal life is inter-mingled and questioned. To quote, “Just look at the way she behaves. ... Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman?” (*Silence* 46). The writer uses satire and irony to highlight the hollowness of society. All the unethical things take place in ‘court’: false evidence is created, allegations are framed and when Benare wants to speak a few lines, she is constantly cautioned by the judge to be silent as ‘the court is in session’. She is made the prime accused as the unwed mother of his illegitimate child whereas Prof. Damle is summoned merely as a witness during the trial. Further, there is no trace of Prof. Damle who remains absent throughout the play. Her silent gaze and stiffness like a block of stone symbolises the pain she passes through. The word ‘Silence’ in the title of the play exposes the narrow mentality of the society which sets different yardsticks for a man and a woman and rarely supports a woman who wants to live life on her own terms. Through Benare’s soliloquy, some important issues in our society have been raised. If she is punished for violating the traditions, why not Damle? How pure are the people who pronounce their judgement? What’s the meaning of ‘freedom’ for a woman? One thing noteworthy is that Benare bravely fights her battle against social conventions and therefore becomes victorious even in her defeat. Her struggle not only exposes the hypocritical attitude of the male dominated society but makes her earn readers’ sympathy and love.

Rama Mehta, an Indian sociologist and writer, records the impact of changing social conditions and education on values and attitudes of women. Her novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, is about a woman’s struggle to achieve her identity. By exploring the inner self of the protagonist symbolising ‘new woman,’ the author brings out the unease and restlessness of a middle class girl-educated-yet confined to constraints posed by the conservative society. It analyses the family structure and tradition as the key elements of patriarchal social organisation and depicts the struggle of the protagonist for balance between herself and the newly assumed role as a bride in a conservative family of Udaipur. Geeta’s struggle inside the haveli and her strength to overcome the fears forms the major part of the novel. After her marriage, the sudden change of atmosphere, family tradition and values creates confusion in her mind. The irrelevance of customs and traditions being blindly followed in the haveli makes her disturbed. She longs to express her feelings of love and appreciation for her father-in-law with whom she is not allowed to speak. “Even after seven years I am a stranger to those that are mine.”<sup>xiv</sup> However, with time a change is observed. She starts asking her husband to buy books without caring of what others think. She gives vent to her feelings by starting a school inside the haveli. Holding classes for illiterate women, teaching children from the neighbourhood, spending time with poor children give a new meaning to her life. While early in the book, Geeta seriously considers leaving her husband if he does not want to move out of the Haveli, in the due course of time, she begins to experience pride and affection for the haveli. “I don’t want to leave Udaipur now...Where else in the world would I get this kind of love and concern” ( *Haveli* 137). The third part of the novel depicts how with the passage of time, winds of change start flowing in the haveli. Geeta gets her place as an important member of family, starts

understanding her in-laws and to some extent, succeeds in moulding the haveli customs too. Her father-in-law also says, "I am proud of Binniji." (Haveli 158). To quote, "... To begin with Geeta and her in-laws stand at two hands of a straight line. By the time the book concludes. both parties have made a conscious effort to come closer and try to understand, tolerate and appreciate each other's views and needs."<sup>xv</sup> In this context, Darshana Trivedi remarks, "Geeta accepts the tradition, but preserves her own voice within the given social framework."<sup>xvi</sup>16

From the ongoing discussions, it has been revealed that Indian-English writers have made a significant contribution in bringing out the realities about women in our society. Most of them bring out the conflict their protagonists undergo-whether it is the conflict between husband and wife or age old traditions and progressive outlook or with one's own self - the focus of the writers has been to look into the social and cultural practices which deny women their rights to live as a human being in a male dominated society. One thing common is that all the writers want women to be recognised as individuals, to be accepted as equals.

## 2.0 References:

- 
- i Ghosh Pulakesh. *Feminism in R.K. Narayan's Novels*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers. 2013. P.16.
- ii Everett, Jana Matson. *Women and Social Change in India*. New Delhi: Heritage, 1981. P. 76.
- iii Shashi Deshpande, "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties," Quoted by K.K.Sinha in "Stemming the Rot: The Rising Woman with Promising Vistas Ahead." Ed. R.K. Dhawan. *Indian Women writers*. New Delhi: Prestige Publication, 2001. P. 9.
- iv Sinha K.K. "Where shall We Go hence." Ed. R.K. Dhawan. *Indian Women writers*. New Delhi: Prestige Publication, 2001. P 32.
- v Narayan R.K.. *The Guide*. Chennai: Sudarshan Graphics, 1958. P. 76. All references pertaining to the text are from this edition and are incorporated within parenthesis with *The Guide*.
- vi ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285580933\\_Feminist\\_Sensibility\\_in\\_R\\_K\\_Narayan%27s\\_The\\_Guide](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285580933_Feminist_Sensibility_in_R_K_Narayan%27s_The_Guide)).
- vii Ghosh Pulakesh. *Feminism in R.K. Narayan's Novels*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers. 2013. P. 102.
- viii Ibid. P.104.
- ix Prasad Madhusudhan, Anita Desai: *The Novelist*. Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981.
- x Acharya Shanta, "Problems of Self in the Novels of Anita Desai". Ed. R.K.Dhawan. *Indian Women Novelists*. Set I, Vol II. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. P. 55.
- xi Anita Desai. *Voices in The City*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965. P. 117. All references pertaining to the text are from this edition and are incorporated within parenthesis with *Voices*.
- xii Patil, P.F. "The Theme of Marital Disharmony in the Novels of Anita Desai". Ed. R.K.Dhawan. *Indian Women Novelists*. Set I, Vol II. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. P. 135.
- xiii Adarkar, Priya (Trans). *Silence! The Court is in Session*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2017. PP. 4-5. All references pertaining to the text are from this edition and are incorporated within parenthesis with *Silence*.
- xiv Mehta, Rama. *Inside the Haveli*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1977. P 103 All references pertaining to the text are from this edition and are incorporated within parenthesis with *Haveli*.
- xv Kirpal,Viney. "How Traditional can a Modern Indian be: An Analysis of Inside the Haveli," *Indian Women Novelists*. Vol. IV. Ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. P.181.
- xvi Trivedi, Darshana. "Redefining Traditional Values in Post Colonial India: A Study of Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli," *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English*. Vol. I. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003. P. 129.