Literary Reflections of Womanhood in Colonial and Postcolonial Indian English Fiction

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Abstract— *Tradition is not a force that modifies itself spontaneously; rather, tradition undergoes transformation only when members of society themselves enact deliberate change. The conceptualization of women within Indian society has evolved over decades—and often in abrupt, profound ways—marked by a succession of shifts that mirror changing historical, cultural, and ideological currents. The representation of "woman" has appeared in myriad forms, each reflecting different expectations, prescriptions, and aspirations imposed or cultivated within the social milieu. In literary domains, especially within the pages of early Indian English novels, one observes close examinations of these varying social identities—artfully revealing, through narrative and characterization, the altering masks worn by women in response to their time and context. This inquiry is an attempt to carefully identify and analyze those sites of change and continuity, as presented by pioneering novelists of the period. In composing this study, the objective is to gather and scrutinize the fragmented and diverse images of women, as they emerge from the multiple social layers and strata of Indian life—a reconstruction drawn from the nuanced tapestry that literature affords. It is essential to clarify that the analytical approach pursued does not advocate a position on either side of the feminist/anti-feminist divide. Instead, what is sought here is an exposition of the paradox inherent in women's representations: both as fixed cultural symbols and as evolving agents within a dynamic society. The novels selected for examination comprise the works of both male and female authors, reinforcing the principle that the first duty of a writer is not to any specific ideological stance but to the honest chronicling and interpretation of society's realities. By upholding this standard, the present study positions the writer as a true guardian of the social fabric—one whose role is to record, interrogate, and preserve the truths and contradictions of communal existence.*

Keywords— *Tradition, Transformation, Womanhood, Indian society, Indian English novels, Patriarchy, Gandhism, Social reform, Dowry system, Female agency, Education, Modernity, Female subjugation, Cultural identity, Literary representation*

From the Middle Ages extending down to the dawn of the twentieth century, the intricate fabric of Indian family life, encompassed within a multifaceted social milieu and complex cultural traditions, compelled women to live encapsulated within protective yet repressive boundaries erected by moralists and custodians of societal order. The profound influence of Manu's teachings was particularly impactful during this long epoch, shaping not only social attitudes but also practical conditions for women. The halcyon days of the Harappan civilization and the early Vedic period, noted as golden eras for women, gradually receded into the past. Up until the closing century, a woman's position within the family remained unequivocally subordinate, a state of affairs that significantly informed the genesis and thematic concerns of early Indian English novels. These novels reflect the

ongoing realities of female subjugation and limited agency, set against the backdrop of a society deeply imprinted by traditional prescriptions and patriarchal values derived, in large part, from authoritative texts like the Manusmriti. The novels thus emerge not only as literary artifacts but as sociocultural documents that illuminate the conditions and constraints defining womanhood during this historical juncture.

The emergence of Gandhism and the enactment of the Sharda Act unquestionably precipitated a profound and transformative shift in the lives of Indian women. The ideological and practical reforms advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, combined with legislative measures such as the Sharda Act, served to challenge and dismantle several oppressive social practices that had long constrained women's freedoms and status within society. The relentless efforts of earlier social reformers, including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jotiba Phule, Dhondo Keshav Karve, and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, were instrumental in abolishing pernicious customs such as sati, widow tonsure, and child marriage. These monumental social changes were not confined to the legal sphere alone; they found vibrant expression and representation within the literatures composed in various Indian languages. Writers increasingly sought to present authentic and unvarnished portrayals of women's realities—revealing the complexities, struggles, and aspirations of womanhood amidst a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. The convergence of Gandhian philosophy and reformist zeal thus influenced both societal attitudes and literary depictions, underscoring the central role of literature as a mirror reflecting the evolving status of women in Indian society.

In English novels as well, the emergence of realistic portrayals of women became increasingly noticeable. The pioneers of the Indo-English novel, such as M. R. Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, undertook explorations into the underlying reasons that shaped the traditional societal attitudes towards women. The influence of these long-standing traditional forces is profoundly evident in the manner in which the birth of a girl child is perceived within the Indian family context. This perspective, however, saw some modulation during the later Vedic period. From the times of the Atharva Veda (VI-2-3), which states, "The birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere, here grant a boy," through the medieval ages and persisting into contemporary times, the birth of a daughter has often been received with resignation, if not outright sorrow. Early Indian English novels mirror this social reality by illustrating how daughters are frequently unwelcome within their families, and they delve into the cultural and economic reasons sustaining this traditional viewpoint. One prominent factor is the dowry system, a practice notorious for impoverishing parents

owing to the financial burdens it imposes. In R. K. Narayan's novel, *The Financial Expert*, the character Margayya candidly reveals to his borrowers the economic strain incurred by his family in raising daughters, thereby reflecting the societal anxieties surrounding the birth of girls and the weight of entrenched traditions

> …Three daughters were born to my father.
>
> Five cartloads of paddy came to us every half year, from the fields.
>
> We just heaped them upon the floor of the hall,
>
> we had five halls in our house, but where has it all gone? To the three daughters!'
>
> 'But it is not said that a man who begets a son is blessed in three lives, because he gives away the greatest treasure on the earth?' said some one.
>
> 'And how much more blessed is he that gives away three daughters? He is blessed no doubt, but he also becomes a bankrupt,' Margayya said. 1

This contextual conversation exposes the greyish realities of its times. The problem of dowry and the traditional view about the girl's birth is expressed.

The protagonist, Rukmini, in *Nectar in a Sieve* closes her eyes in sorrow upon learning that she has given birth to a baby girl. Her husband desired sons who could assist him with the arduous work in the fields. This concern deeply troubles her, as she grapples with the societal preference for male offspring, especially the expectation that a first child should be a son. The prevailing negative attitude toward the birth of a girl child stems partly from the harsh realities of the dowry system, a burden Rukmini herself has suffered under, and partly from the traditional belief that sons serve as the pillars of support in old age. This perspective is further reinforced by religious doctrines that ascribe to sons the unique role of safeguarding ancestral spirits through ritual oblations. Raja Rao's protagonist, Ramaswamy, and his stepbrother, Vamana, perform such rites on the ghats of the Ganga River in the novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. Even progressive writers like Mulk Raj Anand echo this sentiment, as in his work *Morning Face*, where there is no depiction of joy at the birth of a girl. Likewise, R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* reflects this traditional viewpoint. However, contemporary society has improved somewhat compared to previous generations. Yet, it remains a matter of concern that a child not welcomed at birth faces daunting challenges in later life. If mothers themselves greet the birth of any child, girl or boy, with

sorrow or reluctance, then such a society is bound to remain conservative, backward, and deprived of progress.

Another perspective on this traditional viewpoint must be considered. The joy associated with the birth of a son holds significant importance from the woman's standpoint as well, for it is the mother of the son who experiences immense pride during his marriage. Yet, the infusion of Western cultural values did indeed foster a shift in attitudes toward daughters, particularly in the post-independence era. This evolving perspective is vividly illustrated in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya. In *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), Kalo, the blacksmith, initially wished for a son to assist him in the smithy, but his deep love for his wife, who died in childbirth, transfers to his daughter, whom he educates and cherishes. His rebellion against societal indifference toward her remarkable academic achievements marks a critical narrative moment. In *So Many Hungers*, the character Rahul, soon to become a father, desires a daughter, though his mother and wife maintain traditional preferences for a son. Bhattacharya's works often reveal that the tide of change impacts men more noticeably, whereas ingrained views persist longer among women. As Tara Ali Baig insightfully remarks in *India's Woman Power*, traditional women have long upheld and enforced male primacy within society, beginning from birth, training girls from infancy to serve others dutifully:

> " Arch traditionalists that women are, it is they who have successfully and brutally established man's ascendancy over women in society. And it starts right from birth. …girls were trained from babyhood to serve others and do manual work…"3

A small segment of society was able to resist the pervasive traditional views surrounding childbirth. For instance, Venu Chitale, in his novel *In Transit*, presents his heroine Mai—a princess by birth and a member of a progressive family—who desires to have a daughter after already bearing sons. Mai's wish symbolizes a departure from conventional preferences and reflects the evolving attitudes within certain privileged and enlightened circles that began to challenge entrenched societal norms.

Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and Kamala Markandaya have, without doubt, vividly portrayed in their early novels the myriad sufferings that girls were subjected to under various circumstances such as famine, orthodoxy, and conservatism. Anand's literary motivation was rooted in social realism and a fervent passion for progressivism—an intellectual and artistic force that had swept through Europe in the 1930s and inspired the works of playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and John Galsworthy. In his most acclaimed novel, *Untouchable*, Anand's primary focus is the harrowing plight of the protagonist Bakha, a young boy oppressed by an orthodox and caste-ridden society. However, Anand's narrative also offers significant insights into the lives of girls within this social framework. Anand's ambition was to delve deeper into the lives of the marginalized, even more profoundly than contemporaries such as Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Premchand. Both Bakha and his sister Sohini are depicted as honest, diligent, and graceful individuals. While Bakha occupies the central role, Sohini is presented through an external viewpoint yet emerges as a compelling and lifelike character. Anand does not shy away from illustrating the harsh realities faced by girls, as exemplified by the incident where Sohini is molested by a priest while sweeping the temple courtyard, laying bare the suffering endured by young girls in a deeply unjust society.

In his novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand presents another poignant image of a girl through the character Leila. She compromises with the harsh conditions imposed upon her. The python that coils ominously around Leila as she ventures out to collect firewood symbolizes the impending lustful harassment by the white overseer, Reggie Hunt. Bereft of maternal protection, Leila stands "dumb like Time held spell-bound by the fear of Death." Though merely a girl, she undertakes the labor typically assigned to an adult woman, and does so without complaint, enduring her plight silently. It is only through their labor that daughters are regarded as blessings by their parents—blessings akin to the rivers that are sacredly worshiped by Indians. As Anand notes, "The Aryan Hindus have loyally worshiped four things—Vedas, fair complexion, the rivers, and the cattle." While Anand's female characters occasionally find moments of joy, the adult world remains largely hostile to them. For instance, Sheila in *Coolie* can only play freely with Munoo when her mother is absent. Maya in *The Village* exhibits a bolder spirit, even joining boys at play. Yet, she is abruptly reined in by a shrill and stern voice that admonishes her for lacking modesty. This reflects the pervasive societal pressures placed upon girls to behave in accordance with conservative gender norms:

> Maya ni Maya, eater of your husband, may you wither away. Have you no shame that you go sitting among men? You must learn to be ashamed and modest."7

In Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the character Lekha embodies the image of a suffering girl. Despite being motherless, she is full of joy and vitality. However, her exuberance and laughter are not without caution; she is sternly warned by an elderly woman relative not to laugh too freely, reflecting the societal constraints

imposed on young girls' expressions of happiness and freedom. This warning serves as a metaphor for the suppression of female joy and autonomy, underscoring the severe limitations placed on girls' behavior within traditional patriarchal norms.

> " Laughing, a maiden uncovers a part of her That should be hidden! A maiden is safe Only in gravity's cloak." 8

In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ira is depicted as a sweet, obedient, and industrious daughter of Rukmani and Nathan, a poor rural couple. Despite her dedication, Ira faces abandonment by her husband due to her inability to bear children. When famine strikes, her care and concern swiftly shift toward her younger brother, who becomes the center of her attention as maternal instincts awaken in her. For the sake of her brother, she starves herself, placing his wellbeing above her own. Ultimately, she crosses the strict boundaries of moral conduct by selling her body to the tannery workers, an act of silent sacrifice that manifests the extreme lengths to which a girl might go to support and protect her family. Ira's actions also represent a form of rebellion, as she disobeys her mother's counsel and navigates a morally fraught path, driven by necessity and love. This portrayal underscores not only the hardships faced by daughters in impoverished and traditional settings but also highlights their resilience, strength, and selflessness in the face of overwhelming adversity

Early novels by Anand, Bhattacharya, and Markandaya predominantly depict the suffering of girls arising from poverty and the restrictive nature of family dynamics. These authors tend to focus on rural and urban settings where traditional social constraints severely limit the freedom and agency of young girls. However, their coverage is somewhat limited geographically and culturally. Notably, they do not explore the experiences of girls from tribal communities, which remain largely unrepresented in their works. There is a conspicuous absence of narratives similar to Yashoda, a Marathi novel by Pendse, or Chemmeen by T. S. Pillai—works that vividly portray the lives of girls from tribal backgrounds and coastal fishing communities. These narratives provide a different perspective, highlighting the unique hardships faced by girls in marginalized and underrepresented social groups. Such works extend the scope of Indo-Anglian fiction, enriching the understanding of varied socio-cultural realities faced by girls across different regions and social strata, yet they remain relatively absent in the early Indo-Anglian literary canon

The pervasive theme of obedience to elders, which girls were expected to uphold, suffuses the Indo-Anglian novel. The depiction of highly westernized girls who mimic Western lifestyles and are preoccupied with physical love was often subjected to ridicule. In stark contrast, traditional values of obedience and faithfulness were portrayed as the very essence of Indian girls and girlhood. This thematic distinction underscores a fundamental difference between Indo-Anglian and Anglo-Indian fiction. While Anglo-Indian novels typically presented the "sexy" or passionate female archetype as a dark-skinned woman, Indo-Anglian novels reserved such "bitchy" or morally loose types for Western or thoroughly westernized women. Among Indo-Anglian writers, Manohar Malgonkar's novels feature a host of such Westernized vignettes, illustrating the clash between tradition and modernity. Furthermore, Anita Desai's Voices in the City depicts ultra-modern girls in Calcutta who emulate Western manners and attitudes, thereby highlighting the societal tensions around changing female identity and cultural influence in urban India.

The advent of new education exerted a profound influence on Indian society, particularly among the middle class. It became a catalyst for significant change, initiating ripples—and at times whirlpools—across the social fabric. For young girls, education introduced an expanded vision of life and unlocked new vistas full of promise. Yet, despite these openings, tradition maintained a stronghold, exercising vigilance against any ideas or aspirations in girls that deviated from accepted norms—often condemning such thoughts as nearly sinful. Western ideas, in particular, were viewed with suspicion, regarded as pernicious by elders and, perhaps, also by many contemporary writers. As a result, while many literary works of the period portrayed girls as educated and somewhat enlightened, they ultimately depict these young women conforming to the wishes and expectations of their elders, underscoring the continuing dominance of traditional authority in shaping female destinies.

As literature serves as a mirror reflecting societal transformations, it also chronicles the evolving social changes taking place within society. With the gradual spread of education among girls and the increasing age of marriage, novels began to portray young women confronting the challenges of reconciling tradition with modernity. Some girls, influenced by their reading of English novels, developed notions of romantic love and, naturally, longed for such affection within their Indian environments. The figure of the young, educated girl increasingly became a central subject of study and focus in Indo-Anglian novels. This emerging change is discernible even in the later works of the founding figures of Indo-Anglian literature. For instance, in Anand's fictional universe, Sohini and Leila are depicted as modest and compliant, yet characters like Maya and Gauri display a nascent vitality, despite lacking formal education. Bhabani

Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* centers on the character Mohini, who embodies the transitional tensions experienced by a young Indian woman navigating the demands of education and the pull of traditional life. The difficulty Mohini faces in reconciling these opposing cultural trends is poignantly illustrated. Her father's statement that "there's to be a cultural synthesis of a horoscope and a microscope" attempts to express the necessary integration of tradition and modernity. Nevertheless, Mohini's experience in married life reveals that "old ties of girlhood slackening is a painful process." She yearns for love but discovers that achieving it requires enduring suffering, sacrifice, and compromise—ultimately needing to create harmony from discordant elements.

Apart from formal education, Gandhian ideals exerted a substantial influence over the cultural and social milieu. Tradition, as reflected in both life and literature, was portrayed as embodying the Hindu ethos, whereas modernity was largely equated with Western manners and morals, which were sweeping through the minds of the young with considerable force. Young girls, captivated by the allure of movies and Western culture, were sometimes carried away to the extent of compromising their virginity. For example, in Khushwant Singh's *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, Beena is shielded from such dangers by the vigilance of her mother. The influence of Western culture was particularly potent in upper-class urban societies, where girls were often swept along before they could develop a mature understanding of these conflicting forces. The resulting conflict was complex in nature, encompassing both emotional and intellectual dimensions, as these girls were not only physically mature but also educated, with many being surrounded by similarly educated individuals. This created a multifaceted struggle between adherence to tradition and the temptations and freedoms offered by modernity.

Last but not least, this limited study of the position of women in early Indian English novels reveals that the period before independence and immediately after was a pivotal and transitional moment for both society and women in particular. The early works of writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan are predominantly framed from the male perspective. Female characters in their novels are largely portrayed as subordinate figures, rarely explored in depth, and are often presented primarily as objects of pity and suffering. Although later works by these authors do introduce moments of joy in the lives of female characters, the dominant impression remains one of constraint and endurance. Raja Rao's viewpoint is similarly traditional and philosophical, emphasizing cultural continuity.

Bhattacharya's early novels also depict the sufferings of girls, portraying them as bound by tradition and societal expectations. Female novelists, however, contributed nuanced and intimate portrayals of girls within their narratives. Their works offered perspectives and details—particularly about isolated or conservative communities such as Brahmin and purdah-clad families—that male writers could not easily access or convey. This contribution enriched the early Indian English novel by introducing the feminine point of view, thereby broadening the literary landscape and deepening the exploration of the female experience in society.

The educated middle-class girl found herself ensnared in the dynamic and often conflicting interplay of traditional and modern values. This tension and transition rendered her a central, emblematic figure in early Indian English novels. Authors frequently positioned such young women at the heart of their narratives to explore the complexities of balancing inherited cultural expectations with the influences of education and emerging modernity. Consequently, the educated middle-class girl became a staple character—a symbol of evolving identity and societal transformation within these literary works.

The study of women's portrayal in early Indian English novels reveals a profound narrative of transition and tension between tradition and modernity. These texts, richly informed by socio-cultural realities and historical contexts, exhibit both the perpetuation of patriarchal norms and the subtle emergence of female agency. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Bhabani Bhattacharya provide nuanced insights into the complex lives of Indian women—showing their sufferings, struggles against orthodoxy, and moments of resilience. Female characters in these novels often exist at the crossroads of old values and new aspirations, grappling with cultural expectations around obedience, education, love, and sacrifice.

The middle-class educated girl, in particular, emerged as a powerful literary figure representing this conflict, embodying both the promise and the contradictions of social change. While tradition remained deeply embedded, pressures of modern education and Western influence introduced new vistas and dilemmas. Moreover, women writers enriched the literary landscape by bringing forth intimate portrayals of girls' lives in secluded social spaces, inaccessible to male authors.

Thus, early Indian English novels serve as both mirrors and architects of social consciousness, charting the evolving identities of women and reflecting the broader currents of reform, resistance, and redefining womanhood in a changing India. This trajectory in literature underscores not only historical oppression but also the relentless spirit of

transformation and the ongoing quest for equity and recognition in Indian society.

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