

# SHIFTING PARADIGMS IN POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN’S FICTION

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The advent of the 20th century marked a significant paradigm shift in almost all walks of life. The century witnessed extraordinary seminal happenings wherein life itself got redefined. Literature, which has always been the index of various hues of life, too witnessed watershed moments. There is an undeniable inter-relationship between life, literature, thought and language. The ever-changing paradigms of the global world have given literature not only an opportunity to revisit its own theories and practices but chartered a course for new ones to emerge. The issues of society, culture, politics, family, gender, etc. have experienced unprecedented changes; which have been reflected realistically in postcolonial women’s fiction. Moreover, the rise of a global world has made the medium of imitation a complex phenomenon as the linguistic diversities have paved the way for a multilingualism that co-exists with the ever-increasing territory of a single Global Language, English, which in turn comes with its own set of adaptations and “englishes”. This study focuses on the shifting paradigms to explore the recent trends and developments in postcolonial women’s fiction necessitated with the advent of new schools of feminism emphasising the universality of women’s suppression in patriarchal societies.*

**Keywords:** *Global World, Paradigm Shift, Patriarchal Societies, Women’s Suppression.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Women Studies have been receiving increasingly academic and disciplinary recognition throughout the globe. It has emerged as a distinct genre. The writers are determined to narrate, and thus put on record their response and reaction to the place of a woman in the social system, giving way to an image of new woman. The advent of female literature promises woman’s view of life, woman’s experience; in other words, a new element. Women writers’ fiction has always been responsive to the changes in material reality and theoretical perspectives that have impacted and governed its study since the time of its inception. At the earlier stage the fictional works of the writers like Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal etc. in India; Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot in Nigeria; were mainly concerned with the down-trodden of the society, the middle class and marginalised life and sufferings of women and the expression of traditional cultural ethos of their countries.

However, the interplay of a variety of material, social, and philosophical developments marks a discernible shift in the nature and study of women’s fiction all over the world. Consequently,

postcolonial women’s fictional scene has become variegated, complex and thematically richer. The writers settled abroad and the ones who divide their time between their motherland and abroad have contributed much to this rapidly developing sub-genre of English literature. Now Postcolonial women’s fiction no longer remains limited to the writings necessarily of the sufferings of women in families, but has broadened its horizons to various themes like war, social problems like abuse, human trafficking; health and psychological issues etc. Their fictional works become more significant for giving expression to cross-cultural encounter from a different perspective. Consequently, the recent trends or developments in women’s studies shows a broadened scope of new concerns from national to global or transnational.

### **1.1. New Perspectives**

Postcolonial perspectives have impacted the critical and the creative aspects of women’s fiction. Contemporary writers hailing from the previously colonized nations, particularly India and Nigeria, explore forms of life that existed during the British rule and expose the subtle strategies employed to make the colonized people take their subjugated position as something natural and transcendental. These writers also bring out the functioning of almost the same power politics that defines the relations between the power wielding people and the people kept at the margins even after the end of political imperialism. A number of contemporary writers fictionalize these aspects of life and the postcolonial critics analyze and expose the way colonialists propagated constructed reality about different societies and cultures as thereality.

In the post-colonial period many women writers have staged their protest against the double responsibility of women and dwelt on tortured womanhood. Their writing often compares patriarchy with colonial power, the imperial gaze, with the male objectifying gaze. The colonized nation is thus compared to a woman, not quite an independent subject; the bearer, not maker of her own meaning. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonical versions.

## 1. 2. Shifting Paradigms in Indian Women’s Fiction

### 1. 2. 1. Family and Transformation

In contemporary postcolonial women’s writings in English the theme of the family is particularly rich and diversified. As the locus of tradition, the family in these literatures explored as the place where the core values of the preceding generations and the ancestors are transmitted and lived, so that continuity and growth are ensured. At the same time, the family, as reflector and indicator of social change, offers a wide area of research for themes of conflict and reconciliation, the multiple problems of disrupted family lives, of enforced family separations, of political and personal violence within the domestic environment, and moral ambiguities of contemporary society like the sexual abuse of young girls by close family relations. For example, as Manju Kapur in her novel *Home* (2006) shows how Nisha faces sexual abuse by her own cousin as it was not considered as something serious by elders [1]. The significance of the family in postcolonial nations is perhaps over emphasised sometimes because family has become the central unit for suppression of its women in patriarchal world as in *The God of Small Things* (1997), shown by Arundhati Roy how Chako was allowed by his own mother to have sexual affairs with women workers of his *Pickles and Preserves Paradise* in the name of ‘men have their needs to be filled’ [2]. Roy also shows how women will be disparaged if they do the same as she depicts the case of Ammu, who was thrashed by the family when she develops contacts with Velutha, an untouchable, and kills him through well planned act.

### 1. 2. 2. Deconstructing the Norms

In the novel *The Day in Shadow* (1991) Sahgal, raises her voice against the economic violence done to a divorced woman by her husband and presents the most excruciating problem faced by a divorced woman, Simrit. As a woman novelist, Sahgal recognizes that her primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. She has gone deep into the female psyche in her novels. She describes in her novels how woman is exploited even during the modern times by both the individuals and the society. She tried to portray the sensibility of woman that how a woman looks out at herself and her problems. The clear message Sahgal gives is men and women are equals and peaceful survival depends on mutual respect and understanding, women should have the moral courage to claim the rights and ‘men... were born to lead and educate sometimes to triumph’ [3]. Similarly, Shashi Deshpande too reveals with a feminist perspective the revolutionary sentiment of an unusual woman character Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), who revolts against the age-old traditions of orthodoxy and conservatism in order to assert her independence and identity. In *The Binding Vine* (1992) Shashi Deshpande deftly handles the juxtaposition of the two situations – rape committed within and outside marriage [4].

### 1. 2. 3. Defining Identity

The portrayal of women as abject victims of the patriarchal family has been challenged and modulated in contemporary feminist philosophy. An early feminist who aimed to revise traditional, implicitly masculinist, autonomy with a conception of freedom that incorporated women's experience was Beauvoir. According to her, 'women' is a category imposed by society; women's selves, then, are also in large part imposed on them by society, and in her view women would do well to take hold of their claims to freedom and choice and thus reclaim their freedom and selfhood. Depicting this explicitly Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997), deconstructs the stereotypical characters of women and gives a message that women can play an equal

part with men, only if they gain a distinct voice of their own and learn to transcend the traditional barriers of their silence. Roy attacks the age old attitudes and constructs such as phallogocentrism – the view centered on or emphasising the masculine point of view – which has social and religious sanction. By focusing attention on the plight of women and social injustice, she has established the ever-changing role of women in Indian postcolonial literature. The contemporary Indian Writer Manju Kapur focuses in her novels the predicament of middle class educated Indian women, their quest for identity, marital compatibility and sexual fulfilment, their expectations leading to a sense of frustration and disillusionment. Her protagonist Nisha in the novel, *Home* fights for her happiness; as she is educated, she has modern approach towards life and relationships. She falls in love with a boy of low caste and economically also poor. She feels humiliating as her dreams are shattered by her family. She makes her father agree to support her for an independent business. Nisha proves herself capable of living independently, yet agrees to marry a middle aged man as a compulsion not from the family but even she feels her life is incomplete without a man. Eventually she leaves her business contentedly for the sake of her children. It's not Nisha's loss, it is only her way of settlement which many women do when they have to bear the liability of their children along with their job, and sometimes they willingly choose their children and family. Though her sphere is constrained to familial roles in her novels yet Manju Kapur suggests that the potential of a woman is such that she can be get different identities in life simultaneously, providing an outlet for the liberated talents thereby empowering women in today's complex world of competitions.

#### 1. 2. 4. Marital Discord

Marital discord is one of the many issues focused by women writers in their fiction in recent times depicting the psychological impact the conflicts in marital life may have on the mind and life of women. Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur and many more Indian women writers have focused on this particular aspect. Desai's earlier novels, *Cry the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965) deal with the case of the depressed housewife in two different ways. In the first novel, Maya is pushed beyond endurance to insanity because of her husband's inability to relate to her. In the second novel, Monisha has to suffer not only her husband's insensitivity but also the suffocating authority of the in-laws. While Maya turns insane, Monisha chooses death as her mode of escape. Such events are not uncommon in Indian middle class households. Both Maya and Monisha belong to the middle class Indian household. In Maya's case it is a nuclear family consisting only of her husband, but in Monisha's case it is the joint family household in North Calcutta. The common factor between the two women is that they are both deprived of love and affection and they both are childless. Anita Desai does not even hint at a solution to tackle their depression. Neither Maya, nor Monisha attempt to find alternatives to their existence. The idea of venturing out in the outer world to obtain their economic independence which brings with it a sense of freedom and self-worth does not occur to them. Both Maya and Monisha are tortured minds in their stultifying existence. The writer does not endow these women characters with their possibilities as she has the definite objective of exploring the mental state of women placed in such situations. These two novels are the study of two women characters in their claustrophobic confines of loneliness resulted from marital discords. In Shobha De's fiction there is the emergence of women who are extra ambitious and reject the traditional value system of Indian society. They attempt to make sense of themselves out of their senseless position in a world which makes no sense – because the moral, religious, political and social structures, both men and women have erected, have collapsed. Shobha De's *Second Thoughts* (1992) deal with

the story of a middle class Bengali boy and a young bride who is more in love with the city, Bombay than her groom. This novel offers a slice of urban life and it is an explosive tale of love and betrayal that exposes the hollowness of Indian marriage system. Her novels though discuss sex openly, yet they are not immoral but are considered as amoral. She depicts the way of life prevalent in the upper-class society in the metropolis of our country. She focuses on the new concept of marriage with complete sexual freedom and no notion of fidelity, but her novels at the end project traditional Indian values emphasising the importance of the family and marital fidelity.

### 1. 2. 5. Diasporic sensibility

Over a period of time Indian English fiction witnessed a new awareness in the concept of diasporic sensibility which evolved as a result of globalisation. The second and third generation immigrants realised that co-existence of two cultures can lead to a progressive future. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a powerful expression of the issues and problem of the Indian immigrants and about the cultural differences, problems of adjustments and assimilation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai of India and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from Nigeria are some of the other postmodern novelists who deftly handled the theme of existentialism. They have brilliantly expressed the diasporic experiences and the multitude of emotions; anguish, isolation, discrimination, assimilation and dissimulation, and particularly identity crisis in the new circumstances. Themes as wide-ranging as multiculturalism, cultural conflicts, degeneration of ethical values, scams, diasporic susceptibility, consumerisation, BPO's, etc. have dominated the literary world of these writers.

### 1. 3. Shifting Paradigms in African Women's Fiction

The portrayal of woman in Postcolonial Nigerian women's writing as the silent victim and up holder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. The contemporary African women writers are striving against the age old slavery and suppression. We see the emergence of new women in the novels of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Yovanna Vera, and many more writers. They represent their heroines defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire self-reliance through education. They nurture the desire of being independent and leading lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented. One thing is notable here is that, these writers sometimes have shown their heroines caught within the strong holds of patriarchy, either compromised themselves or adapted themselves to the needs of men in their life. They are forced to submit to the necessity of conforming to the extremely imposed requirements of their masculine societies – like the one we find in the character of Nnu Ego, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who yearns for liberation and for fulfilment as a woman, while still respecting the traditional concept of manliness. Living in bondage to men, but desiring to live freely and fully, they are bewildered by, or seethe with inner rage at their servitude to a structure of values matched to the needs of others. Some of these women characters like the wives of Okonkwo in *The Bride Price*, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in an attempt to enlarge their lives, become active agents and collaborators of patriarchy and abusively treat their co-wives. Some characters' resist, but in doing so could not overcome the pull of

traditionalism as the character of Akunna (*The Bride Price*), who though educated, could not overcome the superstitious beliefs about paying the bride price, becomes a victim and dies. She becomes a schizophrenic, and her personality fragments by her desire both to accept and to reject her condition. With the exception of the few like Adaku (*The Joys of Motherhood*), Kehinde (*Kehinde*); who through ingenuity and great courage triumph in their struggle out of patriarchy's shallow grave; are sacrificial victims. Though they are the New Age Women in the world of African letters, the ingenuous African society does not accept them as epitomes of African Womanhood. The third generation Nigerian writer Adichie in her novel, *Purple Hibiscus* shows women with contradictory behaviour about African customs and traditions. Mama Beatrice and her sister-in-law, Ifeoma are the antithesis to each other. Beatrice sees futility in breaking away from Eugene because of over depending on her husband in everything, whether economic or social. She is also afraid of losing respect as a married woman and also for leaving her prominent husband. Beatrice's fear of starting afresh on her own reminds us of Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981), who refuses to leave the husband who neglects her after taking a second wife. However, Adichie has focused on multiculturalism and the fate immigrants in racist American society in her latest novel to date, *Americanah* (2013).

## II. DISCUSSION

The privileging of man in postcolonial societies has involved an erasure of identities and subjectivities of many women, holding them to an assumption of female inferiority. To counter the injustice, postcolonial women writers have engaged in rhetorical and performative strategies designed to reconstitute the cultural erasure as they try to claim status as individuals. But in the process, various cultural expectations such as their maternal roles act as constant bottlenecks to return them back to their prescribed roles as subordinate beings. These authors work in, through and toward what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a “mestiza consciousness,” whose work is to “break down the subject- object duality that keeps her [woman] a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” [5] and they have explored the methodologies of cultural resistance and the complex ways to articulate their subjectivity, to challenge societal roles, to negotiate tradition and formulated a literary and feminist aesthetic. Though with differing methodologies, for each writer, the act of seeking a space through which a self with an “outline” is negotiated and articulated allows the women to become aware of the need to speak their own truths and realities. They construct textual strategies that go beyond the marginalized figures and articulate themselves so that they escape society's sanctioned external definitions.

French feminist and theorist Helene Cixous claims that in order for women to develop self-affirming forms of discourse, they must write through their bodies and give voice to female sexuality. She notes that they must not get trapped in male identified languages and grammar that reduce them to objects of production and reproduction. “Write yourself,” she tells her readers in “The Laugh of the Medusa”. “Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” [6]. Cixous associates these “immense resources” with new forms of possibilities in form of metaphors and symbols that would eventually liberate the women. However, in most postcolonial societies, the challenge goes beyond the task of writing one's self. If “identity” refers in part to the ideas and feelings an individual has about herself, what happens in postcolonial societies, where women have, as part of their identity, a view that they are second class citizens, a

view perpetuated by the patriarchal and colonial legacy? These are the certain questions which may not have right answers, but are being attempted by the contemporary women writers through certain means and methods to contest the subordination and erasure of the woman from an embodied realm. In order to contest the dominant rituals and patriarchal structures that control women's lives, “better imaginaries are needed” [7]. This means that the politics of female identity can only be tackled when the writer engages in creative ways with a new imagined reality that refuses to fit into fixed dichotomous structures and the implications of these structures. The task of imagining new ways of representation then becomes all the more pressing to carve out the discursive spaces where the women can begin to speak from various complex vantage points of their own.

But as the writers move beyond the constricting paradigms, it is important to point out that the new realities they imagine for their characters aren't simply essentialist trappings that parallel the orders they are negating. In fact, all they are doing is refusing to fall into the binaries of the master narratives, and instead undertaking balancing action dealing with the concrete and literary realities of women's lives. Postcolonial women writers employ the trope of imagining alternative realities to affirm an ontological status for women that is not provided for in the patriarchal orders of their societies.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

As the writers interrupt the hegemonic definitions of the women's lives, they suggest that the act of transgressing the patriarchal law can be both a place for “radical openness and possibility” as hooks proposes [8] and at the same time a place for pain and alienation. The narratives show that accounts of how women in African societies alter the dynamics of power involves sustained efforts in crafting possibilities of redemption in spaces created in and disseminated by social practice. But irrespective of the kind of resistance these writers embrace, their overriding mission is to articulate the collective erasure of women fostered by their restrictive social-cultural mores.

Through the various subversive strategies, the writers encourage their readers to re-examine both the patriarchal and postcolonial gendered ideologies. Their novels affirm a continuous challenge and resistance to the hegemonic power discourse in postcolonial nations, particularly when they display liberating tools like “safe spaces” that empower women to speak and listen to each other. Explicitly these writers are trying to tackle the systems that oppress and subjugate women. This is a way of helping women “unlearn the lessons of past, engendering their new awareness of their inherent borne of their new awareness of their inherent strengths and potentialities for effecting change in their society as equal partners with men” [9]. Now it has become an imperative that women writers should be prepared to play dual roles in society as writers and as women. Admittedly, the task ahead for women writers is far from easy, considering that the female voice is unheard in male canon of world literature, but women have an additional commitment to employ their art to place women at the centre of development and change. There should be the sort of empowerment that reveals to women their potentialities, for so long suppressed by male domination. It is important to reiterate further that education is indispensable in women's causes and in variably gives them the confidence they need to look inward and begin to shake off the many years of cultural and religious indoctrination and realize their complementary role and indispensability to the male. Finally, it is fitting to conclude with these words by Elaine Showalter cited by Chukwuma: “In women's hands—in women writers' hands—lies there generation of the world. Let us go

without ongue so ffirecon secrated to an entire lyholy work ,cleansing, repairing, beautifying as we go, the page of the world’s history which lies before us now”[10].

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