CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

The theme of gender discrimination is the most favourite one for the contemporary Indian women novelists in English. A host of writers like Namita Gokhale, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Githa Hariharan etc. have interpreted the plight of discriminated women in their fiction. A thorough study of their novels reveals the life of suffocation and suffering of women in an unkind patriarchal framework. Their works focus on women's physical, financial and emotional exploitation along with their psychological anguish.

One finds a detailed description of numerous forms of discriminations against women in Indian society which is infested with many an age old notions of inferiority, inconstancy, and insincerity in the context of women. The basic instinct of these newly emerged women novelists is to record the psychic oscillations and tensions of their kindred souls with stunted and negated identity. Smriti Singh observes 'A comparison between the early women novelists of the post-independence era shows a definite continuity in trend and approach. In both the periods, women characters have been shown to be searching for identity and for self-awareness. In the earlier novels, women rebelled against major social issues like child marriage, denial of education to girls
and atrocities suffered by a woman in her husband's house. In the contemporary novels there is more depth and complexity in the choice and treatment of women. The modern novels have women who rebel against accepting the traditional feminine roles. They have challenged the accepted ideals of marriage and maternity, and have chosen to work for a living instead. They refuse to conform to the image of the effeminate, docile, silent and long-suffering woman, a picture invented and nurtured through a male-oriented culture. The women of contemporary fiction are revolutionary in nature and the emphasis is on creating a totally new character type. The new woman in Indian fiction is talented, intelligent, and indulges in deep self-analyses and introspection. She has refused to accept unquestioningly the rules fixed for her by an ancient outmoded culture. They effort at heralding a change in the social milieu so that women are given their dues and accepted as equal or better than the males in all social as well as familial responsibilities, rights and situations. In fact they aspire for a total removal of the persisting gender discrimination in all its manifestations. Literature now has a number of women characters striving for self-actualization, self-assertion and self-worth. Despite being denigrated in different phases, these writers of new age fiction do not hesitate to handle radical themes and portray even
women's innermost, and so far called personal, intimate and private experiences.

Like the novelists, contemporary women poets in English also display a remarkable shift in attitude and reflection. Prof. Pashupati Jha observes: ‘After the mid-sixties of the twentieth century, a perceptive change was noticed with the emergence of ‘I’—an assertive self, in the poetry of Kamala Das, and this trend went on gathering strength with Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Sunita Jain, Lalitha Venkateshwaran and Shree Devi. This new breed of women poets is poles apart from the lilting romanticism of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu—the poetic world of the new generation is more real and vibrant, even if it is ugly on the face of it. These contemporary poets are not the ones to hide their shame and suffering behind some mask or persona; their feeling is exposed to the barest bones. It is through this relentless exposure that these poets discover their ‘I’—their inherent strength. This ‘I’ is no more a male prerogative alone, these women poets can also lay claim to it; as Kamla Das concludes her ‘Introduction’: ‘I too call myself I.’²

The main objective of women writers of the day is to present various roles played by women in the society and to bring the darkness of centuries of her life to light. ‘Though the archetypal roles of women as mothers, wives, daughters and the “other”
woman continue to haunt the imagination of these writers yet they try to view the strength and weaknesses of the female sex as problems which are arising out of cultural, social, sexual, economic, ideological, political and gender specific confrontations. The traditional standard equation has been radically altered, women are emerging with increased awareness of gender roles and gender identity.\textsuperscript{3}

Gender has been defined and interpreted in various contexts by feminists of the day. Shulamith Firestone views gender as the root of discrimination, suppression and oppression of women. She is in complete favour of the elimination of gender roles. In the \textit{Dialectics of Sex},\textsuperscript{4} she emphasizes upon women's complete liberation from the function of child bearing and child rearing. She advocates for extra-uterine gestation. Luce Irigaray refutes at the traditional role of women as breeders only. She is of the belief that it is futile to talk of women's liberation and empowerment unless and until they are rescued from the pains of pregnancy and motherhood. These feminists argue so because in their opinion 'the motherhood has been cunningly glorified by generations of men to chain the women in cycles of production of children.'\textsuperscript{5}

Karen Offen\textsuperscript{6} stresses on the development of co-operation and harmony between men and women than anything else. Judith Bulte finds out an interconnection between the terms gender, sex
and sexuality, 'If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties, but rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces “sex”, the mark of its full substantiation into gender or what, from a materialistic point of view, might constitute a full desubstantiation ... If gender is the social construction of sex and if there is no access to this “sex” except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that “sex” becomes something like a fiction...’

Nicholson explains that ‘gender and sexuality are theoretically interconnected. Ideas about being women and men transfer in theory to assumptions about the body and the physical practice of sex; distinctions that set women and men apart in dichotomous gender categories are based on physical, bodily distinctions. In practice, ways of being women and men, ways of being physically sexed, and ways of being sexual are determined by individual everyday activities and cultural meanings used to make sense of these activities.’ In short gender refers to male like or female life characteristics of individuals and also the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities concerned with the
respective sexes. Gender is in essence a socio-cultural construct. It is neither biological given nor a creation of God. It is interdependent with ideologies of sexuality, roles and expectations for “woman” and “man”, and is grounded in a heterosexual ideology that relies on dichotomous categories and practices.

Prior to proceeding ahead let us see how the theme of gender discrimination has been dealt with by a few noted women novelists in our times.

Shashi Deshpande belongs to the coterie of eminent women writers of post - Independent India. ‘A close study of Deshpande's novels and short stories reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time, highly sensitive to the issues concerning women. The relentless probing of man-woman relationship by the author intrigues the reader enough to question her stand on feminism.’ In her novels like That Long Silence, Such A Long Journey, and the Dark Holds No Terrors, she has dealt with marginalization and other gender related issues of Indian women. Through the sufferings of her heroines she intends to change the social order maintained by men and aspires to build a new society devoid of gender codes in which human values will be given top priority irrespective of sex.
The Dark Holds No Terrors unfolds the protagonist, Sarita’s (Saru), journey to discover herself. She is a woman who is against the social order in which man is at the centre and the woman always on the periphery. She is highly individualistic and her temperament is revealed in her candidly spoken words:

My life is my own. Somehow, she felt as if she had found it now, the connecting link. It means you are not just a strutting, grimacing puppet standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness.  

She is very much opposed to living like a cloistered and domesticated woman given to the men’s whims and dictates. She believes that:

No partnership can ever be equal will always be unequal, but take care that it’s unequal in favour of your husband.  

Though Saru passes through various ups and downs in her life, throughout the novel, Deshpande has presented her as a woman who doesn’t make passive acceptance of life, and is resolute to control it in her own way. She is a realist who knows that:

We come into this world alone and go out of it alone. The period in between is short. And all those ties we cherish as eternal and long lasting are more ephemeral than a dewdrop.  

Similarly Jaya in That Long Silence dislikes the role of a subservient wife. She does not feel that a wife is only destined to
sit before the hearth and to wait for her husband for every initiative. When her husband, Mohan, tries to change her name from Jaya to Suhasini, soon after marriage, she does not accept it. Because the change in name suggested a soft smiling, placid motherly woman. Jaya has been brought up in the conventional Indian fashion where gender decides everything. Right from her growing years she is taught by the members of the family:

‘Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you.’

Ramu kaka instructs her that a husband is like a sheltering tree. But, when she feels that her life with her husband is no longer comfortable, she rejects such inscriptions on her mind. She resolves to escape from the rigid confines of a sagging life where only emptiness prevailed. On the motivation of Kamath, another man, she becomes a writer. Writing helps her a lot in the process of self-identification and exploration of her role and status in the society. Jaya’s words are full of hope and assurance to women:

‘We don’t change overnight. It’s possible that we may not change even over long period of time. But we can always have hope without that life would be impossible.’

The contemporary women novelists in English advocate for women’s full control over their bodies and sexuality. They seem to re-utter Crystal Eastman’s words, ‘We want love and to be loved,
and most of us want children one or two at least, but we want our love to be joyous and free not clouded with ignorance and fear. And we want our children to be deliberately, eagerly called into being, when we are at our best, not crowded upon us in time of poverty and weakness. We want this precious sex knowledge not just for ourselves, the conscious feminists, we want it for all the millions of unconscious feminists that swarm the earth, -- we want it for women.  

Kamala Das’ My Story and Namita Gokhale’s Paro cases in point. In both these novels the woman is presented as fully exploiting her sexual charms and attributes in order to enjoy love, gain power, and improve her prospects.

Kamala Das’ My Story is a vehement text that derides male dominance. In this semi autobiographical novel, Das dethrones the traditional myth of feminity and registers her protest against male chauvinism. She is very explicit to reveal that the gender roles prevalent in Indian society are heartlessly insensitive for women. Whereas these roles boost the monstrous ego of men, they dwarf the status of women. She denounces the patriarchal attitude of defining a woman in terms of a womb, an ovary and a weaker sex. She reminds of Simone de Beauvoir who is quite intolerant about the second sex status of women. Kamala Das in this book lays bare the hypocracies and snobbishness of overtly masculinized Indian
culture. In a way this work is a protest against the social reality where the most mediocre of male feels himself a demi-god as compared to women. Throughout the novel, Das boldly criticizes the male attitude to underestimate women, and she also condemns the feminine weakness of submissive reconciliation and servitude.

Ronald V. Sampson\(^{16}\) maintains that the power that men assume over women corrupts basic human relationships. It is the corruption of basic human instinct with regard to women, which is the theme of *My Story*. The protagonist in the novel is disgusted with the social reality where a woman is supposed to live within the four walls of a house like a showpiece and a door mat. The strictures of gender are condemned in the following words where a woman is expected to wash her:

husband’s cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of national flag with wifely pride.\(^{17}\) (88)

The courage with which Das debunks the conventional role of the Indian wife is even more forcefully visible in the following words where she frankly portrays the rudely shocking sexual sessions with her partner:

whenever he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breasts and if I did not, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin... The poor women born of a peasant stock
were accustomed to a clumsy rapid mating like that of the bird for their men had very little time to spare for niceties of any kind, since all the incomplete chores waited for them, the hoeing, the ploughing, the chopping of firewood and the feeding of livestock.\textsuperscript{18} (87)

It is very encouraging to see that the woman figure in this work openly discloses her rebellion against the objectification of women. Instead of her man's 'rough hands riding up' her skirts or 'tearing up her brassiere', she declares her passion for his loving words and emotional compatibility. Even more exclusive feature of this work is that, here, the novelist criticizes the folly of the wives who fall victim to their husbands' accursed party and submit themselves easily to their crazy male hungers, as if they were merely, 'puppet at the mercy of gross men.'\textsuperscript{19} (160)

In a word, Kamala Das, in this autobiographical novel, strongly challenges the gender biased social set-up with a woman's eye. She frankly shows her angst against being a toy – fit for the roaring nights of the lecherous men.

Anita Nair is another promising novelist who lashes hard at the discriminating cultural practices in Indian Society. In her recent novel, \textit{Mistress}, she tells the story of Koman, a famous Kathakali dancer and the choices he makes in life. There is one more story running parallel to this which is echoed in the dancer's life who happens to be the heroine's uncle. Like the use of myths, he uses
Kathakali to advise her on things she should be doing and things she should abstain from. Christopher Stewart is a travel writer who visits Kerala to meet Koman. This causes upheavels in the lives of Shyam, Radha and Koman as well. Christopher enchants both Radha and her uncle alike with his charms and ways. His incessant questions about the past draw them to him. Radha passionately embraces Christopher, and this upsets her uncle. He tries to prevent Radha from indulging in such an affair. But Radha revolts and refuses to live a life dictated by others:

‘I cannot continue to play wife merely because it frees me of worries. I have not done right by Shyam. I have played wife all this while, despising him. For this I know remorse.’\(^{20}\)

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She decides to assert herself and live on her own terms.

The stories of the lives of women give an insight into expectations of married Indian women, the choices they make, and the choices made for them. Anita Nair's story telling is superb and each woman could easily spawn a novel of her own. There is a strong message of hope through change, and even the ending is revealed as another beginning – enticing and uplifting.

Geeta Mehta in her famous novel, *Raj*, explores various shades of discrimination of women in pre-Independent as well as post-Independent India. The novel is ‘interwoven with the political
events but it has the tears and romance of woman's existence in India which saves the work from being a mere record of all-too-well known history of our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant life-style of the princess.\(^{21}\)

The novel is about the troubles and struggle of Jaya, who suffers for being born in an orthodoxical Hindu family. She belongs to Royalty yet her sufferings are illustrious of the frustrations and disappointments of nearly all Indian women. Right from her birth she is treated like an object. To her father, Jaysingh, she is a sign of Victory, whereas to her mother, Maharani, she is a means to fulfil the material needs of the family and the state:

From the moment Jaya was born, the Maharani had vowed her daughter would be raised in the ways of her Predecessors, which alone could protect the child from the harsh, changing world beyond the zenana walls.\(^{22}\)

She is brought up in a very protective and possessive way. When only of twelve, the concubine in the palace teaches her arts like 'Sola Shringar':

'No one understands how the attraction between a man and a woman is born, Bai-sa. Even worse, no one understands why it suddenly dies. We poor creatures must use every aid to keep a man's affections constant.'\(^{23}\) (31)
Thus Jaya is made to understand that a woman's duty is to always please her husband. When she is married to Prince Pratap, she comes to realize that her status in the Royal family is no more than a child breeder. When she gives birth to a son the family is blessed with an heir, but not she. The irony of her motherhood is that she is objected while breast-feeding her son by her husband, Pratap:

Jaya smiled at the crying baby as she pulled down her sari to feed him. ‘Stop that!’ Jaya looked up in surprise from the infant suckling at her breast. 'The Maharani of Sirpur employ wet nurses. I will not have my wife feeding a baby like a peasant woman.'

Jaya reveals her sorrow to another woman Lady Modi:

‘He shrinks from the sight of his wife giving breast to his son, but not from wearing his ancient crest on his feet to visit a brothel. Is this conduct of a husband? of a king?’

It is these and many such humiliations in her life that spur Jaya to set her identity and make certain resolutions in life. After the downfall of the state she collaborates with the United States of the Republic of India and decides to contest as an independent candidate.

‘Githa Hariharan tries her best to project a new sense of woman's identity that transforms her status from the victimized to the powerful, from the rough to the sublime, from marginalized to the center point of significance.’ In her novel The Thousand
Faces of Night Hariharan narrates the story of passion and loneliness of Baby, Sita and Mayamma. Through the tales of these three women she unravels the secret dimensions of women's oppression in the society. The novel is primarily a document of Devi's life. She is a youthful and educated girl who is 'caught in the cross-currents of conflicting discourses and traditions. The novel renders an account of her confused acceptance of an arranged marriage and finally her walking out of it in defiance of the conventions handed down to her. Hariharan exposes the confining limits of the material relationship that stifle Devi, through the working of several parallel discourses and relationships.²²

In the novel Hariharan has portrayed the life of Devi when she comes back to India after two years' sojourn in America. She, after her return, comes to compare her life in two different cultures of the East and the West. Devi finds that separateness and discrimination of women is their destiny in both the worlds. Baba's stories revolve around the society defined gender roles of mother, daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law. Devi, through her own experience in the world, has learnt that a woman is supposed to follow some hierarchical order across different cultures and climes. She also feels that emptiness and meaninglessness are part of women's existence. The novel examines the plight of women through highlighting the mother-daughter relationship, and it also
presents the drift of women between different worlds, that is the drift between romance and reality, dreams and nightmares, and the mire and the mainland.

The most popular and prolific novelist, Shobha De, deals with the tensions and contradictions prevalent in the uppermost strata of urban Indian society. ‘The Treatment of sex and the description of sexual relationships form a major promotional backdrop of her fictional world. But a careful scrutiny reveals that these sexual activities are not meant to be a source of spiritual satisfaction or self-gratification, rather, lead to frustrating and painful experience.’28 De is very much interested in unraveling the world of the affluent socialites where no taboos prevail and no morality works. All her novels bring to the light the frailties and frivolities of the society ladies, in particular, who are autonomous individuals with no regards to the socio-cultural restrictions imposed on them. Her women are in full control over their lives as well as bodies. De believes that a woman has every right to live like a free individual and prioritise her choices on all fronts – physical, intellectual, economical and social, in man’s world full of ‘sharks thieves, blackmailers and double crossers.’29 Her women struggle for success in life and stand up for their rights. De believes that women are conveniently entrapped by men simply because they are not firm enough to project their full blooming personality.
It is with this viewpoint that she presents her heroines who are possessed not just with seducing personalities but also are shrewd and straightforward to woo and be wooed by men at the spur of their passion and desires. For example, Asha Rani in the *Starry Nights* achieves success by her hard hitting attitude to male chauvinism and exploitative nature. Continual subjection to men's idiosyncratic defilement of her body emboldens her to defy them in their own game, and she resolves that:

‘All of you are just the same, but wait I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all – beat you at your own game.’\(^{30}\) (8)

De has analysed various aspects of womanhood portraying them in both the situations – extremely conservative setting to the glaringly modern and uninhibited environment. In fact she has tried to contrast and compare the lives of traditional women like Malini (*Starry Nights*), Malti Ben (*Sultry Days*), Maya (*Second Thoughts*) with the radically assertive women like Asha Rani (*Starry Nights*), Anjali and Karuna (*Socialite Obsessions*). Her traditional women suffer the pangs of patriarchal discriminatory attitude of the male infidels, and resort to live a colourless life of seclusion and loneliness, but her new generation women flaunt their sexuality to the core and indulge in bohemian ways of life.
Namita Gokhale is famous for her sexually frank novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, which heralds a new wave of feministic writing. She is a candid, witty and sophisticated writer who projects women caught in diverse roles in the society. She feels that a woman's life is reflected in the rhythm of the seasons unlike men whose stories are rooted in wars, territories and legislations. Whereas her novel, *A Himalayan Love Story*, displays her fascination for Kumaoni region and traces the lives of two lovers in a nonstereotypically romantic way, *Paro* narrates the tale of the passions and jealousies of a group of middle class Indians. It is the story of Priya who remembers her own loves and failures. It is an unconventional story with a commingling of wit, humour, pathos, romance and much erotic content:

I went and curled up in bed, my fingers groping for the warm secure place between my thighs. I napped lightly for a while and then I began to masturbate. I did not fantasize, but sometimes I became Paro, and sometimes I was myself sometimes I was B.R. devouring Paro, and then B.R. tenderly loving Priya, and then I became Suresh who was ravishing Paro, and then Paro with Suresh in slavish possession and intermittently Suresh copulating with Priya who was actually Paro.31

Exploring various contours of pleasure and desires the novel turns up the value system of male-dominated society upside down.
In brief contemporary Indian women novelists in English emphatically illustrate the status of women in Indian Society. They display their concern to emancipate women from the age-long shackles of male-domination and protest against their subsidiary condition. They project the biological, sociological and psychological confrontation of women and question hitherto unquestioned atrocities of men. They urge to root out deeply rooted ills and evils in the society of the day. These novelists, with their unique traits, examine how women suffer entrapment between the shreds of past and the dreams of future, and register their indifference towards the long-cherished prejudiced ideologies against women. They express their shock and anger at the callous traditional human values and aim at 'catching the whole woman alive in terms of feelings, intellect and emotions.'
References:


11. Ibid. 137.

12. Ibid. 208.


18. Ibid. 87.

19. Ibid. 160.


23. Ibid. 31.

24. Ibid. 298.
25. Ibid. 329.


30. Ibid. 8.
