ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in literature is as old as literature itself. However, this portrayal has got sea changes in the context of advent of women writers in literary arena. These women writers have taken a new approach in their treatment of women and the issues related with them. Women have been depicted in various hues and shades since times immemorial. But the depiction broadly represents a particular stereotyping about women. The novels too, which owe their popularity mostly due to women readers, despite their very generous and profuse representation of women characters, present women in the same hackneyed ways. The male dominant mentality created their own stereotyping and presented them either as self-sacrificing angel for the sake of their family and near and dear ones or as vamps. However, as much as a novel is ‘a low mimetic literary form’ (Northrop Frye), it cannot ignore the ground realities of the society. Thus the novels abound with a great host of women characters which are impressive both in variety and profundity. The reason for this is that these novels are the product of progressive man writers who often image women haloed in idealised romantic light. The Indian English novel too generally presents women in the same romanticised ways. The woman characters in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, a stalwart of Indian English novels, are obvious examples.

Though women have been presented in various ways in Literature, the depiction of womanhood acquires a new benchmark after coming of women writers in the scene. Refuting the patriarchal norms, these female writers have given a new meaning to self-assertion and establishment of identity of women. The Indian female writers, writing in English, have established their own brand of feminism while advocating their cause of ‘womanhood’.

However, a major change, as far as the image of womanhood is concerned, has been discerned after India gained her Independence from the foreign rule. A large number of women writers flashed on literary horizon with their representation of real experiences, feelings, sufferings and emotions of women. These writers try to reveal the inner psyche, feelings, longings and actual experiences of the Indian women. Owing to the impact of
western feminist theories put forth by Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet, the Indian women writers have succeeded in breaking the social and literary norms of the past and exploring the psyche of their characters. Though prominent writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha de etc have denied any feminist intent in their writings, a thorough analysis of their works reveals a strong feminist bias for issues pertaining to women. It is perhaps due to this duality of their creators, the woman images of Indian English fiction are progressive in their outlook and docile in their attitude, at the same time. Like their Western counterpart they are aware of their rights. But unlike them they quickly get reconciled to the fact that the real place of a woman is within the family which she must sustain and not ignore this in the name of ‘liberty’.

As a result, the concept of womanhood acquired a new dimension in the works of these women artists. Womanhood has now become synonymous with asserting their individuality as women without being defensive for or apologetic about being a woman. It is about evaluating their status vis-a-vis the traditional patriarchal society. It is all about their real problems, real dreams and real aspirations. It is about their yearnings for liberty and getting more rights. It is also about rebellion or at least about protest against the male-chauvinist society. Still we must say that women writers necessarily need not be anti-men. They are just against unjust male-dominance. They want to achieve their rightful place in society so that they can be equal players in socio-cultural development. This women centric approach in dealing with the issues related with women, must be taken as a major revolution in modern Indian fiction. Many Indian women novelists have tried to explore female subjectivity so as to establish an identity. They are mainly preoccupied in depicting the inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. A woman’s presentation of woman is more assertive, more articulate in expression, more liberated and more truthful in view. The female writers taken for the study in this dissertation include Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy who have been chosen mainly for their perspectives on feminism, and their overall contribution to literature.
It is thus clear from the above discussion that the present research work is a sincere attempt to bring out the comprehensive image of womanhood as it emerges out of the portrayal of Indian women writers writing in English. The precise design is to bring out this image by a comprehensive study of the works of prominent women writers in English. For this purpose the two most common literary genres of recent times viz. poetry and novels have been taken. The choice of one poetess, Kamala Das and three novelists-Anita Desai, Shashi Despande and Arundhati Roy- is deliberate and suitable to the purpose. The research is carefully designed to evaluate the works of three novelists who have entirely different perspectives of feminism. It incorporates three distinct feminist sensibilities as reflected in Anita Desai with her “feminine sensitivity”, Shashi Despande with her “Indian feminism” and Arundhati Roy with her “radical feminism”.

The depiction of Womanhood in Indian female writers, however, is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Each writer has developed her own brand in keeping with her philosophy and vision of life. The present research-work aims at evaluating the major works of Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy from the perspective of feminism by analyzing the female protagonists who struggle to assert their individuality and establish their self-identity in a male-dominated socio-cultural set-up. These writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural practices that restricted their freedom. In most cases, the writings are in a confessional and personal note, where their composition acts as a social document as they are themselves sufferers and also agents of social revolution.

The introductory chapter traces the portrayal of women in the Indian context, including in mythology, religion and literature. It also discusses the rise of feminism, its different stages and its influences and preoccupation of the writers taken up for the study. The introduction also traces the life and works of each of the writers under study. In the following chapters, each of these writers is evaluated and analysed on the basis of three parameters: Portrayal of women characters in their works, quest for identity and feminist aspects in their works. The chapter following this analysis then makes an evaluative
comparison of all the four writers under study in terms of the above three parameters. The findings are then summed up in the concluding chapter.

It is noticed that the female protagonists of all the writers demonstrate ample courage and vitality to question the oppressive role of religion, society and culture but desist themselves from following the paths as suggested by their western counterparts. Instead they seek to create their own paths.

Keywords: Patriarchy, feminism, self-assertion, identity, womanhood, chauvinistic