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A Comparative Study of Women Characters Depicted in the Booker Prize Winner Indian Novels

Dr. Balasaheb Bawake

C. D. Jain College of Commerce, Shirampur; Dist. Ahmednagar (MS)

Abstract:

The Booker Mc-Connell company inaugurated sponsoring the prize for the best original full length novel, written in English, since 1968, commonly been known as 'Booker Prize'. It is open to the citizens of the former British Commonwealth for fascinating interface between literature and society. The Booker prize has been awarded to four Indians – Salman Rushdie (1981), Arundhati Roy (1997), Kiran Desai (2006) and most recently in 2008 to Arvind Adiga and V.S. Naipaul, the Indian Trinidadian.

Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Salman Rushdie have artistically depicted the socio economic and cultural exploitation and predicament of women characters in their novels. These novelists have elucidated the social economical and cultural plight of the major women characters in the novels. Salman Rushdie a well reputed writer at the international level has significantly stressed inner consciousness of the female characters in his novel *Midnight's Children*. His female characters are sufferers of the oppressive system. Kiran Desai has portrayed the worst condition of women in a very sophisticated class and also depicted feminine submissiveness through Nimi. *The Inheritance of Loss* is the reflection of male dominated society.

Keywords: frustration, alienation, disappoint, oppression, submissiveness, socio economic and cultural exploitation

Introduction:

In the works of Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga, the roles of women characters are oppressive. The major women characters are exploited and oppressed most of the time at the hands of their husbands. Their characters live and interact in certain unashamed transparent conditions which are the examples of female oppression, repression and subjugation.

In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Desai's '*The Inheritance of Loss*' have been focused that women are owned by their husbands and fathers, often being objectified by standards of beauty. Naseem Ghani and Jameela Singer are both the characters embodied and objectified by men and considered as pure ideals of chaste beauty though their true identity and faces are not openly known. This objectification of women lessens the value of women as living beings but rather a puppet in the hands of male dominated society and increases their value as possessions.

Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things* portrays the factors responsible for exploitation and oppression of women in Indian society. Though some valuable decisions have been taken recently in Maharashtra and some other states regarding the right to property act for women still the exploitation and torturing of women in society and in families is rampant. Roy states Ammu as a daughter has no claim on the property. Ammu only because of having no right to share the ancestral property works elsewhere to earn living and to support her twin children. Gender differentiation is also responsible for insecurity and inequality of women.

The men in the novel feel insecure about their level of power over women; therefore they feel they must oppress women in order to clearly establish a visible superiority. This andocentric view of human equality automatically oppresses

women and people of lower classes. So long as men were continually established as inherently better than women, injustice to women will prevail.

The position of women and the untouchable in India is same. The happiness and sanity of Ammu and Velutha's life has been sacrificed to maintain the status quo of the community in the society. Ammu and Velutha are the victims of the society which follows the untouchability.

Chacko has been accepted in the family though he had once married and been divorced like Ammu. Chacko inherits the ancestral property of the family, as well as the family business. He has not been disowned from his property, or punished for getting married in England. But Ammu on the other hand has been punished and harassed for her act of being in love with Velutha.

"The love affair between Ammu and Velutha is being crushed down by the orthodox force on the account of power politics of caste. When she goes to the police station with her twins, the police Inspector Thomas Mathew also humiliates her. On the contrary he calls her 'Veshya' and tries to molest her. This is indicative of Ammu's humiliation not only at home but also in society."¹

In this manner Arundhati Roy describes the predicaments of women in society and exposes their disadvantaged status in the male dominated society. Roy focuses the gender exploitation harmful traditions, conventions, and social norms that block the ways of women's progress and freedom.

Simone-de-Beauvoir describes the status of women in the following words-

"The situation of woman is that- she, a free and autonomous being like all creatures- nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other."²

Simone-de-Beauvoir explains that male in the society forces women to play a secondary role. It is only the male attitude that forces the women to play a subsidiary role in the family too. Sheila McLeod also illustrates the term 'Power-nexus' in her article to delineate the position of women in society:

"Women's work has long been downgraded and devalued when compared to man's work, male muscular strength has been prized above the female capacity for physical endurance, men have been the owners of wealth and property, the holders of power and authority, the achievers, the doers, the go-getters, while women have been barred from, such apparently desirable positions or behaviours."³

The above mentioned quote by Sheila is applicable to Padma in *Midnight's Children* too.

In the novel Padma is one of the characters created by Rushdie. She is a loving caretaker, Partner, not only for bed but for life too, a devoted nurse and above all a very submissive soul to Saleem Sinai. She is a prey of masculine might. She hurries the narrative along, imploring Saleem to get on with the plot rather than veering off into tangents and often she expresses doubts as to the veracity of Saleem's accounts. Padma is portrayed only in a descriptive manner by Saleem. There are other characters also that figure in the novel, have an unwholesome affinity among themselves. Padma is the victim of male Chauvinistic society. She is depicted in the novel through her animal materiality.

Padma is compared to a bitch, she seduces, snorts, moves her hand up down up and so on. She is illiterate, ignorant and unpleasant as well. Saleem calls her 'Plump' 'thick of waist' and somewhat hairy forearm.' Saleem again mentions her 'Padma: - really- truly was a witch?'

Padma has been shown as an illiterate. To cook and make bed is less significant job. But Padma is doing a good maintainer's job. On the other hand Saleem derides her for her illiteracy and passivity. So Padma's honest devotion, simplicity, submissiveness have no meaning. Saleem mentions Padma as a mere sample of sensual raven.. Padma appears as if she has totally devoted herself to Saleem, she has sold her life for the sake of Saleem's love. But Saleem takes her as an object to play with. Saleem needs warmth of affection, care, and food. Which Padma is supposed to provide, but in return Padma is treated as 'nymphomaniac' by Saleem. This duality and double standard presents his callousness. He degrades her, derides her, exploits her and still expects her to be loyal to him. Padma is Saleem's disdained other, utilizable, exploitable and submissive soul. Salman Rushdie has presented her as an only commodity of sex. Padma is considered a subject to male domination.

“The novel presents disgrace, humiliation, unjust treatment and exploitation of woman by the masculine strength through the medium of the characters in the novel. Padma leads such pitiable life only due to her gender. She is presented as a victim of illiteracy and ignorance. At the end of the novel it seems that Padma is subjected to male authority and it is she who desires to change her name from Padma Mongril to Naseem Sinai.”⁴

In the very first chapter under the title ‘The Perforated Sheet’ Saleem Sinai opens the novel and explains the exact date and time of birth.

The incident narrated in the very first chapter of the novel is a good example of the male dominated attitude of a father towards his own daughter. The women in the family are treated like toys and objects. It’s the exploitation of women in the society. They are treated like toys and playthings. Their freedom and liberty has been crushed down by the parents.

Even a doctor, who is considered as a life saver is also not permitted to see the woman. She has been kept behind a perforated sheet having a melon size hole in it and the doctor would be shown the part of the body which is affected.

Dr. Aziz does not permit his wife to say anything about Nadir Khan though expresses her concern over Nadir Khan’s presence in the house when they do have three daughters at home. So the wife Naseem has been neglected and she has no right at all to say anything in the family though she is a mother of three daughters. It shows that the predicament of women in every sense is rampant in the novel.

The women characters in *Midnight’s Children* are always caught between positions of power which they don’t have. A lonely woman can follow her desires within moral reasons but she has no societal power.

In *The Inheritance of Loss* Nimi is presented as major figure in the novel, Nimi is mostly seen in relation to Jemubhai – her fate is described in a few pages. Both Salman Rushdie and Desai are interested in discussing gender-related exploitation and oppression in their novels. However, it seems that Rushdie focuses somewhat more on the subject than Desai, as she includes more female characters, including rich details about the experiences and destinies of these figures. Desai, on the other hand, seems more interested in depicting racial and ethnic exploitation and subjugation.

Padma’s experiences and thoughts in Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* make a natural comparison to the character of Nimi in *The Inheritance of Loss*, who is also a subaltern woman, discriminated against due to her sex Nimi and her sisters live a life of boredom; they are hardly ever allowed to leave the house and to explore the world around them. They are obediently obeying their father’s authority and they are just waiting to get married. Thus, Nimi feels trapped in her father’s house, not being able to influence her own life.

“In the life of Nimi deprivation, injustice, oppression, alienation and isolation are well discernible. It can be stated that she is completely tied with above. She cannot evade far away. Nimi’s character is projected through the lens of recollection of her anglophile husband. Nimi is an example which shows how the traditional women are bound to suffer bitter treatment in the name of husband”.⁵

Due to his mental oppression and physical abuse of her, Nimi becomes very depressed and indifferent to her own situation. In addition, she is so used to being “locked up” that the thought of leaving him never really occurs to her. She was still unable to contemplate the idea of walking through the gate. The way it stood open for her to come and go-the sight filled her with loneliness. She was uncared for, her freedom useless.

These three novels *The Inheritance of Loss*, *The God of Small things* and *Midnight’s Children* by the writers, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Salman Rushdie respectively, depicts the quandary and predicament of women characters.

In this respect, Padma, Nimi, Sai, Ammu, fit into the theory of Edward Said they are filling the roles of the passive, poor and subsidiary women from the Third World, characteristics traditionally associated with the East. This reflects a deep contrast to the typical features of the West which are related to power, masculinity, independence and development.

However, there is one important difference between Padma, Nimi, Sai, and Lola Nimi, is not able to fight back or to leave her husband. Instead, her reactions to his abuse are silence and the refusal to cooperate when Jehu wants to westernize her identity. However, Nimi’s view of him as a cruel man is maintained until the end of their relationship, and finally she gets the courage to talk back. After this incident Jemubhai sees no other option than returning her to her family, as he fears he will kill her if she stays on. This situation is impossible to bear for Nimi, the thought of her family’s shame on her

behalf being too much to bear. Thus again, she is confronted with an impossible situation, but due to the discrimination against her she is not able to influence the decision which has been made. Nimi ends her life in the house of a brother-in-law where she accidentally catches fire over a stove. Like many other women in India she is killed without a witness, without a case, in a country where human life was cheap, where standards were shoddy, where stoves were badly made and cheap saris caught fire as easily. Like Nimi, Ammu too dies in an isolated condition in a grimy dark dirty lodge in the town.

Nimi, Ammu, Padma and Lola are in oppressed situations they are not able to communicate their fear and hopelessness to the world around them, as the listeners are either "silenced" them or influenced by the same patriarchal culture or customs.

Thus the women like Nimi and Padma and Ammu can never obtain any kind of freedom or power - they are "passive, poor and subsidiary women. Thus, through their novels Rushdie, Roy and Desai have attempted to give voice to these women and to draw attention to their lives in difficult situations. The stories of Nimi, Lola, Ammu, draws a realistic picture of female predicament and exploitation in the society. Women are not able to voice or express their difficult situation to the world around them.

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