



Portrayal of different Archetypes of Traditional Women in

Indian Writings in English

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ABSTRACT:

In a traditional society, it is assumed that women form an “out-group” and their primary duties are relegated to home and childrearing. The Indian Writings in English are replete with the archetypal images of women where they are being humiliated and shamed by the ideology, class, creed and religion, by the so-called industrially, philosophically and materially developed societies. Keeping in view the different archetypal roles played by the female protagonists of Indian writings in English, the present paper makes an attempt to give an overview of the woman’s destiny which is being subjected to different kinds of oppression and subjugation in varied contexts, i.e., colonial, postcolonial etc.

KEY WORDS: Tradition, Archetypes, Subjugation, Oppression, Family

A traditional woman is bound by certain traditional customs, values, moral and religious attitudes and is supposed to play the traditional roles of daughter, wife, mother, mother-in-law laid down by the society from ages. Traditionally, she sees nothing and connects herself with nothing but by the male members of the society. Both Feminists and Marxists have argued that the oppression of women is centrally constructed within the family, ideologically and materially. Luce Irigaray in ‘Speculum of the Other Woman’ believes that “the cave/womb becomes the place from which the male subject differentiates himself; she is the ground and precondition of his transcendence into the light, but is not acknowledged as such. Rather than proper recognition being given, and the debt being paid to the womb from which he emerges, the mother takes on the character of the mere bodily other, outside representation, which is left behind in man’s progress towards reason, God or the light.(Green,21)



The status of women in India society has changed from time to time. It is generally believed that women were held in high esteem in ancient India and were granted the same privileges as men. But later on female infanticide and malpractices like this crept into Indian society along with many other social evils like early marriage, enforced widowhood, sati, temple prostitution, purdah, dowry, polygamy, polyandry and particularly also the feudal system with its roots in land, agriculture and domination over lesser eco groups in villages which made Indian culture a vast, stagnant and immovable community in which women almost had no say and were ignored. On the whole, the culture that produced a Sita, a Savitri, and a Gandhari (who covered her eyes to become blind like her husband, Dhritrashtra) has deprived existence to woman except as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother or a mother-in-law.

The force of tradition is very much operational in the way the birth of a girl is seen in the family. The main reason is the dowry system which continues to take profounder and more all-encompassing roots in Indian society as daughters continue to be considered as “ParayaDhan”. The burden which the parents bear because of this dowry system has been well pointed out by R.K.Narayan in *The Financial Expert*:

“But is it 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.” (Narayan, 5-6)

Knowing fully well that as a female child she is an unwanted creature, the traditional woman continues to be docile, self-sacrificing, patient, living and capable of suffering. Ideas and taboos instilled in her mind from the very early childhood have resulted in her acceptance of an inferior position. Even the term “Griha-Lakshmi” cunningly juxtaposes woman’s deification and her confinement in domesticity. Faced with the constant bullying in their houses, the Savithris of India have no other remedy except to retreat in the dark rooms of their houses. Mulk Raj Anand in his essay, ‘The Position of Woman in India through the ages’ throws light on the pitiable condition of the Indian woman:

“Obviously, woman in India has sometimes been exalted as a goddess, but mostly pampered as a doll or kept down and oppressed.” (Anand, 19)



Ram Nath in R.P.Jhabvala's *Esmond in India* understands this inescapable dilemma of Indian women :

*“Our women are so ... like animals, like cows ...
Beat them, starve them, maltreat them how you like,
they will sit and look with animal eyes and never
raise a hand to defend themselves, saying ‘do with
me what you will, you are my husband, my God, it
is my duty to submit to my God’.” (Jhabwala, 97)*

Although the Indian woman has been described as the personification of purity and mystical power yet she emerges as a weak creature constantly requiring the protection of a man either in the form of a father, a husband or a son. Even a woman like Rosie in *The Guide* who has been treated as a modern woman by most critics also has a traditional touch in her dependence on the men folk – first on Marco, then on Raju.

The wife archetype occupies a central position in Indian writings in English. Here she often appears in the Pativrata, the Sita, Sati, Savitri image. The terms for wife, such as ardhangani, sahdharmini emphasize her non-duality with the husband. For the wife, the traditional ideal held forth is that of Pativratadharma which consists of atmasamarpana – merging her identity in that of her husbands’ – having no views or voice different from her husband’s, for whom the only conception of a bride, says Raja Rao, is the image of Parvati:

*“All brides are like Parvati, though Parvati was the
daughter of the Himalaya, today Parvati is in Kashi.
‘AnnapurneSadapurneSankaraPranballabhe’ Every
woman is a Parvati. They are potentially so.”(Niranjan, 25)*

The girl’s wish to have her own say in marriage is derided by elders. Laila in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* finds the voice of family disapproving her desire to marry of her own choice through Phuphi Jan, her aunt, scolding her:

*“You have been defiant and disobedient. You have
put yourself above duty to the family.”(Hossain, 312)*

Even an English girl Sarah in *Bye-Bye Black Bird* becomes a true Indian wife as she gives full support and cooperation to her husband Adit when he is very edgy and unstable on the decision of leaving England. She knows how to handle her husband in a true Indian traditional manner. Nalini in Kamala Markandaya’s *A Handful of Rice* also remains the typical, long-suffering Hindu middle-class wife. Her husband Ravi unloads his frustration on



her and she bears his brutalizing passively like a cow being led to a sacrificial altar. He slaps her, taunts her with bitter words, commits incest with her mother and makes her life miserable. She bears him with a stoic's unflinching spirit:

“Nalini never complained. He had seen her fighting for breath, or covertly rubbing oil into the livid marks on her abdomen or arching her back against the cold granite grinding stone, but he had never heard her complain. Neither of the ills of her pregnancy, nor of him.”(Markandya, 195)

Ganga in ManjuKapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a traditional wife. Her husband, a professor in a college, marries another woman Virmati and brings her home. She accepts this all as “her husband continued to be Ganga's public statement of selfhood. Her bindi and her bangles, her toe rings and her mangalsutra, all managed to suggest that he was still her god.”(Kapur, 278)

Another archetype of traditional women which looms across over the pages of Indian writings in English is the mother archetype. The mother archetype, like other archetypes, appears largely in immeasurable variety of aspects. First, we can see the appearance of mothers, grandmothers, stepmothers, mothers-in-law; then any other woman with whom an association subsists – for example, a governess or an ancestress. While talking about the mother archetype, Jung says, “whether this psychic structure and its elements, the archetype, ever originated at all is a metaphysical question and therefore unanswerable. The structure is something given, the precondition that is found to be present in every case. And this is the mother, the matrix – the form into which all experience is poured. The father, on the other hand, represents the dynamism of the archetype, for the archetype consists of both-form and energy.”(Jung, 101-2)

The mother archetype is all pervasive in Indian culture and it is natural for it to appear in Indian literature and in folklore in a most glorified manner. The silent suffering wife becomes a venerable figure when she becomes the mother of a son. Wives suffering from childlessness are often taunted by the members of the husband's family and they are sometimes forced to observe various rituals. Mohini in *Music for Mohini* visits a shrine, Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* seeks the help of Kenny, a missionary doctor while Premalain *Some Inner Fury* suffers silently and adopts a waif. Raja Rao, like other Indians considers maternity as the most revered of worldly manifestations. According to him, the expecting woman is



auspicious. In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, he says, “I envy woman who can give birth.” (Rao, 92) Through his women protagonists, Bhabani Bhattacharya projects the image of the mother who is capable of good self and courageous deeds. In *So Many Hungers*, the mother decides to finish her own life. In her last journey, she is even willing to carry the burden of her children’s sins. “If they are guilty of wrongs in past lives, let the punishment be mine alone, let me alone work it off, let me drag suffering from life to life.” (Bhattacharya, 193) Thus, we have three aspects of the mother archetype fictionalized in Indian writings in English – the mother who bears, the mother who cares and the mother who shares. Gauri from Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* is the symbol of purity and domesticity who, being trapped in the concept of a good mother, is supposed to forgo her own sufferings.

The archetype of woman as daughter also appears in Indian writings in English. While talking about the daughter archetype, i.e., the woman who is identified with the mother, C.G. Jung says, “Everything which reminds her of motherhood, responsibility, personal relationships and erotic demands arouse feelings of inferiority and compels her to run away to her mother, naturally, who lives to perfection everything that seems unattainable to her daughter ... She is content to cling to her mother in selfless devotion, while at the same time unconsciously striving, almost against her will, to tyrannize over her, naturally under the mask of complete loyalty and devotion.” (Jung, 89) *Roshini* in Veena Paintal’s novel *Roshini* or *Serenity in Storm* represents the typical Indian daughter who decides to marry Ashok which amounts to a suppression of her own will as she loves Deepak. But she does it without resentment because she sees greater virtue and value in discharging her duty as a daughter to her parents. Monisha in *Voices in the City* finds her relationship with her mother “filled with an inbred and invalid sense of duty, of honour, of concern”.

Moreover, “Woman as *Hetaira*, companion in the aspect of the sister, Soror Mystica” says Som P. Sharma “is peculiar to Indian culture. She is enshrined in the Hindu ritual of Rakhi wherein the brother and sisters exchange vows of protection and fidelity.” (Srivastava, 128) As sister, Saroja in *The Serpent and the Rope* bows to her brother’s orders. When it comes to her relation with her stepmother, Rama flatly tells that she has to obey her step-mother, whatever her personal ambitions may be. Though she feels she is let down, she bows to her brother’s orders and submerges her feelings out of a sense of duty to the family. In her relationship with her brother, Mohini (*Music for Mohini*) gives to the latter the love, tenderness and protection of the elder sister. The two together share a world in common, a



world of jokes, pranks and eavesdropping on their father. It is not surprising, therefore, that Heeralal, her brother, goes with Mohini to her mother-in-law's house in order to help his sister to take roots in her new environment. Mohini, from her beginning as a blood sister becomes the great sister of many like Ranjan, Ashu, Hari, Gopal, Jeeban and many more. She also becomes a Bau-sister (elder sister) to her husband's friend Harindra.

Whatever the role a woman may portray in the traditional Indian domestic setting, traditional women for ages have remained contented playing only a subordinate role as wife, mother, sister, daughter etc. The reason for their submissive roles, as Dr.Radhakrishnan points out, is that "centuries of traditions have made the Indian woman the most patient woman in the world, whose pride is suffering." (Kapur, 10) But these women now appear to have come out of the stagnant pools of orthodoxy. Dr.PromillaKapur finds that the change in the status and spirit of woman has led to "the emancipation of woman from the tradition-bound ethos." (Kapur, 13) Indian writers have also started writing about the strong and emancipated women in their writings. Hence tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which woman in Indian writings in English is passing.



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