

## EXPLORING FEMINIST, GENDER, AND QUEER PERSPECTIVES IN LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** The social and cultural systems of India have long been shaped and regulated by patriarchy, wherein male dominance determines socio-economic structures and systematically denies women self-identity, autonomy, and emancipation, relegating them to the status of second-class citizens. Within this male-dominated framework, women's aspirations for self-assertion, protest, resistance, and independence have historically been constrained and marginalized. However, contemporary women writers attempt to expose these silences and interrogate the deep-rooted negations that continue to persist in society, despite limited social support for such resistance.

Modern literary representations increasingly move away from portraying women as passive sufferers who submit to oppression in silence or martyrdom. Instead, contemporary women writers foreground female protagonists as individuals who resist traditional norms, dismantle oppressive structures, and assert their individuality and selfhood. Their narratives vividly depict resentment, defiance, retaliation, and deliberate transgressions of conventional images of Indian womanhood.

This paper explores how feminist writers pursue self-expression and self-realization within the limitations imposed by socio-cultural structures. In Indian English literature, particularly fiction, this concern manifests prominently through a persistent quest for self-identity. Feminist undertones resonate strongly in contemporary Indian writing, emphasizing women's struggles for autonomy and self-definition. Among the prominent voices contributing to this discourse, Manju Kapur stands out as a significant contemporary feminist writer. Her works consistently question traditional family values while negotiating a delicate balance between individual desire and social expectations.

**Keywords:** Idiosyncrasy and emancipation; patriarchy; humiliation; exploitation and oppression; feminism in Indian literature

### **The Perception of Idiosyncrasy and Emancipation of Women in Indian Writing**

Quest for Idiosyncratic and Female-emancipation in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English are two different subjects denoting the conditions of women. The purpose is to direct its gaze towards the sociological aspects of women such as their continuous struggle to identify their own role in the social system that is long been negated due to internal and external conflicts. The expressions 'Idiosyncratic' and 'Emancipation' have become high-toned and fashionable terms in the contemporary literary studies. Of late, even the media is vociferous on several issues of women in the society and in a way, pointing to the need for 'Idiosyncratic'. Smitha. G denotes that there are various expressions gaining momentum in the pursuit of identity.

Their stories tell us about 'national identity', 'regional identity', 'tribal identity', 'cultural identity', 'man's identity', 'women's identity', 'Indian identity', 'European identity', 'group identity' and hordes of other identities. One has no idea how many identities are at present

floating in the air. It is very difficult to have a count of them, to catch them, and to comprehend them. (2015: 321)

Most of the novelists who belong to the older generation are involved in discussing the problems of identity and emancipation, but their concern is more physical than psychological. Not encouraged by these, the novelists of the current generation, namely Chaman Lal, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Salman Rushdie, etc. are deeply concerned with the **'Idiosyncratic'**. Any attempt to go through their notable works will help us find how their characters revolve around the theme of identity crisis. Balachandra Rajan has explored the difficult situation of alienating one's own 'self' in his novels. His novel *Too Long in the West* is a story of Nalini whose long stay in the West for her studies in Columbia University makes her realize the bitter realities of the society in her homeland that even her mother feels at a point that she will never fit into the Indian culture as she has been too long in the West. Chaman Lal has also written many novels such as *My True Faces* (1973), *Azadi* (1975), *Into another Dawn* (1977), *The English Queens and the Crown* (1979) and *The Lion Cloth* (1981) with the same theme of self-exploration.

In the writings of Anita Desai, the inner urge towards 'self-expression' is more powerful and predominant as it leads to identifying the 'self'. Her central characters are on a never-ending search in reaching and realizing their identities. Her characters like Monisha, Amla and Nirode are free from all kinds of social restrictions. They are portrayed as the ones who are dissatisfied with the routine happenings of the world. They want to disconnect themselves from their usual life patterns, only to reaffirm that familial and social bondages cannot be so easily replaced.

The novels of Anita Desai are stated for parallel flow of writing in the history of Indian English fiction. It is an undisputed and undeniable fact that her novels have been knit around the intricate idea of self-identity, and a female character is always on the focus. Her first novel *Cry the Peacock* published in (1964) is treated as a landmark in the history of Indian English Writing. She traverses a world subsisting within another world only to locate the disintegration of the protagonist's 'identity'. Maya, the principal character of her first novel, is a capsized soul who is so desperate for her identification however simplest to realize in phrases of marital concord and unsuccessful at the end.

In her second novel *Bye-Bye Black Bird* (1984) the issue of 'identity' is the result of the dissension between 'the spirit of place and the protagonist's soul'. The inability to move ahead hand in hand of these two authoritative forces contributes to the dynamics of her narratives. The quest for identity and the attempts to identify it give finite dimensions to her narrative in most of her celebrated novels. *In Custody* (1984) and *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) – are the other most popular novels which carry another disposition of the perpetual quest for identity which, in a way done under the abrading pressures of the cultural systems and all the efforts to trace it, become a gruelling exercise. Anita Desai's *The Voices in the City* raises million-dollar question via her patience, passive struggling and suicidal try. Woman's voice in opposition to injustice and inequality tends to get to the bottom of the fact that feminism is the effect of the way of life or society shaped and governed by way of men to healthy their wishes and interests regardless of women's basic desires and happiness. In this man-made society everything is supposed for the pride and earnings of male sexuality

The concepts of idiosyncrasy and emancipation in Indian writing reflect the evolving conditions of women within a society shaped by internal and external conflicts. These themes

draw attention to the sociological realities of women's lives, particularly their continuous struggle to define their roles within a social system that has historically negated their agency. The terms *idiosyncrasy* and *emancipation* have gained prominence in contemporary literary studies as critical tools for understanding women's resistance to patriarchal domination.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has left an indelible mark on the tradition of women novelists writing in English. It is difficult to categorize her identity as wholly Indian or European. Born to Polish parents in Germany, educated in England, and married to an Indian, Jhabvala lived in India for over twenty-four years. Although many of her works explore various facets of Indian life, she resisted being labelled an "Indian writer," describing herself instead as a European writer writing about India.

Her first novel, *To Whom She Will* (1955), presents a vivid portrayal of Indian society, focusing on marriage, love, social customs, and illicit relationships, while also depicting the traumatic consequences of Partition. *The Nature of Passion* (1956) received critical acclaim for its satirical depiction of Indian society and centers on Nimmi, a young woman who challenges traditional norms in her pursuit of emancipation. Through this character, Jhabvala critiques superficial modernism and highlights the social conditioning underlying individual aspirations.

*Esmond in India* (1957) explores the failed marriage between an Englishman and an Indian woman, emphasizing cultural incompatibility and emotional dissonance. *The Householder* (1960) portrays domestic life and interpersonal conflicts, particularly between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, revealing Jhabvala's acute insight into everyday Indian realities. Her Booker Prize-winning Novel *Heat and Dust* (1975) examine the lives of English women in India and their emotional and cultural dislocation. Collectively, Jhabvala's novels project the image of the "new woman"—economically independent, self-aware, and engaged in a quest for identity—making her work a pioneering contribution to feminist discourse.

Shashi Deshpande, another prominent voice in Indian feminist literature, presents a nuanced portrayal of middle-class Indian women. Her works are deeply rooted in Indian cultural traditions and explore women's contradictory identities shaped by familial and societal expectations. Novels such as *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1982), *Roots and Shadows* (1992), and *That Long Silence* (1990) highlight women's struggles to reconcile personal aspirations with traditional roles.

In *A Matter of Time* (1999), Deshpande extends her exploration of feminine experience across three generations of women, addressing themes of silence, gender inequality, familial disintegration, and emotional abandonment. The novel foregrounds existential anguish and the impact of patriarchal neglect on women's psychological well-being. Deshpande's prose style—simple yet evocative—allows her narratives to delve deeply into the emotional core of her characters.

Critics observe that Deshpande's central thematic concern is human relationships, particularly those between women and their families. Her female protagonists strive to assert their identity not only as wives or mothers but, most importantly, as autonomous human beings. Nityanandam aptly notes that Deshpande seeks to present complete and authentic female characters rather than idealized figures shaped for male perspectives.

Nayantara Sahgal takes up the problem of unsettled conditions as the cause and stresses on some change in the social setup. Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* (1965) thinks that she is completely estranged when she returns to her parental home after taking divorce to her husband. She aspires for modernity and freedom which according to her true representations of

identity. Ruth Praver Jhabwala emphasizes more on the complications of foregoing 'identity' by disclosing the ascertainties and threats to 'self-identity'. There are multiple characters that are scurrying towards the realization of the self-identity in her novels. Most of her characters, as R.S. Pathak points out in his article, move in a long-lasting quest for **Idiosyncratic** and they face lot of hardships in their journey. Although her novels are disarranged with external indication of withdrawal, she is at her best in prioritizing the concept of 'Self-Identity'. (1999:52)

Nayantara Sahgal, though admittedly a minor writer she has lately been placed on a high pedestal with eight novels, published by her so far. Her literary background, associated with her "fecund imagination' and' susceptible sensibility' has inspired most of her novels in which she shows a perfect command over her medium. Most of the novels by Nayantara Sehgal explore and highlight the attitudes of women. She presents women's Quest for identity, real life conflicts, marital tensions, the lack of communication between people, especially husband and wife. All this results in unhappiness and prevents human fulfilments.

*The Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is one of the best political novels written by an Indian in English. It deals with the partition of East Punjab on linguistic lines just when the state had recovered from the trauma of the 1947 partition. Beside the political background which is very well projected there is also a human background which has not received adequate treatment. Vishal's marriage had been a failure. A widower, he is deriving satisfaction in a liaison with Gauri, a Bengal businessman's wife who finds security in arranged marriage, but she needs and establishes a relationship with Dubey which is based on sex. Vishal develops a deeper attachment to Saroj wife of Inder who has an affair with Mara wife of Jit – Inder and Jit both being in business. Jit and Mara, however, find each other in the end and Saroj escapes to Delhi. The ideal relationship between a man and a woman is exemplified by Vishal Dubey Saroj relationship is in the novel. The analysis of the fictional situation of the novel shown that healthy growth of natural relationship is here mainly concern. Mrs. Sahgal has emphasized the need of understanding the individual existence of others through the exercise of love and freedom. It is a relationship between two fulfilled individuals who remain individuals. The lovers form a union without the loss of their individuality.

Sehgal's women characters – Maya Sivpal Rashmi Saroj and Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* are highly individualistic but are still bound by traditions of Indian Society. In "husband centered" society, they have no standing. They are portrayed as passive creatures in the beginning, to which only things happen. Her women are a typical example of qualities one would look for in a traditional Indian woman; qualities such as patience, forbearance adherence to family. In *The Day in Shadow*, Nayantara Sahgal, shows how an Indian Woman attempts to liberate herself from the moral and social pressures. Here she presents her personal experience of conventional reaction. When Simrit wishes to break a seventeen-year-old marriage she has problems not only in coping with her own irrational fears and tensions but also with society which does not recognize a woman's identity apart from her husband. A divorced woman is curiously watched by other as if "divorce was a disease that left pock marks" (4)

Sahgal, advocates women's struggle for freedom and self-realization in her fiction. Her heroines always try to realize their selfhood, happiness and fight against injustice. In fact, fighting against injustice is a recurrent idea in Sehgal's novels. The women all over the world have remained under the male force. They must face the sense of insecurity, the sexual harassment and violence which are similar in the advanced as well as in the developing

countries. In this male-dominated society a woman has been the victim of male-hypocrisy violence and exploitation since the earliest times.

Indian women novelists over the past few decades have increasingly explored female subjectivity as a means of reclaiming self-identity from patriarchal impositions. Works such as Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House* (1956), Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973), and Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* further exemplify this thematic concern.

The present study, "Idiosyncrasy and Emancipation: A Study of the Novels of Manju Kapur," examines women's experiences within patriarchal family structures. It highlights how women use their bodies and identities as sites of resistance against violence and oppression. Despite patriarchal attempts to control and destabilize women's bodies, Kapur's narratives illustrate how women reclaim bodily autonomy as a powerful means of empowerment and self-definition.

The study further explores internal quests for identity alongside external oppression, focusing on familial and societal pressures that shape female consciousness. It examines how patriarchal power structures marginalize women while simultaneously provoking resistance and self-awareness. By interrogating traditional myths, gender biases, and social evils, the study demonstrates how contemporary narratives reconstruct man-woman relationships within a modern socio-cultural context

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