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Empowered Indian Women in Selected Novels

Ms. Richa Pathak

Rani Durgawati Vishwavidyalaya, Jabalpur, (M.P.) India

Dr. Aparna Tiwari

Govt. Shyam Sunder Agrawal P.G. College, Sihora, Jabalpur, (M.P.) India

Abstract

The study titled, *Empowered Indian Women in Selected Novels* is an analytical scrutiny on the reality behind empowered Indian women. By and large Indian English fiction writers have presented women as a sculpture of inferiority and weakness painting their miseries and limitations. There is a need to explore this partial picture which negates her image and depicts her as an object of desire and as weak. To censure the negative image a complete picture has to be drawn. For this purpose three fiction writers belonging to three different centuries have been selected. Further an effort to assert that the Indian woman has been and is an empowered entity in more ways than one has been made through this study.

Key Words: empowerment, Indian woman, novel

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, the first published novel in English by an Indian is a story of young and brave Matangini. She is introduced as Rajmohan's wife; someone whose identity depends on her relationship as a wife of a certain man. She represents women of pre independent era. The depiction of this female protagonist is unconventional as she has the energy and spark to act with determination. In the story Rajmohan fosters enmity with Madhav, Matangini's brother-in-law. He steals a Will from Madhav by which Madhav will inherit immense wealth. Madhav's cousin Mathur is envious of Madhav's future prosperity and wants to change the Will. Rajmohan is approached by Mathur, through some dacoits, for the task. After overhearing the conspiring words of

Rajmohan in the 7th chapter, *Love can Conquer Fear*, "We mean to carry off his uncle's will". "It is an ivory box,' [. . .] "with three English letters written in gold on the lid" (Chatterjee 33), Matangini, who has great affection for her sister and Madhav, who happens to be Matangini's sister's husband, leaves home in the middle of the night to warn them about this danger, "Every word that caught the ear of Matangini froze her with horror during the terrible dialogue she overheard" (Chatterjee 34).

This story projects the strength of an Indian woman, one who has the vision and courage to fight odds:

She thought not of the danger, though the danger was great. At this hour of

dreaded loneliness, a young woman would have to thread her way through a wild and jungly path. She was, naturally enough, superstitious and her rich imagination was stored with tales of unearthly haunters of the woods, and had fed on them since infancy. A band of desperate robbers were stationed somewhere in the vicinity, and should she fall into their hands, she shuddered to think what might be the consequence. If among these robbers she should meet her husband! Matangini shuddered again. Matangini had a brave heart, and for her sister and her husband she felt she could risk her life. (Chatterjee 36)

During the period when women were equated to Savitri, determined to save the life of their husbands at all costs, Matangini goes against the bitterness and wrong doings of her husband. Here is the reality of a woman, who has through her courageous and righteous action established her own identity.

Devi Chaudhurani, another protagonist of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in the novel of the same name, is a freedom fighter; a woman of substance. At a time when most women remained behind *pardah*, this story of a young girl, Prafulla, who had to lead a life of penury and desolation more than once and also suffered miserably when disowned by her own father-in-law's whims, epitomizes empowerment with education and military training. Her transformation into Devi Chaudhurani became an inspiration for many Indian women to come out and fight for the county's freedom.

During the course of a complex plot she confronts her husband and father in law, who are in distress. Epitomizing "to err is human, to forgive divine" she finally sheds off her role of authority and leadership and decides to accept her family and role of a wife and daughter-in-law, considered by her as a more difficult task but the real task at the same time. The significance of showing her inherent strength to take independent decisions, keeping family and its welfare first is the most powerful quality of an Indian woman, shown here. Another novel *Anandmath*, also by the renowned novelist, exemplifies and can also be equated with *Devi Chaudhurani* dealing with courageous empowered women.

Women characters of Kamala Markandaya are the next to appear under the scanner of this study. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is about a common woman Rukmani of post independent era. Markandaya discovered the real asset in the strength of a common Indian woman by courageously facing day to day hurdles in her life. The story is set during the period of urban development in India. Rukmani is married to Nathan, a tenant farmer:

By the time I came to womanhood even I had to acknowledge that his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me, his wife, whom he took at the age of twelve. (Markandeya 4)

The story is about the couple and the hurdles of their life. It shows how growing

tyranny affected the life of poor farmers. “With six children to feed we could no longer afford to eat all the vegetables we grew” (Markandeya 25). Rukmani being an ordinary Indian woman projected the image of empowered woman by finding happiness for her family despite several shortcomings:

For the first time in years I bought clothes for the older children, a saree for myself, and although he protested I bought for my husband a dhoti which he badly needed, since the other was in rags and barely covered his loins. (Markandeya 55)

Two Virgins is about progressive qualities in Saroja and her sister Lalitha. Saroja lives in a village with her family. Where Lalitha is ambitious and wants to become a movie star, Saroja is simple and composed, who enjoys simple things in life. When Lalitha gets misguided by the charm of big city and leaves her family, her sister Saroja holds the family together, looks after them and also searches for Lalitha in an unknown city with her parents:

He turned to Saroja. You are her generation, he appealed to her, in Lalitha’s place where would you go? I’d go straight home, said Saroja passionately. [...] She hated the city [...] She wanted to go home. [...]

The city took it away all from you. You were one in a hundred, in a thousand you were no longer you, you might have been an amoeba. (187-188)

Here is a woman, a modest girl, who willingly yet strongly takes up the

responsibility of supporting her parents and also endures several impediments to find her sister who is lost in this big world.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a well acclaimed novelist of the present times, presents her women, who belong to 21st century. In her novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, she has presented an able entrepreneur and a decision maker. Tilo is a young storekeeper who sells spices and also solves mental and physical ailments of her customers in America. Eventually she falls in love with an American. She is forbidden to follow her carnal desires due to her exceptional professional restrictions. In case she is enticed she loses her magical powers. Tilo faces a dilemma where she has to choose between her work and love. Finally she finds a way to make her life worthy to live. Her *guru* and her mother, discovers that she has a humanitarian cause behind her profession, which is her asset and more importantly, her strength, her power that she is passionate about. It is to heal the afflicted. If she continues to be as passionate then she is free to follow her desire too. This novel presents the image of another courageous woman who goes to a distant land alone and establishes herself as a successful entrepreneur. She also is the one who knows what she wants from her life. Obliquely, the story also affirms that the inherent quality of a person, if channeled in the right direction, can eventually make that person empowered.

Divakaruni has written a book in the form of an autobiography of the most famous female epic character, Draupadi. The novel, *The Palace of Illusions* lends an

all inclusive aspect to the character of Draupadi. The purpose of the novel is to write the epic from a woman's standpoint. Taking this purpose into consideration, what would have been a better choice than Draupadi, titivated with a contemporary touch?

There are other women characters in the novel, right from Satyavati to Kunti and Gandhari, who are projected as decision makers and have courage to face consequences, yet it is Draupadi or Panchaali who alone has been the victim of circumstances from her birth till the end, tackling with men and women who played critical roles in shaping her destiny and the one who has faced the most unfortunate incidents with the nerve and gallantry of the most extraordinary nature.

The study of these six characters presented by three different writers from centuries spaced out, have been validated with an unconventional perspective. It is unreservedly ensured after an overview of these character presentations that women were not, are not and shall never be the weaker sex of the society. This short study reflects women as self empowered. An examination into women belonging to different sections of society, class and even times, have been powerful by their own inherent quality. It brings out a magnanimous image of Indian women. It wipes out all sketches of the social hypothesis drawn on a woman.

In our society it is customary to consider women who constitute half of the country's population as inferior to males. Women are

here to sacrifice their dreams, hopes, and live in the name of relationship, family and society. They are supposed to submit to all their sufferings as their destiny. They are born to make others happy at the cost of their own happiness. Even this cultural upbringing can be attributed to their strength of nature. They have that efficiency, perseverance and nobility to do so. Why call it a weakness and why not their strength, their power?

It is once again a convention to deem women as mentally and physically weak. This is a fact no doubt, yet it is sadly observable in the way this biological weakness is being taken advantage of. The news of their falling easy victims to physical abuse and assault at alarming frequency is on the rise, which is disheartening. (Delhi Rape Case Dec 2012 being the recent example). One of the reasons for this plight is the perspective in which Indian society has presented women. There are hurdles and also major problems like insecurity and increasing crimes taking the toll on women in the ever growing complexities of the world. India still has a long way to go and much more is yet to be done to ensure respectability and security for its women, to make her more empowered. Nevertheless, India has also covered a long way doing just that.

Digging and rummaging into history with an unconventional and unorthodox approach helps witness that women coming from different sections of society and in different centuries, have been presented in their best empowered image by the study of characters selected. This research paper has

aimed to boost up new confidence in Indian women. There is struggle, decision making, courage, efficiency, entrepreneurship and independent identity along with all other inherent feminine qualities that have been justified as a sign of strength and not

weakness. It is also believed that the work will stimulate fresh outlook in reconsidering women empowerment, paving a path in forming clear views in understanding the emergence of Indian women as empowered individuals.

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