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Women in Indian Literature: A Feminist Critical Study

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Abstract

Women are often seen as the most beautiful creation of God on Earth. They represent the essence of life and are the ultimate creators. As grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives, they serve as the foundation of the family, surrounding everyone with their steadfast love and affection. Since they make up about half of the population, they are commonly the focus of study and debate in Indian literature. Indian writers have always aimed to depict the intricate realities of women from multiple viewpoints. They have carefully addressed the various issues and challenges women face, including their fears, suffering, and struggles. Through their literary works, these authors have expressed their thoughts and concerns. The status and role of women in Indian society have evolved significantly from ancient periods to the present day. This article seeks to critically evaluate the representation of women in Indian literature throughout history.

Keywords: *Women, Women's representation, Feminist perspective. Gender Studies, Women's status.*

Context and Scope

The main objective of this paper is to illuminate the role of women in Indian literature, with a focus on Indian theater. This paper will also discuss the historical and contemporary social, economic, political, intellectual, and cultural contributions of women. It will further highlight the gender- and sex-based inequalities prevalent in Indian society. Moreover, the goal of this paper is to advocate for the recognition of women as active participants in family life, societal development, politics, and national advancement.

Literature Review

M.K. Naik, in his work *A History of Indian English Literature*, has extensively explored Indian English literature, including plays and their playwrights. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar also elaborates on the evolution and progress of Indian English plays and highlights the contributions of numerous dramatists in solidifying drama as a recognized literary form.

Radha Kumud Mukherji's book, *Women in Ancient India*, is an important reference for understanding the status of women in ancient India. The author has adeptly illustrated the position and roles of women in India, from the Vedic period to their complete independence across all aspects of life. Furthermore, Sanjay Saxena's *Women's Identity in Colonial India* presents the conditions of women during the British period and the initiatives pursued by British officials to improve their challenging situations in various ways. This book also emphasizes the brave efforts of the British to eliminate practices such as sati and child marriage in colonial India. Additionally, P. Dhanwel's *Indian Imagination of Girish Karnad* has helped uncover the differing representations of women in India.

Introduction

The woman is the fundamental basis of existence. She embodies 'nature' and possesses the capacity to nurture and endure everything. All the consciousness (energy) within the universe is managed, either directly or indirectly, by her since she is the origin of all. When the Supreme Lord, Parabrahma, contemplated the creation of the world, his first act was to create women. It is said that woman was his most exquisite creation. The continuity of this world is contingent upon her existence. She represents the initial light of dawn, where all shadows vanish. She is akin to that sun, which illuminates everyone and has the power to eliminate all the darkness that exists in the world.

As the ultimate creators of existence, women are the origin of life. They play crucial roles in families, communities, and the economy, serving as daughters, wives, mothers, grandmothers, caregivers, friends, doctors, scientists, engineers, writers, and entrepreneurs. She embraces everyone with her limitless love, warmth, and compassion. She embodies the principles of faith, love, trust, patience, forgiveness, and resilience. In spite of all this, they have not attained the recognition they rightfully deserve in a patriarchal society.

Women have often been among the most misunderstood and misrepresented individuals throughout history. This is particularly evident in societies dominated by men, such as India, where they are either completely overlooked or viewed solely as reflections of male values. Indian literature presents a range of viewpoints on women's roles, from feminine leadership, as embodied in the supreme goddesses (Adimata, Jagatmata, Adishakti), to the constraints of gender roles. The Devi Sukta hymn from the Rigveda posits that feminine energy is the fundamental essence of the universe, an eternal and boundless force that shapes all matter and consciousness. In Indian sacred texts, including the Puranas and the Upanishads, the female figure is considered the most powerful and empowering force. In these scriptures, women are held in great respect and veneration. The veneration of the mother goddess by men has led them to perceive women as embodiments of power, wealth, and wisdom. In the Hindu tradition, these qualities are represented by various female deities. Hinduism has long showcased a significant representation of the divine feminine. The goddess is regarded as the core of power. Matriarchy was commonplace in the Sanskrit tradition, and many Hindu communities continue to practice matriarchy today.

The sacred text 'Manusmriti' in verses 3.55-3.56 also states that 'women should be respected and adorned' and 'in places where women are honored, the gods are pleased, but where they are not honored, no sacred ritual yields any results.' In other words, it conveys that where women are revered, the divine presence resides. Conversely, where they are not revered, all endeavors fail or ultimately become meaningless.

The status of women in Indian society has experienced significant transformations from ancient times to the present. In the era of the Rigveda, women were regarded as equals to men in all respects. They were not seen as subordinate to men in any way. They received a strong education and were proficient in all Sixteen Kalas (arts). Additionally, they actively participated in conducting Yajnas. Notable figures such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamundra, Sita, Shakuntala, Savitri, and Draupadi are examples of women who were highly esteemed and attained esteemed positions in history. They enjoyed the freedom and the chance to engage in religious practices, debates, select their spouses, and join military confrontations. These women were far from submissive and did not allow themselves to be at the mercy of a dominant male mindset.

Sita left her husband, Lord Rama, when her integrity and virtue were put into doubt. Savitri battled Yama and successfully revived her husband. Draupadi responded fiercely and avenged herself on the Kauravas for their

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humiliation in the court. These stories of these remarkable women continue to echo in the shared memory of the Indian populace.

In both Buddhism and Jainism, women were held in high regard from the very beginning. However, over time, the elevated position and status that women once enjoyed diminished significantly during the medieval and modern eras of Indian history. Patriarchy fully asserted its dominance over women's roles, limiting their freedom and stifling their identities. It was as if they were kept under the control of male family members. During her childhood, her father looked after her; her husband provided protection in her old age; and, as a result, she was never considered capable of exercising autonomy. Additionally, various social issues such as child marriage, the Parda system, the Sati practice, the dowry system, and parental control over choosing a husband further deteriorated their circumstances.

Indian writers, especially playwrights, have historically focused on the challenges women face and their roles in society and culture. Kalidas, Bhasa, Ashwagosh, Bhavbhuti, Vishakhadatta, and others have successfully illustrated timeless female figures in their works. Following this, Sri Aurobindo has created impactful female characters that play a crucial role in the development of key themes. Rabindranath Tagore's innovative representation of the struggles of Indian women and their fight for Indian writers, especially those in the theater, have consistently highlighted the challenges faced by women and their roles in society and culture throughout history. Kalidas, Bhasa, Ashwagosh, Bhavbhuti, Vishakhadatta, and other playwrights have masterfully portrayed timeless female figures in their narratives. Following this tradition, Sri Aurobindo has created powerful female characters that play a crucial role in the development of the main themes. The innovative depiction of the struggles and quest for equality and freedom warrants particular emphasis. Tagore advocates for women's education, supports the remarriage of widows, and criticizes social conservatism, dogmatic beliefs, and the oppressive treatment of women within patriarchal structures. His characters Chitra, Vasanta, Malini, Supriya, Sumitra, and Nandini articulate strong, empowering viewpoints in their respective portrayals. liberty faced by Indian women in Rabindranath Tagore's plays merits specific attention. Tagore advocates for women's education and the remarriage of widows while critiquing social conservatism, rigid beliefs, and the subjugation of women by male-dominated systems. Chitra, Vasanta, Malini, Supriya, Sumitra, and Nandini serve as his mouthpieces, conveying strong, assertive viewpoints in their respective parts. Tagore's approach is rooted in social realism and reform, evident in the female characters he has developed for his plays.

In the period following independence, playwrights such as G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb, Pratap Sharma, Guru Charan Das, Asif Currimbhoy, Bharti Sarabhai, and others depicted female characters who are predominantly inferior to their male counterparts. They were subjected to a 'culture of silence.'

Mira, Isha, and Maya serve as the submissive female figures in Desani's male-dominated play "Hali." Bharti Sarabhai's female characters are rooted in reality and aware of their situations. Anuradha and Uravasi, the protagonists of her play *Two Women*, embody the ideal of the Hindu woman who finds happiness within her family. In Asif Currimbhoy's plays, women function merely as ordinary individuals who aid in the progression of themes and narratives. Kasturba, in *My Experiment with the Truth*, is portrayed as a mere caricature and lacks thorough development. Pratap Sharma exhibits notable courage in his portrayal of women in his works: *A Touch of Brightness and Professor Has a Warcry*. He addresses topics such as prostitution and a woman's relationship outside of marriage following her husband's death in these respective plays. Nevertheless, these plays were written to promote social reforms. However, the representation of women remains traditional and intermediate.

Dramatists from the post-modern period, including Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, and Badal Sircar, were attentive to social issues and crafted powerful female characters. The women in their works struggle with questions of self-identity, pursue wholeness, seek freedom, and strive to break free from the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society. They confront the traditional values of a highly conservative culture.

Dattani examines how the postmodern era's colonial perspective shapes women's struggles with identity and highlights the dangers posed to feminine sensibilities. He boldly challenges the patriarchal social system, outdated customs, and the constraints placed on women's lives and behavior. Numerous female characters in his works appear to be victims of traditional views that perceive women merely as objects and sources of pleasure. Those who display

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assertiveness and determination fight against these limitations and emerge as postcolonial women in search of independence and self-identity.

Vijay Tendulkar depicts a woman as both instigator and sufferer. The woman's physical form and the structured authority of power clash in Tendulkar's works, articulating and demanding different levels of aggression. He challenges the established conventions and beliefs of a traditional society.

Girish Karnad, a legend in Indian drama written in English, was a developed humanist. The writer's awareness of the social responsibility has heightened his understanding of his role in society. He is exceptionally progressive in how he depicts and develops female protagonists in his plays. He is completely conscious of the human connections that traditional Hindu families and society have developed over the years. Women are depicted within the social framework against the backdrop of Indian socio-cultural norms, patriarchal family dynamics, and social politics, yet the playwright also envisions the personal aspirations of women along with their various roles, such as mother, wife, sister, daughter, lover, and social reformer. While fulfilling their social responsibilities within the family and society, Karnad's female characters pursue their own desires and find their unique paths to achieve them. In both their social and personal lives, they remain aware of physical needs and contemplate them within the larger context of the world.

Karnad explores various aspects of women's roles as defined by society, particularly the widely discussed idea of sexuality. He possesses a very earnest view of sexuality. Karnad addresses women's sexual desires and infidelity with remarkable candor, portraying them as natural human reactions rather than something immoral. He does not see any wrongdoing or unethical behavior if a woman seeks fulfillment through a relationship of her choosing. While the portrayal of female sexuality may not be a predominant theme in his plays, it plays a crucial role in depicting women alongside the other societal roles they are expected to fulfill within their families and communities.

The playwright endorses extramarital relationships for the sake of physical enjoyment, aligning with his personal beliefs and societal views. He is disturbed by the gender distinctions present in Indian culture. He advocates for gender equality and promotes the idea of unrestricted human connections between men and women. The female characters in his works seek to engage with their surroundings and social issues to validate their existence. In Karnad's plays, the female body acts as a vehicle for the development and expression of identity, emphasizing the sexualized female form within a patriarchal framework.

The female figures in Karnad's works are motivated by ordinary individuals. Their involvement is grounded in active engagement. Many of his female characters are bold, confident, and vibrant, continuously challenging the situations in which the playwright presents them as submissive and weak, all while striving to reclaim their power over male counterparts. In both *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, female sexual desire acts as a central driving element of the stories. A love-sex triangle emerges, featuring two men and one woman. Both the clever Padmini from Hayavadana and the innocent Rani from Nagamandala are propelled by the same longing: to seek sexual satisfaction beyond the confines of marriage. Karnad portrays both characters without bias, allowing readers to develop empathy for them.

In truth, a woman boldly defies the constraints placed upon her in her quest for love and enjoyment in the aforementioned plays. Drawing inspiration from Sartre, Camus, and other existential thinkers, Karnad empowers his female characters by giving them freedom through their choices. Most of Karnad's works can be seen as feminist plays since they tackle issues like child marriage, the abuse of wives by their husbands, societal double standards, and the legal systems that uphold them. Furthermore, they underscore the hollowness and injustice of the patriarchal family structure.

Karnad is a reformer. He does not discriminate against anyone based on gender. His aim is to change men's perspectives on women. Unlike many feminists, he does not oppose the presence of husbands or men in women's lives. He advocates for women's equality in society. The narrative of Rani in the play Nagamandala presents the female perspective regarding her desires, challenges, and experiences within patriarchal structures. Her story also satirizes the inflated male assertions and ambitions to dominate female sexuality and virtue.

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However, by the end of the play, Rani stands out as a formidable figure, wielding ultimate authority in a realm dominated by men. Karnad, through the character of Rani, reinforces the traditional idea of matriarchy and women's commanding role in both the family and society.

In *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad powerfully portrays Padmini's yearning for completeness and her quest for perfection. Karnad's depiction of Padmini presents her as a contemporary woman caught between extremes, affectionately drawn to both her husband and another man for their distinctive qualities. Padmini agrees to Kapila's proposal for them to cohabitate with Devdatta, reminiscent of the Pandavas and Draupadi. She remains unbothered by societal expectations. Her primary aim is to attain physical fulfillment through her relationship with Kapila. She longs for a sense of completeness. Unlike the conventional Indian woman, Padmini does not suppress her attraction to Kapila, despite knowing that society would frown upon her living with two men. She embodies the idea of a liberated woman and refuses to adhere to a submissive feminine role.

Many female characters from various castes and social strata, including Rambhavati, Gangambika, Lalitambha, Kalavati, Amba, Bhagirati, and Savitri, were introduced by Karnad in *Taledanda*. All these characters are significant in the context of women's studies in this play. Some exhibit boldness and freedom, while others display a more submissive demeanor. Generally, they are victims of caste, class, gender, and religion. They advocate for socio-cultural and religious reforms, even though their requests are rejected by the traditional male-dominated society.

Girish Karnad has crafted another compelling female character in the play Tughlaq, depicted through the stepmother. As a Muslim woman from the Medieval period [14th century AD], she is constrained by various religious norms, yet she refuses to confine herself to the traditional feminine role. Although the play is primarily centered on the Sultan, the absence of a strong woman would prevent the Sultan's actions from being effectively conveyed to the audience.

Conclusion

Karnad has skillfully depicted his female characters by not only assigning them important roles in his plays but also by elevating their status, placing women at the center of action as they confront societal stigma, male dominance, and various social taboos. Several writers have also tackled issues related to gender and examined its intricate dynamics in their distinct ways. They have represented women in diverse roles and conveyed significant messages to readers about the importance of respecting them and recognizing their rightful place in society, as established during the Vedic period.

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