Gender Politics: 
Scenario in Indian English Fiction and India

Dr. Shruti Das

“I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives.”

— Jane Austen, Persuasion

I find it pertinent to begin my article with this quote from Jane Austen’s famous book Persuasion. Indeed, women have been always assigned two roles in society; they are either the bold, the wild and the evil or the beautiful, the docile and the obedient. They practically have no other representation. They are always to be seen and never to be heard. Jane Austen’s lament that she hates to hear of women being described as “fine ladies instead of rational creatures” rings true even today. Fictional representations of women even in the 20th and 21st centuries still reflect deep patriarchal influence which forms a concern of feminist readings of Third World fiction.

Jane Freedman, an important feminist of the twentieth century, contends that the basic assumption of feminism starts “with the assertion that feminisms concern themselves with women’s inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. Furthermore, one could argue that all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women” (1). The continuity of changes in socio-economic and psycho-cultural aspects of human living has influenced the role of Women. With the process of Industrialization, Modernization and Globalization showing its deep impact on the human society all over the world, the role and responsibilities of Women has attained new definition and perspective. Yet, through history woman has been violated and discriminated against. Woman’s expression and articulation has always been timid and reserved. In writing, she has been exhibiting an apologist attitude almost always compromising with patriarchal mindsets. Her writing has been conservative and has simply chronicled the lives and love stories of women from a certain cross-section of society articulating the discourse of patriarchy. Examples of these are profusely found in the works of majority of the prolific women writers of India today. Bhasa literature and literatures available to us in translation written by eminent woman writers are not exception to this. The bold and rebellious Draupadi in Prativa Ray’s epoc making Jagnaseni bows down before patriarchy, towards the end of the novel. We find the rebellious voices finally tamed in the fictional world of Sarojini Sahu and these are only a couple of the prototypical writers.
we find in the mainstream writing in India today. In the initial stages of the novels/stories the woman character is full of resistance but the ending usually exhibits a compromise with dominant patriarchal principles and the novels conclude with a fairy tale ending of ‘happily ever after.’

Elaine Showalter in her essay, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, explains this. She says,

... a theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman’s body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. ... women’s culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space. 197.

Showalter cites Gerda Lerner’s explanation of the importance of examining women’s experience in its own terms:

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women. To rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness we must, for a time, focus on a woman-centered inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women’s past. 198

Dominant patriarchal structures have always constructed history and controlled the forms of social consciousness. We learn that in the 18th century, English common law gave men permission to discipline their wives and children with a stick or whip no wider than their thumb. 20th century onwards many feminists claim violence against women is the result of deeply entrenched patriarchal culture that encourages and rewards male domination. They say in a patriarchal culture, men are more likely to use violence to maintain hierarchy. While society claims to abhor violence, patriarchal structures often make heroes of men who are aggressive. Indian society is no exception when it comes to patriarchy. It has attempted to diminish feminism by branding it a Western import, Uma Narayan responds to particular problems of women in Third World countries and contends that Indian women have specific problems which the Indian feminist movement has sought to address. She highlights issues that feminist groups in India have politically engaged with, problems of dowry-murder and dowry related harassment of women, police rape of women in custody; issues relating to women’s poverty, health and reproduction; and issues of ecology and communalism that affect women’s lives. 13.

These issues in fact bring to limelight the manner in which Women’s Rights are violated. Voices have been raised against such violations of Rights by feminists, reformers and writers over the years, sometimes aggressively but most often timidly and covertly.

The present paper takes as a case in point the depiction of these issues in Indian English fiction by women writers in general and Arundhati Roy’s 1997 Booker Prize winning novel, The God
of Small Things in particular, to show how representations of patriarchy and dominance are encountered polemically by women represented in the fiction. This book is a part of most of the University curriculum in India. In this book Roy questions certain social, economic and political structures that have got patronage of the male dominance over centuries and have crossed borders into a democratic socialist India. Talking about herself and her novel she says; “I don’t come from a privileged background, I just happened to write a book that sold a lot. My mother was literally dying. She had nothing. She left her drunk husband. She started a school. I left home at 16, I lived on the streets. I had nothing. Then I wrote a book. I lived for a long time, yes, with a man who had privileged parents but then that had nothing to do with me.” (Andrew Anthony. Arundhati Roy: goddess of big ideas)

Radical in practice, Roy is not impressed by the protectionist attitude of society. A victim of discrimination and violence, her writings champion for empowerment of the underprivileged in India. It is relevant here to move away from fiction to discuss the ground reality of women and laws formulated on their behalf in order to render fictional narrative true to life. The Empowerment of women which is a concern of various schools of development has become one of the most important Concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Govt. are on to ensure Gender equality but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. Here a question may be raised: ‘why focus on women?’

In a website that addresses gender equality and women empowerment we find certain key issues discussed, that:

‘The 1995 Beijing Declaration from the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women and the 1992 Rio Declaration recognized that empowering women is essential to sustainable development. . . The global development agenda should seek not only to address and monitor the elimination of specific gender gaps, but also to transform the structural factors that underpin the widespread persistence of gender inequalities, gender-based violence, discrimination and unequal development progress between women and men, girls and boys. The empowerment of women and girls and the protection of their rights should be centre-pieces of the post-2015 agenda.’ (https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/news/2013/03/11/56097/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-are-key-to-addressing-global-poverty/)

The theme of this article is well in keeping with the International agenda. It goes further, looking at the ways in which literature and literary works; especially in India is relevant in this cultural participation. In 2012 U.N. Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Global Sustainability, made a conclusive report that, promoting human rights and advancing gender equality were fundamentals of development . . . (through) full economic empowerment of women’ (ibid). Some of the key obstacles to women’s empowerment, as outlined in the document, are threats and acts of violence against women. Further, the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls is recognized as integral to development. The
prevention and reduction of all forms of violence and abuse . . . should be at the heart of any agenda which fully recognizes the centrality of human security, both as a human rights imperative and as integral to development. Michelle Bachelet, executive director of UN Women, speaking on gender equality and the post-2015 developmental framework at a conference in Dublin, Ireland, said, “There is no country in the world where women and girls live free of the fear of violence . . .” (ibid).

This forms also a part of Indian reality in the present times, as always. Empowerment of women is the prerequisite to transform a developing country into a developed country. Women empowerment generally has three components : firstly, women’s sense of self worth; secondly, their right to have the power of control their own lives, both within and outside home; and lastly, their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just social and economic order nationally, internationally and universally. Educational attainment and economic participation are the key constituents in ensuring the empowerment of women” (Singh, Gupta 54).

Apart from the laws and policy formulations the violence against women can be only tackled through attitudinal change that need to take place in the family, in the society and the female members of the society as well. Only this attitudinal change and proactive action against violence by every single individual will help in galvanising the slumbering structures of the government and society towards further concrete steps and action’ (Singh, Gupta 55).

Empowerment can be achieved through: 1) By initiating a change in the mindset not only of men, but also of women themselves. Women should have the right to decide upon their choices without coercion or violence and have the freedom to participate more fully and equally in society, 2) Ensuring Gender equality in opportunities, rights in all matters including property and obligations for women in every sphere of life, and 3) Education for the Girl Child-Education is important for all, it is more so for the girl child as education helps them to know about their rights and privileges. An educated mother generally has a greater influence in a household which help in securing more resources for herself and her children.

It is interesting to note an opinion given by the noted danseuse Padma Subrahmanyam in a discussion on Empowering Women of India published in the New Indian Express on 25th Jan 2014.

‘She said that the present Western model of individualism was creating a situation where an individual’s interest was becoming more important than that of a community, resulting in the disruption of the duty-based family system.

She said that in an Eastern culture like that of India, family and women were to take care of the elders, the infirm and the unemployed. But the present system of individualism in the Western society has led to a situation where it is the State that provides all the care and none in the family has any duty towards the other.

The idea that the India of today will be the America of tomorrow must change and that India should not get affected by the ‘infection’ of individualism, she said.

Exploring the origins of Western feminism, she said that in the West, for several centuries, women were not considered as
human beings but as animals. “Even when that changed, it was not at the same level of man. The man had the image of god and everything else, including the woman, was thought to be for his consumption,” she said. This injustice prompted women to rise in protest and fight against the system. “In India, we have not had a situation like this. From the earliest of days, women were worshipped as deities and revered. Pujas were done on young women,” she said. She narrated the role of women from the days of Gargi Vachaknavi and Avvaiyar to Chittoor Rani Padmini’ (New Indian Express 2014).

Subrahmanyam, like many others like her, is merely articulating the cultural stereotype of female characters that adhere to classical modes, thereby, supporting ‘the tools of patriarchal exclusion’ (Freedman 9). For them male is the norm and humanity is viewed as masculine in spite of the changing definition of society. Women in India have been selectively given positions of power under the reigns of patriarchy from which they are not allowed to slip. The idea that ‘women were worshipped as deities and revered’ is tagging the line of patriarchal ideology. It does not allow for the manifold atrocities meted out to her when she dares to try to be heard rather than fit into the assigned role of an idol, a beautiful puppet of entertainment. This attitude of eminent women is disturbing to the 21st century Indian woman whose reality is perpetual fear of multidimensional violence to both her body and psyche. It is disturbing and disquieting and can only help in perpetrating violence against women in general under the facade of deification and protection.

Journalists and activists draw one’s attention to the psycho-socio-cultural and economic reality of women nationally and universally. The problematic of women empowerment has to be resolved through awareness and through literary texts that move away from the position of being apologist and adopt an affirmist and assertive attitude. Writers have taken up the onus of participating in such crucial issues through representations of multiple levels of oppression in their work. Literature offers solutions by stimulating the minds of the reader and promoting and generating confidence in the reading public to confront violence on women and the underprivileged. According to Suzzane McGlynn ‘girls today often are overwhelmed . . . by society’s mixed messages that they must be intelligent and strong, yet compliant and delicate. In a fast-paced world where young women are assailed with detrimental messages of what a woman should be, the students of Saint Catharine Academy (in the US) find asylum in their English classes. Here, amidst dynamic lessons of grammar and vocabulary, of colourful Native American folk tales or ancient Greco-Roman mythology, they encounter guidance, support, and encouragement that they as women, can, and should, reach for the stars’ (Pathways). We get a picture that literary discourse or fictional discourse is instrumental in offering guidance, support and encouragement to women that they can confront oppression and move towards self actualization and development.

Coming back to the Indian scenario, we notice that towards the 20th century Indian English literature started moving away from projecting women as highly desirable damsels or vicious women impediment in the fight of good against evil. It started recognizing woman as a cultural participant in the freedom movement and as a cog in the wheel of national development. Yet, difference of sexual orientation and woman’s
supposed difference from man has been ‘used over centuries to justify discrimination against women and their exclusion from full social and political citizenship’ (Freedman 9). Mahatma Gandhi’s political manoeuvres and gender politics becomes an interesting study in this concern. Robert J C Young has commented on this issue as he discusses Gandhi’s gendering politics in India in his book, *Postcolonialism : A Very Short Introduction* (OUP 2003).

In India Gandhianism still remains the touch stone of morality and values. Hence, the elitist women writers have not been able to completely move away from this comfort zone of Puritanism and moralizing.

If we consider literature as a reflection of our reality, that despite individual perceptions it mirrors social manners, then women’s changing roles, be they social, political or emotional, in life and literature, must not be ignored. Writings about females by males may be suspect. We in the twenty first century feel that all literature, even women’s writings about women needs to be re-read. Many women writers have strayed little from the given stereotypes of the female character that so plague society and literature. From Readers taught in primary schools, to the religious texts and classics, women have held tightly to several role models as their guides. While male characters have been given free rein to be and become what they like, even to fail if they choose, women characters have been written to play and re-play the same themes, limited as they are. Thus, when the female character deviates from the norm, from these stringent stereotypes, more attention is then called to the purity of what the female character is supposed to be. Men are encouraged to become men in both novels and life. Women are forced to stick to the subject position in the narrative. When women strive to be more individualistic they are condemned because they take on male characteristics of aggression, ambition, etc. Bankim Chandra in his famous novel *Rajmohan’s Wife*, which is incidentally the first novel written in English in India, serialized as *Wife* in a Calcutta weekly in 1864 and finally published in 1930 (General Introduction, sodhganga 2).

Female voices in Indian English novels in the early 20th century have been muted and women have been shown to be epitomes of sacrifice and suffering and thus ideal as per Hindu social norms. Acknowledged writer Mahasweta Devi’s writing advocated struggles of tribal life that were revolutionary and anti-establishment. Later writers of the 1990s like Mahasweta Devi evolved a feminine dialogue contributing to a literary discourse representative of the problems of empowerment although with restraint.

Towards the later part of the 20th century the image of women in South Asian novels, especially Indian fiction in English underwent a change from the stereotype of ever-enduring, docile, self-sacrificing woman to the image of more complex human being capable of self assertion and participation in various facets of socio-political life, a woman exhibiting existential angst and in search of identity. Concerning herself with Indo-Anglican fiction Landow in 1989 writes that the interests of women writers have changed with South Asian society and its relationship with the West. This trend is visible if one compares the images of suffering women in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* and Meera Mahadevan’s *Shulamith* to recent subversions and expansions of the traditional image in works by Chitra Fernando, *Anita Desai*, Kamala Das, Sara Suleri, *Anees Jung*, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy,
Manju Kapur, Sashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De, diaspora writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Devakaruni, Bapsi Sidwa, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ruth Jabvala and many others. In Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* the protagonist endures abject poverty, takes responsibility of the family right in line with ‘duty-to-family’ conservative tagline, yet neither has any control over her own life or any say over the number of children she is forced to produce. In contrast to the main women characters in Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* Mahadevan’s *Shulamith*, female characters in the present Indian English fiction assert themselves and defy marriage and family strictures. In Sashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terror*, the protagonist a medical doctor, finds herself treated brutally by her husband because she does much better in her profession, there is a discord in her marital life, the discord for with she returns to her home. In the end, she decides to see her husband, but lives on her own and pursues her career with a new awareness and meaning.

Chitra Fernando’s collection of short stories *Three Women*, Anita Desai’s *In Custody*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s fictionalized women, particularly, Gauri in the *Lowland*, portray women who want their individual worth realized and attempt to break through the suffering that traditional society offers them. *Lowland* offers a contrast between Gauri, a woman who refuses to subscribe to Indian social norms in embracing either widowhood, marriage or motherhood; and her mother-in-law who fits into the ideal picture of the all enduring, ever-suffering woman who refuses to accept change. The comparison and the contrast educate and empower the reader towards choosing the proper. The most recent books explore an educated woman’s search for identity and meaning — in fictional, auto-fictional and autobiographical form, Kamala Das’ *My Story*, Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days*, Anees Jung’s *Unveiling India: A Woman’s Journey*, Roy’s *The God of Small Things* are cases in point. Women represented in recent fiction have been traversing the globe in search of identity and hold private space dear.

The reason for choosing to look into *The God of Small Things* (Indian Ink, 1997) is that it is an epoch making text and has its distinct place in the curriculum of most of the Universities across the globe. Arundhati Roy’s writing is informed and challenged by what she perceives as human values, such as human rights, a non-discriminatory and participative society. *The God of Small Things* is set in the Southern Indian State of Kerala, in post-colonial India, populated mostly by Syrian Christians and Hindus. Born of a Bengali father and a Syrian Christian mother Roy has perceived deprivation and marginalisation in everyday life. Thus sensitized, she projects this in both- the characters in the text and the narrative itself. The human experience communicated to her is incorporated into the body of her narrative. Roy’s portrayal of the Syrian Christian community, she herself grew up in, and its predication with pseudo-liberal ideology is evocative and telling. In the novel Roy presents a kaleidoscope of characters and situations in furthering her agenda of exposing the system and educating the readers. I would concentrate on some situations and the female characters depicted in the novel in order to show them as representative of women, either empowered or in need of empowerment. The Ipe family is representative of a conservative, middle class family, much respected in the area. Arundhati uses the story of this family as a microcosm of
modern Indian reality. The narrative appeals to the readers, in that, it informs and educates them regarding violence towards women and people of unprivileged classes by the State machinery, namely politicians and the police; domestic violence; discrimination; deprivation of the girl child especially where property and education is concerned.

Early in the novel we read Roy’s account of the abuse, intimidation and humiliation suffered by a lone woman, Ammu, in the Police Station in front of her children.

Roy, in the novel, presents at least two stereotypical women, Mammachi and Comrade Pillai’s wife. They are the epitomes of dutiful women who are subject to domestic violence; yet, make heroes of their aggressive men. Mammachi is constantly beaten by her husband and bears it silently, the narrator says ‘every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren’t new’(47). Later on it is her son Chako, who rules over her. He simply takes over the pickle industry that Mammachi had struggled to make and names it ‘Paradise Pickles’. He underpays the local untouchable women who work in the factory and exploits them sexually, all in the knowledge of his mother. Mammachi is not a mute spectator, rather she is an abettor, she constructs a separate new door to Chacko’s room that opened to the outside, through which he could bring in the untouchable women from the factory and indulge himself. The same mother discriminates against her daughter Ammu. When Ammu’s affair with the untouchable Velutha is discovered she throws Ammu out of the house to die a terrible death in penury and sickness in a small rented flat elsewhere. The ‘Paradise Pickle’ factory which could have been an instrument of sustainable development empowering local women economically is shown threadbare as a den of corruption instead. Mammachi, partial to her son, encourages sexual and economic exploitation of the poor women workers.

Another stereotype is Comrade Pillai’s wife Kalyani, who very quietly obeys all that her husband says. In the entire narrative she is only seen but never heard, constantly busy in household chores and catering to her husband’s needs. Roy’s Ammu breaks away from the image of the Indian female stereotype. She is the new woman aware of her rights, willing to make choices and bear the consequences thereof. She defies her father who did not want her to have higher education; moves away from home in search of a new self; works in Calcutta and marries a man outside her religion and culture. She is an empowered woman, a complex human being capable of self assertion and participation in various facets of life, a woman exhibiting existential angst and in search of identity and meaning. This new woman is a surprise to the patriarchal society. She is emancipated, hence called ‘unsafe’ and ‘dangerous’. Roy says, ‘What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge ? This air of unpredictability ? It was what she had been battling inside her. An unmixable mix.

Ammu is pronounced dangerous because she does not confirm to society’s norms. She is self-willed and claims her rights. She has been depicted as a many-time victim of domestic violence- first by her father, then her husband and lastly, by her Western educated brother, Chako. Willing to take responsibility for her deeds she welcomes exile and death rather than compromise to the controlling factors of society. Rahel, her daughter, the other protagonist of the novel, is another projection of the new woman and woman
empowerment that the narrative seeks to propagate. Both make their individual choices, seek economic independence outside of their family and explore the world alone. The surface structure of the narrative grammar presents the hardship and trauma faced by both mother and daughter, but the deep structure is more suggestive. They both face the consequences of their choices without running volte face in adversity. The complexities of their failure and their success make them participants in the existential angst common to humanity.

Roy vocalizes the discourse of feminism, which while being anti-patriarchal and anti-establishment Indian feminist discourse seeks to attain towards equality and advocates the fundamentals of development. She looks at the status of women in postcolonial India where the Constitution and the State agencies claim to be ensuring safety, security, gender equality, equal rights in land and legal affairs, politics and economy to women. She posits binaries and teases the readers to alter their world view so far as orthodoxy and liberalism is concerned.

Dr. Shruti Das, Associate Professor, Department of English, Berhampur University, Berhampur.