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Research Article



Representation of Gender Violence in Jaishree Misra's *Afterwards*

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Abstract

Gender violence is one of the major social issues which needs proper attention. It is one of the worst crimes of human society. 'Gender Violence' is an umbrella term that includes a large number of crimes directly or indirectly posed against a person's sexuality. Several crimes like domestic violence, marital rape, human trafficking, honor killing, and other such abuses are heinous realities of the contemporary Indian society. To a large extent, the trauma of gender violence is not only physical but also psychological. Sadly, it has remained neglected for a very

long period. However, by the twentieth century, voices fighting against such issues have gained wide recognition. The literary representation of sexual violence in Indian English literature is a way of giving voice to silent unheard victims and is worth critical attention. Jaishree Misra is a contemporary Indian English novelist delineating various socio-cultural issues of the contemporary Indian society through her large gamut of literary works. Her novel *Afterwards* (2004) deals with the life of a woman named Maya, trapped in a loveless and suffocating marriage. This research paper attempts to study the textual representation of sexual violence in the contemporary Indian English fictions with special attention to the selected literary work.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Gender, Rape, Domestic Violence, Trauma, Neglect, Marital Rape, Honor Killing, Indian English Fiction, Feminism

Introduction

Gender Violence in a male dominated society like India is not a new phenomenon and involves more than mere physical damage. It is very hard to gauge the severity of damage done to women's physical and mental health. Violence against women is seen as a way of asserting power over them and to solidify the power structure. To define 'violence', Desai and Thakkar quote Krishna Raj, who says: "Violence is a coercive mechanism to assert one's will over another, in order to prove or feel a sense of power. It can be perpetuated by those in power against the powerless or by the powerless in retaliation against coercion by others to deny their powerlessness" (Desai and Thakkar 190). Stereotypically, women are seen as docile, submissive, obedient and weak creatures who are expected to submit to male dominance. Violence is a means to display aggression and power over women. 'Gender violence' is an umbrella term which encompasses various forms of crimes devastating someone's sexuality and integrity. As Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar observes:

Gender violence as a critical concern includes domestic violence, rape, wife battering, sexual harassment at the workplace and in public places, the degrading portrayal of women in media, sex determination tests leading to abortion and foeticide, dowry murders, sati, communal violence and so on; it's long, long list (Desai and Thakkar 188).

The evil acts of violating women in different forms damages the selfhood and self-respect of any woman. For a very long time, such crimes remained neglected but in recent years, it has gained attention. The term is not limited to the physical damage caused but also includes the psychological effects such as anxiety, insomnia, trauma and other acute chronic health issues. The ever-growing cases of brutal rape, murder, sexual harassment and domestic violence are enough to convince us that our society is still grappled with such heinous crimes against women. The myth of masculine superiority is needed to be challenged so that women can also become aware of their position in society. Gender violence is a source of immense physical, mental and emotional disturbance. #Me Too#, a social movement was started in 2017 against sexual abuse, sexual harassment and other such gendered assaults. It soon became widespread

and many popular names with sexual allegations came up. Honor killing is yet another crime which is acted upon by both the genders, but the number of female victims is far higher. These heinous crimes are needed to be represented and addressed urgently. Rather than sympathizing with the women, it is important to make them empowered by punishing the guilty and removing the loopholes of the laws. Earlier, it was believed that a woman's fate is linked to her since birth. The acceptance of feminine roles makes women just “a household slave, a social ornament or a sexual convenience” (Gupta 65). But now, the quest to live a dignified and peaceful life has become fundamental for many women. Therefore, with the aim of increasing awareness among the readers, writers across the globe are continuously producing works which provide proper space for women both inside as well as outside the texts.

Representation of Gender Violence in Indian English Literature

Gender violence has been the focus of many literary works down the ages. The works dealing with various important events cannot easily ignore such grave issues of our society. The status of women has undergone drastic changes from oblivion to empowerment. Though, women are still seen suffering in the hands of their men. Women struggling their way through the exploitative and discriminating world has been closely studied by many writers. Ranging from illiterate, traditional and underprivileged women to well-educated, modern and independent women shows their struggle at every level. The plight of Indian woman is narrated by many Indian women novelists such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobhaa De, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya and many more. The 1950s had witnessed some of the very prominent Indian women novelists; Anita Desai is one of them. Like many other modern feminist writers, has depicted the inner world of the women characters. The trauma caused by violence is the central focus of her novels. In almost all her novels Desai reflects that: “Woman has no escape in this male dominated patriarchal family system which sanctions security to women who submit to ‘escape from freedom’ and choose to live by slave morality losing identity as person” (Gupta 65). Maya in *Cry the Peacock* (1963) and Monisha in *Voices in the City* (1965) are characters who succumb to miserable plight but Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) faces the hardships of life and boldly protests against the patriarchal society. In almost all her novels, Desai fictionalized the extremely sensitive psychological condition of women in male-centered Indian society. A scholar, D. Maya observes Desai's women-centric novels: “With women it often results from an incompatible partnership with an insensitive, practical and successful male” (Piciucco 137). Her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1975) centers around the theme of oppressed and victimized human souls. M. K. Naik says: “Desai's protagonists are persons ‘for whom aloneness alone’ is ‘the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring’. They are mostly women who, though they have reached different stages in life (from school-girl to grandmother), are all fragile introverts ‘trapped in their own skins’. Their emotional traumas sometimes lead to violent death, in the end” (Naik 252). There marked a shift in the thematic concern in the women's writings, as quoted in Lisa Lau's work: “The novel by Indian women writers make an extremely significant leap forward as 1970 rolled around: the self... becomes in the novels between 1971-1980, the

sole preoccupation of the writer” (Lau 17). Likewise, Kamala Markandaya, first generation Indian woman novelist writing in English covers almost four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s. She is a social realist and draws the readers’ attention towards the traditional patriarchal Indian society. Her women characters like Rukmani of *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Nalini in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and Lalitha and Saroj in *Two Virgins* (1973) are the women who believe in fighting against the society victimizing women and therefore, prove themselves to be strong, confident and resilient. As Asha Susan Jacob says: “Markandaya’s novels present women who prove themselves to be as resilient and resourceful as the earth. The positive attitude of these women is an outcome of their inner strength which can withstand social oppression” (Mittapalli and Monti 115). Markandaya’s through her novel *A Silence of Desire* (1963) has “astutely tried to probe her male character’s psyche to reveal male hegemony and patriarchal dominance in the domestic sphere” (Piciucco 96). In her novel *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Desai achieves the textual representation of the life of Nalini as a lone-suffering creature trapped in the web of traditional roles of a Hindu wife. These women characters show a steady progression from a docile, submissive creature to physically and psychologically transformed one. They discover themselves by struggling through the difficult phase of their lives. In Bharati Mukherjee’s first novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972), Tara “corresponds to Showalter’s first phase when bound by traditions, a woman’s existence is expected to survive by adherence to dogmas and indiscriminate conventions without claiming to have any freedom of will or any liberty to protest” (Dodiya 310). Similarly, in her second novel *Wife* (1975) also depicts the psychological plight of the character Dimple. Incapable of fulfilling the traditional role of a woman in Indian society, she develops a mental disposition and ultimately commits suicide out of acute suffering. M.K. Naik says the novel is, “a sympathetic study of a frustrated Bengali wife in New York” (Naik 256). In contrast, her novel *Jasmine* (1989) focusses on the life of a very strong, confident, courageous and mature character jasmine. Shashi Deshpande’s novels also share the theme of psychological crisis and the problematic lives of her female characters. She herself says, “what it is to be a woman in our society... [and] the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman” (qtd in Anjaria 326-27). Her most renowned work, *That Long Silence* (1988), “reinforces the physical exploitation which takes place in a loveless marriage which is an ongoing concern with Deshpande” (Piciucco 216). Published in 1993, her novel *The Binding Vine* (1992) foregrounds the real-life incident of “sexual assault resulting in the victim’s going into coma. This happened to a nurse in a Bombay hospital, a woman who is still alive and still in coma” (Piciucco 218). Young girl named Kalpana is brutally raped, the husband of her maternal aunt. Her novel *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1980) is about mother-daughter relationship along with the difficult reality of marital rape. Sarita (Saru) is a modern, middle-class woman. She is aware of the socio-cultural inequalities in Indian society. Hoping to break away from the rigid traditional norms by fighting for her freedom and identity. She suffers in the hands of her mother’s gender-based biases but later discovers herself as a mature and balanced woman in the present male chauvinist society. Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) has also proven to

be a true representation of women exploitation. The brutal unspeakable trauma that lonely Ammu experiences for having an affair with her childhood acquaintance and a Paravan, Valutha. A scholar Nancy Ellen Batty comments: “Roy’s novel locates trauma in the prohibition of female autonomy in the Gothic, in the families that people it, and the society that reads it” (Piciucco 330). Abhishek Rai and Suchi Dewan states: “The portrayal of women in Indian English fiction as the silent sufferers and upholders of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone tremendous change in the post-independence period” (Rai and Sujata 01). E. Dawson Varughese quotes Sen and Roy, who say: “Today’s Indian English fiction... mirrors the socio-cultural dynamics of a country changing so swiftly that it inevitably inspires new forms and content” (Anjaria 325). Manju Kapur, being one of the leading authors of modern day, deals with the predicament of women in Indian society. Her novel, *Home* (2006) displays the reality of a typical joint family in India. The women are the real sufferers: pressure of giving heir (male son) to the family, does not have a home to call their own and individual suppression. The novel describes the marginalized status of Sona in her husband’s place. She, being childless for the first 10 years of her marriage, makes her life even more tough. Abhishek Rai and Suchi Dewan say: “The suppressed and subjugated world of Indian women comes to full light in the character of her protagonists. She shows that in all marriages— conventional as well as unconventional, women try to adjust tolerate forces sex and try to play idealized roles of wife” (Rai and Sujata 06). Tamil Dalit Christian writer Bama’s novel *Sangati* (translated into English from Tamil by Laxmi Holmstrom), discusses the double victimization of Dalit women. During the late 1980s and early 1990s came a popular novelist, Shobhaa De. Padmini Mongia observes that De, “broke a barrier by introducing female protagonists who knew what they wanted and set about getting it, women who expressed and fulfilled their sexual desires openly, women in urban settings who knew or quickly learned how to negotiate difficult terrain to make their own small niches within it” (Mehrotra 425-26). Her first novel, *Socialite Evenings* (1989) talks about a young girl, Karuna. The novel gives an insight into the changes that took place in the character and her life, as she moves to the much alluring life in Bombay (now Mumbai). Her novel, *Starry Night* (1991) is about a woman from madras getting exploited by her mother, who sees her daughter as a potential asset. Asha Rani, forced by her ambitious mother, becomes a star but later withdraws from that fake glimpse of the world of Bollywood by returning to her middle-class life in madras. With these novels, today’s post-millennial women’s writing has come into play. About this E. Dawson Varughese reminds us: “... I see as two distinct eras of women’s in the writing in the Indian novel: the more literary, postcolonial phase of the 1980s into the late 1990s, and a new phase of Chick Lit in the last ten or so years” (Anjaria 324). He later adds: “As in the earlier texts, decision-making is presented as difficult. Yet despite their difficulty, these texts’ post-millennial women emerge as more settled and fulfilled characters by the end of their narratives. Interestingly, these female characters are less impacted by outside influences in their decision-making; if anything, it is their own personal pressure that pushes them to take the decisions they do” (Anjaria 325). E. Dawson Varughese quotes Lau, who says about the Indian authors like Shashi Deshpande,

Anita Desai and other novelists of this generation that: “Their writings frequently include detailed description of the interior spaces of home, the negotiation of roles and hierarchies, and the emotional lives played out against a background of the bedroom and the kitchen” (Anjaria 326). Advaita Kala’s novel *Almost Single* (2007) highlights “the transformation in the female-centered narrative over the last generation” (Anjaria 331). The novel is about three close friends namely, Aisha, Misha and Anushka. Aisha is a modern woman challenging and disregarding social norms in different manners. She is in total contrast to the characters shown by Deshpande and Desai, rejecting the roles and responsibilities of women in Indian society. Through her characters, Kala has also tried to normalize the act of pre-marital sex. Misha, going to be married to her childhood friend Gurinder, decides to sleep with him in order to know how sexually compatible they are. Anjana Appachana’s debut novel, *Listening Now* (1998) has gender discrimination, lack of communication between the two sexes and emotional gap as themes. As M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan comment: “The book is an entirely credible recreation of Indian life, we feel that we are personally acquainted with the women we read about, we can almost identify them, or identify with them” (Naik and Narayan 89). Mrinal Pande’s *Daughter’s Daughter* (1993) also focuses on gender bias. Her second novel, *My Own Witness* (2000) is based on her own experiences in journalism and TV. She, through her female character, describes how even in today’s era women journalists are expected to deal with the affairs related to women like cooking, interior decoration, etc. and other important and serious issues are handed over to their male colleagues. Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), a book about three women of different generations and their difficulties in coping with life. Indu K. Mallah’s *Shadows in Dream Time* (1990) is based entirely on the real-life challenges in the life of a widow in Indian society. She is considered inauspicious, must give up all her favorite clothing and barred from having social interactions. Arti Nirmal says:

The novels written during the last twenty years meticulously contextualize gender related issues and articulate them keeping in view the Indian scenario. The concept of femininity and definition of women’s role in our society has also gradually changed. It is not to say that gender discrimination has completely eliminated but a consciousness about women’s rights and a need to their dignified status has found a room in the psyche of people. Women authors and activists have made unprecedented efforts to redefine their identity and position besides addressing pain, pleasure, dreams, aspirations, sufferings, challenges and marginalization. The traditional moral values are under critical examination particularly the changing concept of women’s role and marriage in these novels (Nirmal 06).

The women writers addressing such gender issues in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are: Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* (2001), Namita Gokhale’s *Priya in Incredible Indyya* (2011), Simran Singh’s *Origin of Love* (2012), based on surrogacy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s re-telling of *Mahabharata* through a woman’s perspective in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Namita Devidayal’s *Afterside* (2010), Sunetra Gupta’s *So Good in Black* (2009), Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) based on 2002 Godhra Riot.

Samira Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004) centers around 'Triple Talaq', exploitation of Indian Muslim Women, *The Half Mother* (2014) by Shahnaz Bashir reflects the struggle for identity and life of Kashmiri women. There are many other women writers both in the 20th and 21st century who are working relentlessly to represent the predicament of Indian women.

Textual Analysis

Social and cultural convention forbid both single and married women from negotiating their identity and autonomy. The expectations made from women by the Indian society is explained in the following words by Lis Lau:

It may be assumed that single women, without the roles and duties associated with husband, in-laws, children, would have more freedom to negotiate their identities and also more freedom of personal autonomy; but even scratching the surface rapidly reveals that the single status for a young woman in India may not necessarily be an advantageous one in these terms, and that they function under different but still considerable constraints (Lau 272)

Jaishree Misra's third novel *Afterwards* (2004) is about a woman named Maya married to a suspicious man Govind Warriar. Through the novel, Misra rejects the idea of an arranged marriage by touching upon the theme of gender violence. The novel deals with the physical and psychological trauma that Maya undergoes by getting trapped in an unhappy and suffocating marriage with Govind. About the institution of marriage, Anita Singh writes in her article: "Marriage the promised end in traditional society in feminist fiction becomes yet another enclosure that restricts the movement towards a perception of herself as an independent human being and not buffeted by the circumstances or social prescriptions" (Singh 18). The novel begins with the death rites of Maya, who is still alive. Hereafter, the novel takes its readers through the life of this woman in the previous three years. It is from her lover, Rahul Tiwari's viewpoint that we dive deep into her life. Maya is an extremely beautiful girl, "had studied English Literature at college before she had dropped out in her second year to get married to Govind Warriar" (43). In the pursuit of wealth, her parents ignore her real happiness. They only saw that: "He was very well off...he had set up this business on his own and had done so well for himself" (43). They had their own Indian concept of happiness that they would not be too far from Maya, so the marriage was fixed. This emphasizes the evil face of the institution of marriage in the patriarchal Indian society. Commenting upon this social institution, Simone de Beauvoir remarks: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (qtd in Dhand 316). In the same context, Desai and Thakkar also say: "In fact, a woman has no home; in her natal family she is *paraya dhan*, 'someone else's property, and in the matrimonial home she is an 'outsider', a person without any claims unless she 'behaves' properly" (193). Similarly, as long as she conforms to age-old conventions upheld by the society, she is appreciated by everyone but the whole attitude changes as soon as she starts preferring her personal happiness. Maya complains about Govind: "Because he has the sort of business that takes him away on so many tours, he gets suspicious thinking of all the things I might get up to in his absence" (56). She further says about her parents: "...what they

want to see is that I live in a nice house, have a nice car, a husband who gives me everything. They don't want to see the other side of that" (55). She does not want to see herself as a victim of fate and circumstances throughout her life and she realizes that whatever she does, Govind is going to ruin her and her daughter Anjali's life. Rahul comes as a ray of hope in the life of Maya. He comes to Kerala for a short trip to learn mridangam but falls in love with Maya at the very first sight. Maya befriends Rahul as she sees him as someone with whom she could share her pains and sufferings. She painfully whispers: "Here, Rahul, in this stupid heart of mine, I don't know how to explain it, but it hurts really badly" (53). Rahul takes pity on Maya when she sarcastically says, "Good-looking girl, good family, convent educated... but once he got me, he didn't know what on earth to do with me" (56). When Govind comes to know about Maya's friendship with Rahul, he beats her so brutally that she comes running to Rahul for rescue. She explains: "...he hit me...pulled my hair...shouting things... Anjali was screaming". She further adds: "He said he would ...destroy my face...that that was what was causing all the problems..." (64). Due to the regular violence on her, she not only died once but she died every-day. This brutal nature of Govind compelled Maya to leave him behind and run away from this miserable life. With the help of Rahul, she escapes from the tyranny of her husband. Maya did not want to miss this opportunity and seizes the opportunity to leave her unbearable life behind. She accepts the proposal of moving to London with Rahul and settling down there with her daughter. This decision is a turning point in her life. Never for a moment does Maya feel satisfied for betraying her family. Maya, on her part, progresses from attraction towards a genuine love for Rahul, she believes he has all qualities which Govind lacked. She realizes that her happiness lies with her becoming independent and living life on her own terms. Sadly, her protest against injustice done to her did not turn out to be favorable. She just wanted to be a self-reliant person, who had ultimately found love in Rahul. But unfortunately, her untimely death wasted the efforts she made to regain her self-esteem and happiness. The suffering of Maya has many similarities with women who are victims of different forms of violence. Nevertheless, her story serves a lesson to young women who do not accept suffering but fight for their individuality and happiness. After Maya's death, Govind's acceptance of Anjali back to his life is an indication of his changed attitude. Maya died not only once or twice but thrice. She died regularly with her husband and later when she left that bitter life behind, her parents performed her death rites three years before she actually died. Characters like Maya can very well be taken as a commentary on the plight of women even in the twenty-first century. As in the case of Maya, she craves for freedom and the life she deserves. What the novel attempts to portray is the transitional phase of modern society where women no longer believe in succumbing to their circumstances. As Bommana Indu and Dr. N. Soloman Benny also comment: "Jaishree Misra's women belong to the new world where they stand up to their convictions and expect their personal worth to be realized" (Indu and Benny 112). They deeply understand the need of stepping forward and fighting for their rights. The novel is a deliberate attempt on the novelist's part to rescue women from getting exploited by the hands of male-dominated society.

Conclusion

The ever-increasing numbers of violence against women is quite disturbing. Women are not considered humans. Efforts are underway to control the growing rate of violence against women by activists, human rights groups and governments. Awareness against injustice, counseling and providing proper support to the survivors are needed. Despite governments' efforts cases of sexual violence against women are still rising alarmingly. Attainment of justice is possible only when women do not succumb to violence by suffering silently. As Desai and Thakkar rightly assert: "The vulnerability of women, the nature of crime as sexual assault, societal attitudes regarding chastity, social conditioning which looks upon articulation as degrading and loss of prestige (*ijjat*) for the family in combination contribute to the proverbial silence" (Desai and Thakkar 192). Earlier, women could not voice their concerns related to gender-based violence but now they are more vocal about their feelings. With growing awareness among women, Women's Movements and government support has helped them in breaking their silence which helps women regain their confidence. Desai and Thakkar remark: "A woman, instead of tolerating the beatings, or continuing to stay with the man who is abusing her, or silently suffering sexual overtures in the workplace, is verbalizing her suffering, questioning authority, leaving the so-called 'protective' family and taking recourse to legal machinery, even though this may entail publicity and embarrassment" (Desai and Thakkar 193). Today's generation of women writers have depicted the transformed image of present-day women. Female protagonists in their writings are capable of making their own decisions, openly speak about their feelings and "dismantle traditional hierarchies, both in literature and in life" (Anjaria 336). The shift in the fundamental roles of a woman has also witnessed changes in women's writings in the last few decades. In contrast to the earlier generation, the post-millennial women not only face challenges but also question them and believe in changing them. They are excelling not only in their domestic territories but even in the public domain. The writers like Jaishree Misra charts the struggle as well as the ability of her female protagonist to fight against the established social norms. In my article, I commented: "Misra exhibits different facets of Indian women in her novel. her female characters are about her real identity- the creature she really is. They are not merely narrating the tales but are seen as the mouthpiece of the author" (Kumari 64). Ultimately, Jaya's ability to carry out her decision made her life happy, though for a brief period. Just as the female protagonist of Misra, women of today's generation should have the ability to transform their image from a subdued character to powerful one. Thus, women should never choose silence, both in easy and difficult situations. They should try to emerge from their respective struggles and should have freedom to make their own choices. Misra declares:

I still don't believe that it's the job of fiction to try and expose the novelist's own beliefs or carry any sort of social agenda but, as a writer's profile grows, it becomes quite difficult to ignore the expectation (or temptation) to imagine that one can change the world or at least shift people's attitudes in some way via the writing besides, my own feminism has grown alongside my novels. so yes, I have been tempted to use my

characters to help women that they don't necessarily need to take the oppression that has become so much part of the norm (qtd in Kumari 64).

Through their works, the contemporary Indian English women writers have made significant contributions by voicing their concerns. Anita Singh comments about Indian women writers:

Through their works they have defied and destroyed the stereotyped image of the angel in the house, of a submissive housewife, mother and of writers writing only about women and expressing their revolt against the masculine world. It is not surprising that most of the female writers foregrounded women as subjects of their works but global, political, historical, cultural, economic and other significant societal concerns also find articulation in their works (Singh 14).

Similarly, Misra has also used her characters to carry social agenda, she accepts it by saying: "...my own feminism has grown alongside my novels... I have been tempted to use my characters to help women to see that they don't necessarily need to take the oppression that has become so much part of the norm" (Vinai and Hazarika 195-96). In an interview, she speaks about the condition of present-day women as:

Women all over the world have a long way to go before we can consider ourselves equal partners to men. We not just lack the same opportunities that men have, we struggle to cope when we have them because of on-going social expectations that we will be the nurturers and carers and home-makers as well. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, for women who do choose to make that their vocation but I know too many working women, even in the West, who- despite being equal earning members- put immense pressure on themselves to be perfect in every way. Perfect wives, perfect mothers- when all those notions of perfection have been put in place by very clever men who are the only people who benefit by it. Despite vast strides taken by generations following mine, it's still, sadly, a man's world but we can keep chipping away! (Chandrasekhar)

Though the change is slow, nobody can deny the fact that the women in contemporary Indian society have become successful in creating their space in the society. Women are the backbone of the society and therefore, empowering them in every way is necessary.

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