

THE CHANGING FACE OF GENDER ROLES IN GUJARATI FICTION BY WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract

The paper aims at conducting a survey of Gujarati literature in general with a purpose to closely scrutinize the changing image of women representation with special focus on women writers and their treatment of women characters, their issues and their representation through their literature. I have attempted to compare the representation of women characters by some notable Gujarati male writers with that of women writers of Gujarat to examine how this image has changed over the period. The paper analyses the handling of the feminine issues, characters, and representation of women as well as male characters by women authors of Gujarat. Along with these points, the paper surveys the status of women in India during ancient, medieval and modern periods and the role of caste system, social reform movements, Western influence and the rise of feminism and their effect on the lives of women in India.

Key words: feminism, changing connotation of gender, emergence of women writers, treatment of women characters, realistic images, status of women

Introduction

My paper is basically a survey regarding the status of women in India during ancient, medieval and modern periods. I have tried to explore factors like caste system, social reform movements, Western influence and the rise of feminism and their impact on the lives of women. Ultimately it comes down to the trajectory of Gujarati literature where I have analysed the works of some of the earlier as well as later generation of male writers and their representation of women characters finally coming down to the women writers of Gujarat and their handling of feminine issues, characters and representation of female as well as male characters through their literature.

Unlike Western society which believes in monotheism, Indian society is polytheistic and fosters a societal scenario of diversity in social and cultural preferences as a natural way of life. In such vast cultural and religious diversity, men and women are expected to play multiple roles in various spheres of society and life. Along with that the concept of bisexuality is deeply embedded in Indian mythological thought represented by the psycho-biological concept of *ardhanarishwara* representing Shiva-Parvati who are the cherished image of conjugality and creativity. During the Vedic Age (1500-600 BC), the conception of duality based on the male-female divinity held sway and each god was closely linked with his *Shakti* or the female principle. The Rigveda hence speaks of a life of freedom and strength lived by men and women as equal partners in the great task of home and nation-building. Nowhere in the Vedas there was any suggestion of the seclusion of women or child marriage. Monogamy was the prevailing condition of the married state. *Swayamvara* was the accepted

rule and there is a clear indication that marriage in no sense entailed irksome dependence or abject subjection to a husband.

The restrictions on women's freedom are imposed with the *Laws of Manu* (c. 200 BC-200 AD), which articulates the woman's position in relation to her male relatives : first her father, then her husband, and finally her sons. Manu groups women with *Shudras* (lower castes) to whom education was denied. Women as wives were not allowed access to education and fine arts. They had the sole purpose of procreation and catering to the needs of the husband and his family. It is from this time onwards that women were beginning to be considered generally impure and hence were debarred from any religious activities.

Ambedkar suggests that Manu's restrictive laws for women were aimed at maintaining upper caste purity which could be preserved only by controlling the sexuality of the women. According to him the caste system in India is also responsible to an extent for the subjugation of women. He has extensively studied the Hindu scriptures to find out the root cause of degraded status of women in ancient India and the factors that led to a decline in their status in later years. He points out that during the pre-Manu days women occupied a very high position in the intellectual and social life of the country. He argues in this regard in his book *Against the Madness of Manu*, "That at one time woman was entitled to upanayan (thread wearing ceremony) is clear from the Atharva veda...women could repeat the Mantras of the Vedas and that women were taught to read the Vedas. Panini's Ashtadhyayi bears testimony to the fact that women attended Gurukul (college) and studied the various Shakhas (sections) of the Veda. Patanjali's Maha Bhashya shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. The stories of women entering into public discussion with men on most abstruse subjects of religion, philosophy and metaphysics are by no means few. The stories of public disputation between Janaka and Sulabha, between Yajnavalkya and Gargi, between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi and between Sankracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu's time could rise to the highest pinnacle of learning and education." (Ambedkar, 2013 : 125-126).

Later, during 18th century, the British colonizers in India took a firm foothold and with that the socio-economic structure of the country suffered a seer setback. The condition of the farmers worsened due to The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. The textile industry of which India was so proud was shattered. While this was devastating for the Indian population in general, it had some special implications for women. Women, who played a major role in textile industry and in sowing, reaping and preservation of food grains found themselves jobless. With their vitality shrivelling up under such an oppressive system, their songs and stories also dried up. They were shunted back to their household grind and were also deprived of rights to education, articulation and economic freedom.

To reconstruct the patriarchy and curb the rigidity of the Brahmins and to recast gender, many social reform movements began in 18th century – the abolition of the Sati custom by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1820s, the widow remarriage system and spread of education for women through the efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, The Brahmo Samaj promoted the emancipation of women – did much to recover the condition of women in repressive social moulds. But these movements could only affect the women of the upper and well-to-do middle classes. The lower caste women were still subjected to abusive forms of patriarchy and women themselves had very little scope to speak for their roles in society. The

reform movements were only partially successful as Indian society has continued to thrive on the ideas of *Sati Sabitri Parampara*, which has denied woman her status as a human being and made severe demands on her chastity. Jyotirmoy Debi (1898-1988), analyzes very dauntingly the condition of women in Indian society in the following words :

“Everybody knows about the condition of unmarried, married, widowed women in the Indian middle-class homes. But no one is willing to admit the reality as it is. Even if one is sensitive enough, one merely discusses about women pitifully and offers half-hearted solutions to their problems.” (Roy Choudhuri and Sen, 2001 : 131)

However, the challenge for the Indian woman in family or society does not lie in adopting Western measures or “isms” to bring about transformation in the psychic and social processes. The position of an educated and emancipated woman in the Indian society continues to be oxymoronic. In fact, the change has to come from within and herein lays the responsibility of the Indian woman to relocate her identities and earn for herself respectability in the private as well as the public spheres of life. As Ashis Nandy analyzes in the conclusion to his essay on *Woman Versus Womanliness in India* :

“For the more sensitive woman, the challenge is nothing less than refining of herself. The first task that faces her is to devise means of de-emphasizing some aspects of her role in her family and society and emphasizing others, so that she may widen her identity without breaking totally from its cultural definition or becoming disjunctive with its psycho-biological distinctiveness...Indian women have paid terribly for Indian insensitivity, but they have also extracted a heavy toll from a society which has not yet learned to live with all aspects of womanhood.” (Nandy, 1988 : 42)

Many a times it is noted that women themselves show apathy towards the efforts of reform in their conditions and the apparent reasons could be deep rooted patriarchal notions they have imbibed since early childhood. Male supremacy is more firmly rooted in female psyche than in male thinking.

If we consider the case of Gujarati literature in particular, we can observe that traditional portrayal of women or men as essential bearers of imposed ideologies recur time and again in mainstream Gujarati literature. To understand the gender construct in mainstream Gujarati literature, it is essential to look at the ways women have been portrayed in traditional Gujarati folk literature. If we look at the folk legends of Saurashtra, we find the depiction of women as noble, heroic, enduring and revolting against the socio-cultural dictates. These folk tales depict women in two extreme shades – either as fierce and majestic or as delicate and melancholy beings. Both these images are far removed from reality. One of the most initial and famous portrayals of ideal women is found in the epic novel *Saraswati Chandra* (1887-1901) by a reformist writer Gowardhanram Tripathi in the Pandit Yug. In this novel, the heroine Kumud represents the archetypal Gujarati woman, the ideal and desirable, silently suffering and sacrificing herself for the family and society at large. For almost two generations, Gujarati writers portrayed their women in the image of Kumud. However, in the same novel there is a hint of a rebellious, unconventional woman in the character of Kusum, Kumud’s younger sister but Kumud’s over emphasising virtual image over shadowed her.

Later on Gowardhanram’s successor Kanaiyalal Munshi appeared on the screen with a range of heroic and subversive women characters. Munshi’s model for women is essentially

different from the earlier projection of *Aryanari*. He successfully created many powerful women characters like Manjari in *Gujaratno Nath* and *Rajadhiraj*, Loma in *Lomharshini*, Kashi in *Kono Vank* etc. who looked quite promising in changing the image of women in society. But when analyzed closely we can realize that Munshi had only created an illusion of powerful women who initially impressed the readers with their independent and revolutionary way of life but later turn out to be meek and conventional once they find their lovers. Although these women are educated, brave and autonomous, these qualities with time turn into an additional achievement to their husbands. Their primary duties after marriage is pursuing knowledge or doing social work in their spare time, and enhancing their husbands' status by their involvement in such activities. Manjari, for example, who before marriage is the learned and independent heroine of *Gujaratno Nath*, after marriage, in the sequel *Rajadhiraj* is shown cutting vegetables or singing the praises of her husband, Kak. Although she is still respected as a learned woman, she is only proud to be the wife of Kak.

From the 1960s we find the changing connotations of gender relationships slowly taking shape in life as well as in literature. Female or male characters, however, though educated, still represent traditional and essentialist values. In the writings of the major Gujarati male writers like Pannalal Patel, R V Pathak, Manubhai Pancholi, Umashankar Joshi, Jhaverchand Meghani, Dhumketu, Ramesh Dave, Jayanti Dalal etc. (many of whom were social reformists themselves), the insinuation of women's emancipation was found. They did create some strong women characters yet majority of them portrayed the stereotypical images of women in their traditional roles.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a total change from the point of view of presentation and subject matter as the writings exemplify the altered values of the modern times, the fast pace of the society, and its psychological complexity. In keeping with this modernistic trend, we find existentialist novels like *Amrita* (1965) by Raghuvir Chaudhari. Yet, even here the protagonist, Amrita, is forced to surrender her notions of freedom and identity and accept convention and social practice.

With the emergence of women writers on the spectrum of Gujarati literature, newer perspectives and fresh connotations of gender roles started to get reflected in literature. They go beyond the familiar ways of conceptualizing gender. Contemporary women writers focus on the changing configurations of gender and family in present day Gujarat. They see both women and men as subjects, but these subjects are posited as ambiguous and fashioned by societal and individual discourses that are constantly shifting. Their writings read almost like palimpsests, as if they are erasing the imposed patriarchal notions of gender, and writing down newer concepts for both men and women.

After 1940s, woman's participation in the freedom struggle and wider educational opportunities helped them to gain knowledge and confidence and opened up newer ways of life. The Western influence, especially the emerge of feminist movement in the west in early twentieth century, advocating women's rights and equal status in social, economical and political spheres, forced to divert the trend towards the portrayal of women in light of new values.

Here I would like to make a special reference to the Gujarati journals for women during 19th century like *Sudha*, *Stree Bodh*, *Sundari Subodh* etc. and their role in bringing about change in gender connotations. These journals, although appeared to be promising in

making the women more equipped in knowledge and providing platform to exhibit their talent, when analyzed thoroughly are found to have failed in playing their role successfully. *Stree Bodh*, for example, was the first journal for women in India which was published in Gujarati continuously from January, 1857 until sometime in the 1950s. Its discourses were directed towards educating women of the so called modern families to bring them to a level where they could be suitable companions to their husbands who had begun to interact with the British and were embarrassed by their traditional Indian partners. It had sections on fiction, biography, informative articles on science, history, travelogues, poems to bring as much general knowledge to women as possible but surprisingly developments that took place in creative writing or social reform movements that were initiated during the time were rarely reflected in *Stree Bodh*. The motif could be to limit the sphere of women to home and family and not involve them in the larger issues outside. They do not even acquaint their women readers about contemporary struggles over women's issues in *StreeBodh*. It is not surprising therefore, that the educated men of 19th century whether they came in reformers garb or revivalist wished to keep women out of public sphere. Of course, these journals did provide platform to women writers of Gujarat by publishing their stories based on the themes of education of women, widow remarriage, extra marital relations but they merely failed in bringing any revolutionary changes in women's perspectives. Even though these setbacks, the changes gradually started to be taken into consideration. Stories by women writers started to get published creating a wave of awareness in society.

Let us now look at the emergence of women writers on the spectrum of mainstream Gujarati literature – beginning with the pioneering efforts of Vidyagauri Nilkanth, Lilavati Munshi, Hansa Mehta Shardagauri Mehta and others, the issues of family, marriage, female identity have been debated, discussed and analyzed in depth from myriad perspectives. The writers focus on the changing lives of women who are conscious of their rights to protest against a patriarchal system and they dare to question the system. Vidyagauri Nilkanth (Born 1876), the first lady graduate in the province of Bombay, is the author of several remarkable essays and stories. She also assisted her husband, Ramanbhai, in the production of *Hasyamandira*. Lilavati Munshi has penned numerous sketches of contemporary and historical personalities, short novels, essays, stories and one-act plays, diaries and letters relating to her travels in India and Europe. In her literature, she represents the psychological points of view of the modern woman. Most of her fiction describes the trials of an insurgent woman full of life and romance. In spite of the modern outlook and individuality of her women characters, they end up taking refuge in the traditional way of life. In each case the woman has almost the same individuality; the responsibility for her misfortunes is also laid on some man who is held up to ridicule like –In *Malati*, the neglected wife of an elderly professor absorbed in his work, decides to stick to her helpless husband, rather than go away with her lover because the two men arrange between them that the husband should renounce her in favour of the lover.

In her most famous work, *Vanamalani Diary*, a plight of an educated Hindu widow is shown who is compelled to take service as an actress in a Bombay theatre. Vanamala being sensitive woman finds it difficult initially to adapt to the new environment of the theatre life and she prays for death but slowly an optimistic note creeps into her diary and although she feels shy initially, she gives away with her docile nature and finds strength by acting with

confidence and self-control. Her acting brings her fame and gradually she becomes reckless and pursues a downward course getting into a habit of drinking and adultery. Some of the bold passages in her diary indicate that she does not care for the ways of the world which had earlier thrown her in the hands of fate to be tormented. She feels proud of herself for being able to face the hard time courageously and be successful. Even drinking, flirting and adultery do not bother her now. Instead she takes pride in her ability to control men on the bases of her beauty and charm. Thus, we can say that Lilavati Munshi has experimented with variety of literary genres and themes successfully and has been an inspiration to the later women writers of Gujarat.

Although in the works of the earlier writers the women's voice was heard clearly demanding improvement in her position within family and society, they were still abide by their household duties and the demands of the society. While the later writers like Dhiruben Patel, Kundanika Kapadia, Saroj Pathak, Varsha Adalja, Ila Mehta, Himanshi Shelat, Panna Naik, Chandra Shrimali etc. acquired a rebellious tone and some radical transformation in the psyche of the women character was observed who were not ready to compromise and were fully aware of their rights and equal status. As a result, the issues once tabooed started getting expressed in literature. Even the focus of these writers has shifted to the up till now neglected sections of the society namely the downtrodden and marginalized. Most of the earlier literature by women writers dealt with the issue of middle or upper-middle class educated women but in recent years, the condition and exploitations of the under-privileged class of women namely Dalits, sex-workers, Muslim women, lesbians etc. started finding their voices in the literature bringing yet another perspective to the literature of Gujarat.

In the post-independent era, many women writers have focused on the inner conflicts of modern women in search of an identity. Dhiruben Patel's *Shimlana Fool* (1976) is one such story where the protagonist Ranna leaves her house in search of her true identity and herself. Thus as times changed, the portrayal of woman became more realistic with a thrust on her sense of frustration and alienation and on the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. The stories of the heroine in Kundanika Kapadia's *Punaragman* or Vasudha, Vasanti in *Saat Paglan Akashma* or Mamta in Ila Arab Mehta's *Vistaar* or Anuradha in *Batris Putlini Vedana*, all tell the same story of disintegration and self-construction. Gujarati women writers are thus, on the one hand, deconstructing and dismantling the hegemonic constructions of gender in families, while at the same time building and construction a positive gender discourse. Chandra Shrimali presents the stories of physical and mental exploitation of Dalit women while Himanshi Shelat presents women's plight subtly through translating social realities into her fiction, her special concern in her novel *Kada Patangiya* being the portrayal of life and struggle of the sex-workers, who although living a tormented life, are looking forward to education and better life for their daughters.

Many newer and bolder areas of women's life and experiences especially her emotional turmoil at various stages of their lives get reflected in the fiction by women writers. In *Ughada Akash No Ek Tukdo* (A Patch of Open Sky), Oza portrays the whole gamut of a pregnant woman's experience at the time of her labour in a hospital. Jasoda, in Tarini Desai's *Mahalaxmi* dares to flout the age-old Indian convention of considering widows as inauspicious by supporting her widowed daughter-in-law in her desire to participate in her son's marriage rites. In short stories such as Kundanika Kapadia's *Nyay*, the story of a

woman who chooses to walk out of her marriage as a rebellion against her domineering husband, we find marriages dissolving, families collapsing and women emerging unscathed. In *Chaka Chakini Adhunki Bodhkatha* (A Modern Fable of Two Sparrows), Swati Mehd narrates an essentially feminist story of the emancipation of a she-sparrow and the world of new found joy in the freedom to fly.

A few unconventional or unexplored themes like lesbianism are dealt with in the fiction by the writers like Bindu Bhatt in her novel *Mira Yagnikni Dairy* (1992) and Suvarna in her short story *Tou Tou Kevu Saru* (How nice it would be). They boldly and dispassionately talk about lesbianism and bisexuality in the lives of close friends Mira and Vrunda, Baisakhi and Setu respectively. Mira is a highly educated and intelligent lady but due to a skin disease called white leprosy she has to bear with much humiliation. She finds some sort of relief in her relationship with Vrunda but it does not last long. Mira is a modern woman who is not at all ashamed of her lesbian relationship with Vrunda and she openly expresses her feelings, without any guilt. Later, in her search for true love she meets Ujas Agatsya an emerging poet but she is cheated as he rapes her brutally. This event throws her into a deep valley of agony but she is a strong lady who dares to stand against the odds firmly and comes out a winner. Mira, like many other protagonists of Gujarati novels, stands apart due to her unconventional character, her denial to give in to the socio-cultural norms and her ability to take firm stand. If I may mention the earlier novel in diary form *Vanamalani Diary* here which got published at the beginning of the century, to make a comparison with this contemporary novel, I can say both these novels in diary form hint at changing perceptions of femininity. Vanamala is haunted by the notions of sin and pollution as her body has been defiled by her relative while Mira does not feel tormented at all. However, both the characters feel disgusted with heterosexual relationships. While the reference of rape is quite oblique in *Vanamalani Diary*, it turns out to be candid and heated description in *Mira Yagnik's Dairy*. The difference in the point of view of women from earlier time to the present is clearly seen through an analysis of these two diaries.

Ila Arab Mehta explores the world of Muslim women in her novel *Vaad* which is a story of Fatima Lokhandwala who faces many consequences in life due to her religion and poverty. She is an educate lady with liberal ideology. Many a times she becomes a victim of social and religious malice but she faces all the challenges boldly. Fateema represents the changing image of woman in modern times who does not think in terms of religion, status, society and has the courage to face any given situation to lead an independent life. She has the guts to voice her thoughts and feelings.

In Varsha Adalja's writings, exploited and marginalized women gain strength and insight through the experiences of their life. Her women characters try to search out their individual selves through the resolution of their psychological conflicts. Saroj Pathak's *Sarika Pinjarastha* (Sarika, the encaged) is a story which makes use of the stream of consciousness technique to show the psychological exploitation of the protagonist Sarika who is trapped in the cage of social norms so much that she is even denied the freedom to take her most personal decisions. In contemporary Gujarati women's writings, we find women contesting the ideology of the family from two specific points of view. On the one hand, there are women with more or less traditional points of view who revolt or give voice to their experiences of imprisonment. On the other hand, women are featured as mature, desirous

individuals in control of their selves, their lives and their environment. These contemporary Gujarati women writers envision women who have successfully utilized their education, ambition and decision-making capability in the outside world, and moved towards self-discovery. Unlike the earlier generation of women characters, they make bold choices, not out of helplessness or desperation, but through reasoning and self-analyses, in order to uphold their dignity. The women in these writings are striving against the socially-imposed ideological bondage of subordination : from darkness they are moving towards light, from confinement to freedom, from alienation to mutuality.

Thus, Gujarati fiction has undergone a tremendous change in the last few decades in the matter of theme, style, use of language, selection and portrayal of characters, especially women characters. Women oriented themes and women centric fiction have frequently appeared in the fiction of this language and as a result, we could witness some notable, radical and brilliant fiction as well as women characters in literature. In the changing context of time and place, issues related to women have found their voice in Gujarati fiction. Promilla Kapur, a sociologist, analyzes the change: “With a change in women's personal status and social status has come a change in her way of thinking and feelings and the past half century has witnessed great changes in attitudes towards sex, love and marriage.” (Kapur : 4-5)

It is noteworthy to mention here that along with the projection of this new woman, these writers are also promoting a new image of men in their works who are portrayed as alter egos of women. Unlike the traditional image of men as all powerful, insensitive, egoistic, these new men are sensitive, caring, understanding and supportive. This new image of men indicates a change in the definition of gender relationships in literature where both men and women journey towards a mutual relationship. Although this improved image of men is not very frequently seen in the literature but there are some radical examples found in fiction by women writers e.g. the unknown man on a wheel chair who give a new hope to Sushi in Varsha Adalja's *Chandranu Ajwalu* or the characters like Swarup, Gaganedra, Aditya, Agnivesh, Vinod in *Saat Pagla Akash ma* by Kundanika Kapadia who believe in equal partnership. Such images hint towards the awareness that the family systems are changing and the new and improved system is based on companionship and mutuality, support and liberty to find new meanings in life and to make life worthwhile for both the partners.

It is necessary to mention at this point that although women writers have brought forth many unexplored areas and experiences of human life especially of women of various backgrounds, one cannot fail but notice their preoccupation with certain themes like women's personal battles against gender discrimination and social challenges which at times get highly subjective. Compared to male writers they have experimented much – not just with the genre but with the character portrayals as well and have brought to lime light many neglected issues to the mainstream literature but we still do not find Gujarati women's fiction going much beyond the social and family bounds trying to reach to some unforeseen traits of literary genre or theme. There are a few women writers like Varsha Adalja has penned some noteworthy thrillers and dramas for television and Ila Arab Mehta has published detective novels and recently Hemanshi Shelat has started published some political satire but there are many more areas like science fiction, comic fiction for them to explore and contribute to. Even we find lesser contribution of women writers in the field of poetry and drama and we

can hope to find these prominent Gujarati women writers explore other literary areas more and contribute to them as well.

Through the analysis of the fiction by Gujarati women writers and their portrayal of women characters, one thing gets clear that there is no single truth for women/men, but many truths. As subjects, women/men become the deplorers of alternative discourses who manipulate normative signs, create new spaces, and exercise agency. In order to create newer categories of gender, the writers dwell upon the ongoing resistance towards the construction of identity in radical way that characterizes the lives of women. It accepts a vital dimension of reality – the self-perceived world of women/men contesting the hegemonic construction of women/men – that gives rise to not only literatures of protest and resistance but also to assertion of autonomy through unconventional life style, expressions of freedom through subversive, challenge and opposition.

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