

TRANSGRESSING ROLE PRESCRIPTIONS IN WOMEN'S WRITINGS IN HINDI: CASE STUDY OF CHITRA MUDGAL'S NOVELS

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Abstract

The present essay deals with the writings of Hindi women novelists from the Post independence period to the end of the twentieth century traversing their journey which had to break a few norms and transgress many boundaries. The trajectory of how Gender was perceived in the eyes of the finest women critics followed by a history of the novel in Hindi literature in India and present the linkages of this thought process to post Independence emergence of women writers in Hindi is the objective of the essay.

This paper is largely about the re-invention of these roles in Women's writing in Hindi over a forty-year period and attempts to provide an analysis of the relationship between women's writing and social change.

Keywords:

Women Writing, Indian Women Literature, Hindi Literature

Introduction:

Our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, the industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance—in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands.

Religion and custom have had control over social behavior in traditional societies and we have known this for a long time. However, the perpetuation of such beliefs, Millet asks in modern societies consisting of women who had education, financial independence and civil and political rights has continued to happen. Patriarchy has continued in some form of coercion or the other. The answer to this contradiction lies in the women's conditioning. They have been made to embrace this kind of stereotyping from their childhood. They were trained to accept a system which segregated their lives into male and female spheres, appropriating their roles and assigning the power exclusively to the males. Millet blamed the role of the academics and social psychologists like Freud for perpetuating this segregation of sex roles. The woman played the role of a mother, a homemaker and wife and this was the sphere she was allotted on the grounds that she was a female. No such constraints were put on men because their functions in their public roles had nothing to do with their masculinity.

Women's association with the private or 'domestic' sphere is because of their reproductive functions. They give birth to children and are naturally associated with their rearing and this appeared to be one of the most significant factors in their linkage to the domestic sphere.

Male as opposed to female activities are always recognized as predominantly important, and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men...an asymmetry in the cultural evaluation of male and female, in the importance assigned to women and men, appears to be universal.

Written in the Vedic ages, most of the texts in the Hindu tradition have always given importance to the propagation of male descendants through procreation. It has been seen as the uppermost goal in life and the woman is only a passive medium through which this goal can be attained or as a „vehicle for the production of sons.“

Nineteenth century colonial India witnessed a lot of reformists like Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others who questioned dogma, and orthodox customs. However, when it came to re-examining masculine and feminine values, they took a milder approach. They propagated women's education but also reiterated that such an education should not interfere with the innate and God-given qualities of women.

Contemporary media grudgingly accepts that the world is now a changed place and women are increasingly visible in positions of power and responsibility. Yet, time and again we are told that a woman may be a District collector, a Police officer, a Scientist but she cannot afford to forget that she is essentially and fundamentally a wife and a mother. Thus, masculine and feminine identities are forged through what the society wants them to be. There are role prescriptions which are dictated by our social consciousness for both women and men. If they act according to these role expectations, they are lauded and censured if they don't.

There are contradictions in their respective spheres as well. The woman's role at home is that of a wife and a mother and that of taking care of the domestic work. That of a man is in the public sphere, in the world outside where he earns his livelihood. However, what the woman does at home has no monetary rewards; in fact, this work is not considered work at all whereas for a man his work is productive because it has social visibility and public validation. The woman's work is just an extension of her duties as a wife and mother. Man's earning therefore becomes the primary income and his work is real work.

As Patriarchy defines the woman's role in the family, it also makes quite evident that even in her father's home, a woman is seen as a dependent on her father and brothers. Her role is a transient one in the household because she has to leave for her „actual“ home after marriage. There too, she is treated as an outsider till she gains validation after she bears a child and attains motherhood. The rootedness that she has been looking for all her life, comes only with motherhood.

Case Studies of Selected Novels of Chitra Mudgal

In the Nineties decade, Chitra Mudgal's novel *Ek Zamin Apni* (1990) gives us for the first time, a woman protagonist who infuses a new meaning to her role and makes new choices in terms of action. Exercising a choice of this nature means that the woman has to extend herself beyond the home and to interface with the wider environment and the world of „men“. It means accepting and asserting her legitimacy in the wider world and stepping beyond the stereotypes.

Ankita, the heroine of *Ek Zamin Apni* is searching for a space for herself in this consumerist world. Her search is not limited to exercising her own agency, it is to create a space for herself in the man's world. It is a world where not just men but women are out to 'get' other women. Mudgal does not incriminate only men. She believes that women need to free themselves from their cliched ideas of freedom and liberation. Ankita's search for her 'self' does not end with her divorce from Sudhanshu. It begins from that point.

Another character in the novel is Neeta who is a model, single and independent. When Ankita reprimands her for wearing scanty clothes in a fashion show, she points out that Ankita is the kind of woman who 'sets' roles for women and therefore limits her:

Why are you cursing the modern woman for maligning the social image of women, why curse the men? Why don't you curse the kind of woman who puts a ton of sindoor in her hair after marriage and is proud to be her husband's slave? Leave the illiterate but when fresh graduates do these kinds of things, what would you say? If they have to be independent, they have to get rid of these markers of slavery--- sindoor, toe-rings, mangalsutra?

Ankita's role-playing is complete with her taking custody of Neeta's infant daughter. Nita's inability to deal with the stigma of giving birth to an illegitimate child reveals that it was easy to live her life as a successful model as long as she could keep her feelings and her physical involvements separate but as soon as she gets emotionally involved with a man and becomes a mother of his child, she cannot cope with the duality of her 'roles' and the life of a single woman and therefore, takes the easy way out.

What we observe here then is that the Hindi woman writer of the nineties and after struggles to create a path in the shifting sands. Regardless of all the guilt and apprehensions that their heroines face, they opt to review their lives and create a choice for themselves. This choice is to add substantiveness to their lives. In the moment of making this choice, they accept and own up to their potential of being more than just their 'role-playing selves'. Change cannot be thrust from outside or be of an alien value structure. Women must find strength in their womanhood. Women need to look at themselves not as an exception to the feminine norm but the norm itself. For this, the norm needs to be redefined and this is what the contemporary woman writer is trying to do.

Ankita portrays the role of a single mother and breaks the stereotyped closure of the romance novels which end with a happy marriage. By giving a conclusion to the heroine moving on to a journey of self-exploration, Chitra Mudgal challenged the conventional narratives of both the contemporary world and the genre itself.

Chitra Mudgal's next novel *Awan*, published ten years after her first in the year 2000, takes this ideology forward in more ways than one. *Awan* or the *Kiln* takes up multifarious thematic concerns, politics, class struggle, women's movement, problems of youth. The heroine Namita clashes with three ideologies—the socialist, the capitalist and the humanist. She goes through a series of roles in the novel. She plays the „son“ her parents would have preferred; she plays the daughter who is disillusioned by her father-figure Anna Saheb and she plays the wife and would-be mother that Sanjay Kanai saw in her. Each one of these characters wants to use Namita for their own purpose.

The real triumph of the novel is at the end. Namita wants to bring up Sunanda's child and stay with Kishori Bai. She refuses to fit in any of the slots that society has created for her but creates her own. She has 'matured' in the 'kiln' of life. Mudgal has placed her protagonist above all the 'roles' of a woman. If *Ek Zamin Apni* was a tentative step towards self-reliance, *Awan* is a full-throated laughter at the vagaries of the life of a woman. *Awan* shows that a woman can chart the course of her own life and succeed.

Chitra Mudgal's novel makes an attempt to reassert traditional values about a woman's biology being her destiny but motherhood is seen as a redeeming factor in her life of isolation. The heroine of Mudgal's earlier novel *Ek Zamin Apni* lives outside marriage enabling the author to create a narrative which functions as a critique of the ideological foundation upon which the narratives of courtship and marriage have been erected

That women should choose to live outside patriarchal arrangements (as shown in the conclusions of Mudgal's two novels) is of course deeply threatening to those who believed such arrangements to be essential to the stability of the social order

But the threat is compounded if the women who abstain from marriage are articulate, educated and middle-class. These novels show how unmarried motherhood represents a move for the better for the heroines who become more assertive, emotionally aware and responsive to other people.

They interestingly update earlier literary representations and narrativize a dream of motherhood in which its pleasures are possible with the minimum of sex, the complications of men and the burdens of marriage. (Millett, 1970)

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