

Feminist Writing: The missing link in textbook writing

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Literature written by women is a subject of fundamental relevance today. The figure of Woman, notably Indian woman in the contemporary English / American Indian novels could be studied from different perspectives, as creators of literary texts and as literary characters. Through the reading, analysis and commentary of texts, students could work with novels, some of which offer a traditional representation of women, as well as others that present a subversive image. In fact, feminist writing is entirely missing at primary, secondary and university levels. Yet, a variety of strategies could be developed, associated with linguistic and literary contents.

Freedom of speech is a fundamental right guaranteed by the constitution of India with a 5000 year old culture, 18 recognized languages (1) and over 400 dialects. Indian women have excelled at literature (2) but writing has traditionally been considered the domain of men. As elsewhere, woman writing in India has been multifaceted, but often persisted secretly, if not in defiance and pain.

Even more, winning literary awards abroad does not necessarily mean one would be recognized as an important writer at home. It is not solely because of women's gender identity but also of their active role of writing towards the feminist reconstruction of a "literature of their own" (Showalter, 1977), i.e. in the battle over the legitimacy of narratives defined by particular socio-religious and political criteria.

Indian women writers, notably Arundhati Roy (3), Bharati Mukherjee (4) and Meera Syal (5) bring into sharp focus the question of Indian woman identity and identity crisis.

They are crossing linguistic, geographical and cultural borders though they meet resistance and appearing to advocate Westernization and liberalism at the expense of their own Indian cultural heritage.

In Roy's *the God of Small Things* (6) the heroine who dares to cross the boundaries of caste is to face the most hideous form of ostracisation in India.

In Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (7) the heroine rejects her Indian past over concentrated on barriers of caste, gender and subordination while cherishing the U.S.A. as a land of self-fulfilment and freedom.

In Syal's *Anita and Me* (8) the heroine's appropriation of English norms and values is sweeter because her family setting is liberal and westernized

Thus, Indian woman identity is constructed through:

- challenge, i.e. transgression of Hindu casteist and patriarchal culture which perpetuates women's inequality and injustice, allows each heroine to experience a vast array of human emotions beyond defined Indian traditional women roles, i.e. "passive resistance".
- displacement, both mental and geographical translates the confusion and search for identity pleasing to Western mind and feelings and that the surpassed part of patriarchy is undermined by women's new commitments to American and English cultures.
- hybridity, i.e. a blending of two cultures is in the interest of women's progressive thinking and social justice, since Indian women are victims of a patriarchal society which does not allow them to hold their own.
- Thus, each heroine leads a life in complete conflict with traditional values, be it at home or abroad as they aspire for a Western type of freedom.

Indeed, Indian woman writing opened a breach in Indian patriarchal culture, since men portray the "eternal feminine" and gender ideology as univocal, uncontroversial and unchanging. It proclaims its own system of representations through which the feminine character desires to overcome every type of oppression and repression perpetuated through the myth of femininity.

Indian women writers offer no real solution, no models to follow but what they see as important is to bring about a prise de conscience in breaking the myth. The myth may not change but its interpretation changes with changes in the perception of people. It can be transformed to meet socio-cultural needs.

Indian women writers call for real relationships between men and women that are founded on truth and reality rather than illusion and incoherence and for their social construction as complex human beings rather than mysterious exotic creatures. But the myth of the mystery of women is vague and can't describe human beings and reveals that women can't be understood. Mystery is an illusion and women are not mysterious. As such, femininity is a cultural construction versus feminist beliefs and socialization transforms a female human being into a woman, i.e. there is no innate essence to gendered identity.

Though considered as a Western engagement, the construction of a new female identity raises questions that women keep expressing on daily grounds but often of no avail since men remain deaf to what is always felt as the questioning of a "right" and never perceived as the "request" for a fair, morally acceptable social status.

If the God of Small Things, Jasmine and Anita and Me provoked much controversy in India but achieved international acclaim, this supposes that cultural values are specific and not

universal on the one hand, and that English is a fundamental vehicle for subverting patriarchal power and conformism on the other hand.

The dominance of English vs. vernacular languages is due to the paucity of work available in translation, the lack of adequate publishing outlets, the invisibility of Indian voices in the West (Mahashweta Devi thanks to Spivak).

The increase in English Indian literature is the result of a number of factors:

- the growth of an English speaking post independence generation in India English is a linguistic tool of socio political control during British rule (before 1947); it became the most effective language of communication
- the emergence of Indian publishing houses since the 1980s: Penguin Indian Harper Collins, India Ink, Kali for Women
- the rise of post colonial studies in the west as a field that questions the relationship between imperialism and culture, i.e. the corpus of writing that has found acceptance in the West reflect their hybrid contexts and not confined to an Indian sensibility. English is the domain of the upper and middle classes.
- the writers are products of the famous St Stephen's College , Delhi: Amitava Ghosh, Upamaniyu Chatterjee , Shashi Tharoor, Allan Sealy.
- Indian writing became synonymous with the novels but poetry receives some recognition as in the case of Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi.

The dominance of English in Indian writing vs. vernacular languages and the fundamental increase in English literature produced by Indian writers, mean probably that literary achievements in English are sites of struggle. Thus, being able

to speak and write English constitutes the utterance of visibility and intelligence as well as the use of English means the destruction of standards since any openness is viewed as transgression and freedom.

The use of English becomes an insult to the Indian vernacular languages, as well as challenging Indian socio-religious norms is a sign of betrayal and which mean that Indian women writers are reluctantly allowed a voice in the patriarchal dialogism of the West

- culture and language are inseparable and the loss of language results in the loss of culture
- the silencing of women arises from illiteracy and self-censorship as it does from traditional oppressions: threats, denial of access to publication as well as religious fundamentalism continues to curb the freedom of expression of women.
- Consequently, the authentic India lies in a vernacular language and the role of spokesperson is reserved for vernacular writers.

No doubt, to attack or praise literary pieces of writing indicates a difference in criticism based on cultural beliefs. It remains not clear whether what is accepted everywhere includes the principles of human rights and values, or the tools in which they are codified. A less widespread understanding of universality in connection to human rights claims that they are not universal but universalizable norms. They are not in fact valid everywhere, but possess a quality which makes them worthy to be made valid everywhere, in view to promoting human dignity independently from racial, religious, political... differences. Yet, its specific norm regarding what is assumed to be good or bad remains a specific cultural view, notably woman dignity in the Indian context. Thus, the clash between right evaluation of norms is a clash between a cultural and

universal conception. The dialogue of cultures / civilizations is a way to overcome the assumed clashes between cultures / civilizations which could lead to a peaceful co-prevalence of all cultures / civilizations of the world.

Beside my feminist commitment to Indian woman literature, as a teacher I am concerned essentially with the pedagogical level. One hopes to introduce Indian women literature in the new stratification of study and reward, notably LMD (second year) (9):

- Indian women writers' visibility is missing from new English literatures. Indian women writers are granted authoritative status only when they can be considered exceptional by Western academies, and when they can be integrated into educational programs and reading lists without disturbing the traditional literary landscape.
- As Departments of Foreign Languages are overwhelmingly patronized by female students, it becomes necessary and profitable to offer lectures allowing students to trace female involvement on the literary scene
- Since there is also an increasing number of female critics, as Spivak, Trinh, Ong, it is not surprising that a field comprised almost exclusively of male authors, is being challenged. (Indian women writing challenges the controversial meanings of gender, femininity and masculinity).

Furthermore, it would be fair enough to introduce post-colonial reading strategies which is a new way of investigating such themes as racism, identity formation, cultural dislocation through comparisons of experiences across dominant and subaltern groups.

Post-colonial reading strategies allow students to become cross borders, i.e. to overcome stereotyped notions about one another, since ways of living are complex social constructions:

- To deconstruct notions of difference: (how the dominant culture uses the borders of difference it constructs to exclude and silence its other)
- To resist reductionist stereotypes: (to learn how and why racist stereotypes are produced and maintained)
- To compare same place/ feature by different writers: (for example Kipling in Kim (1907) (Nobel Prize For literature) focuses on British moral superiority while Conrad in Heart of Darkness (1900) condemned European trade practices)
- To place emphasis on words: since words have connotations that both shape and reflect some of our attitudes and express values that are held among people who use them.

To conclude with, the contribution of Indian women writers could be presented and studied in a relaxed seminar format as well as post-colonial reading strategies would give students the tools they need to examine cultural dilemmas and the opportunity to grapple with identity problems as they cross borders and become more effective intercultural communicators. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate into and compare Algerian, Maghrebian, African woman writing including fundamental issues related to gender roles, identity and spaces in the patriarchal set up of society.

Notes

(1) Official languages: Hindi and English. Constitutional languages : Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, Kannada, Marathi, Urdu, Sankrit, Sindhi, Malayalam...

(2) History has many instances where women have broken stereotyped notions of womanhood and taken to writing: Sakhubai in Marathi literature, Mahademi Verma in Hindi, Ismat in Bengali

(3) Arundhati Roy (1961-) becomes the first non-expatriate Indian woman and author to win the Booker Prize labelled the Booker Mc Connell in

London, on 14 October 1997 for her debut novel The God of Small Things. This prize awarded to the writers of the Commonwealth countries has been won so far by 19 men and 10 women (Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry), the decision to award it to The God of Small Things was unanimous among the members of the jury. She spent her childhood and grew in Kerala, particularly in Ayemem in a cultural environment with a Syrian Christian mother and a Hindu father who divorced early in her life. She left her home at 16 and trained as an architect at the Delhi School of the Architecture. But, she became better known for her film scripts and notably when she displayed her personal stand about the exploitation of women in the film "Bandit Queen". She retired to private life to work on her first book. But her career as a writer was affected by the deep controversies as a result of writing about sensitive issues such as gender, sexuality and the Indian caste system. Because of her anti-governments feelings, she had been arrested as her The End Of The Imagination and Ruplestiltskin show it .

(4) Bharati Mukherjee (1940-) was born in Calcutta in a wealthy traditional family. Though she first studied in Bengali school, she learnt English when she moved to Great Britain when she was eight for three years. She attended the universities of Calcutta and Baroda and obtained a master's degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture. In 1961 she went to America to attend the Writer's Workshop and obtained a Master of Fine Arts and a P.h.D. from the university of Iowa. In 1963 she married a fellow student, an American of Canadian parents and was granted U.S. citizenship. Clark Blaise and Bharati had been living in Canada for fourteen years and taught English at Mc Gill University in Montreal when she began to write fiction. Since then she and her husband are living in New York and have two sons. She is teaching creative writing at Columbia University, New York University and Queens College. She becomes a currently member of the Faculty at the University of California, at Berkeley. Her fiction involves novels and stories which portray the conflictual situations met by Indian immigrants in North America as they try to assimilate into a new society that does not always accept them. Her short story collection The Middle Man And Other Stories (1998) earned the National Book Critics Circle Award and her novel Jasmine (1989), celebrating the diversity of different cultures as improving ourselves , remains a must in Mukherjee's writing.

(5) Meera Syal (1963-) is a writer and an actress, born and brought up in Wolverhampton who studied at Manchester University. She was granted the National Student Drama Award for her play One of Us and worked as a performer for the Royal Court Theatre. She has written and appeared in various British television series. Her film "Bhaji On The Beach" has prompted both praise and angry criticism from Indian leaders for her dealing

of the sensitive issue of traditional Hindu marriage. Nevertheless, she was listed for the 1996 Guardian Fiction Prize and granted the Betty Trask Award (1997), for her first novel Anita And Me and was awarded M.B.E. in 1998.

(6) Synopsis: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997)
Summarizing the plot of the novel entitled The God of Small Things is rather hard for it includes two plotlines spanning three continents (India, England and America) and decades (1969-1999) in flashback and an array of unforgettable characters. The story opens with the memories of an Indian Anglophile uppercaste family of Kerala (Southern India), half-Hindu and half Syrian Christian, mourning around the drowned child's coffin of Sophie Mol, Chacko's daughter and Ammu's niece. Ammu, who had the audacity to divorce her drunken and abusive tea-planter husband goes back home with her two children where she is confronted to an aggressive brother, a Rhodes scholar, divorced from an English wife. Ammu has an *ill-fated* love affair with the outcaste Velutha, who is beaten to death by the police whereas she is banished from parental home, left and died alone in a room. Meanwhile in a moment of rage, she yells at her twins Estha and Rahel. Emotionally disturbed, they run away with their Eurasian cousin and decide to cross the river. Unfortunately, the boat tips over and Sophie Mol drowns. As there is so much going in the novel, rather all at once and in different time frames, the second plotline starts with Estha's return from his father's house to Ayemenem and retreats into silence. Rahel, who married and divorced the American Larry Mc Castlin comes back to her grand-parents' home but to stay with Ammu's aunt, Baby Kochama whose frustrated love for Father Mulligan, an Irish Roman Catholic priest, transforms into an element of family destruction and T.V. addict. The adult fraternal twins, who are torn apart, reunite and engage themselves in an ultimate incestual relationship. Once more *The laws that lay down who should be loved and how much* had been transgressed for mere minutes of human happiness. Indeed, The God of Small Things is a subversive novel which spans over a love's power to cross boundaries.

(7) Synopsis: Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine (1989)
Jasmine is not the story of a representative immigrant, i.e. oppressed and plaintive, but rather a particular one. From the very beginning she is described as being a different woman from those around her: neither a radical nor a rebel nor a Third World Woman, partly because of the innate predisposition to distance herself from the sameness to an Indian cultural type. She was a free thinking and acting individual from childhood as says her father *a lotus blooming in cow dung* and she wants to carry on her

studies or as her teacher puts it *the first likely female candidate for English instruction I've ever had*.

Jasmine is the story of a young Hindu woman from a small village in the Punjab who reaches the U.S.A. through dubious means in order to fulfil her mission after her husband had been murdered by a Sikh fanatic. The traditionally-raised village girl is involved in both Western and Eastern culture before leaving India; she has a limited view of the West to some books and one movie; she possesses a mirror which came from a U.N. jeep. Once in America, she found that it was hard to pursue her goals: dislocation and displacement weaken the hold of Indian traditions. She experiences rape, murder, suicide, violent shooting and betrayal but heads West with all that the American myth symbolizes: freedom, equality and fulfilment. She undertakes a series of identities closely related to the men she met in search of a new life and for a new self. Eschewing duty for desire, she leaves the invalid Bud for a younger prettier man, Taylor, symbolizing a romanticized spirit of freedom and adventure, thinking she is behaving as an American. Seen in this sense, the story explores crossing American-Indian borders, the borders between good and evil, innocence and guilt, subjectivity and objectivity.

(8) Synopsis: Meera Syal's Anita and Me (1996)

Anita and Me is the story of Meena, a 12 year old girl growing up in a mining village in Tollington, near Wolverhampton in the English Midlands in the 1960s. She is the daughter of Indian parents who have emigrated from Punjab to give her a better life and education.

Though she appreciates the *regular* invasions of the affectionate aunties and aunts, and sweet docile cousins, she wants to break free from her Indian roots. She is desperately attempting to gain the friendship of the local feisty Anita and be accepted into her gang. Her parents cannot forbid this friendship.

Anita is the 14 year old daughter of an English dysfunctional family. She looks nice and has fair hair, i.e. she represents precisely what Meena wishes to be. While she becomes part of Anita's universe, Meena grows up from a childhood that is the result of confusions that emerge from being caught between two very diverse cultures into adolescence which brings about great changes. That inevitable state of biological and mental growth allows her to come to terms with her own British Indian identity and to find out where her loyalties lie: she realizes that her home is England.

(9) Table: The Literature Component in the LMD* Scheme

YEAR	TEACHING UNITS	TITLE OF UNITS	CREDIT first semester	CREDIT second semester
FIRST	Foundation Teaching Unit	Introduction To Literary Texts	1.Tradition of Literary Genres	1.Tradition of Literary Genres
			2.History of Forms of Artistic Expression	2.History of Forms of Artistic Expression
SECOND	Foundation Teaching Unit	Literatures	3.Literary Genres	

Option: Languages, Literatures and Foreign Civilizations

THIRD	Foundation Teaching Unit	Literature	4. Dominant Genres	Critical Study
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1. introduction to literary texts: traditions of literary genres (initiation); identification of literary genres from measured texts
2. literary texts and forms of artistic expression; introduction to different artistic forms and their corresponding forms in literature (semiotic reading)
3. study of literary texts (extracts) from an anthology (short story, novel...); more exhaustive critical study
4. literary theories (modern and contemporary text); contemporary literature and theory of the twentieth century; different schools from the nineteenth century to the modern period and the semiotics of texts

* In Algeria, to reform the system of teaching at University level has become crucial because of obvious dysfunctioning (pedagogical, management ...) in order to overcome consequential crises.

This reform proposed a new teaching framework including three cycles of formation:

- Licence (bac+3 years) Master (bac +5 years) Doctorate (bac +8 years)

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