



## Depiction of Male Figures by Indian Women Novelists

- Utkarsha Srivastava
- Fatima Ghazali
- Yashi Singh
- Shahla Rehana

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**Corresponding Author: Shahla Rehana**

**Abstract:** Women novelists gained foothold during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during that time the readers started accepting the works of the female novelists. Influenced by feminist approaches, they were refreshing because they voiced the issues faced by the women all around the globe. They were completely different from the male novelists of their age. The males generally in some way or the other favoured patriarchy and their novels mainly focused on males who were presented as being superior to females, whereas the females vouched for equality. They had a balanced portrayal of both male and female characters. Their works were a mirror to the injustice done by the double standards of the society. In Indian

contemporary literature also, the women novelists started appearing as forerunners. Women novelists from India are out to add new dimensions to English Literature of India and also to that of the world.

**Keywords:** Male characters, Female novelists, Patriarchy.

### **Utkarsha Srivastava**

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2015-2018,  
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,  
Bihar, India

### **Fatima Ghazali**

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2015-2018,  
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,  
Bihar, India

### **Yashi Singh**

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2015-2018,  
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,  
Bihar, India

### **Shahla Rehana**

Assistant Professor, Deptt. of English,  
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,  
Patna-800 001, Bihar, India  
E-mail : shahla.rehana@yahoo.com

### **Introduction:**

The works of female writers during early centuries were not given much consideration, probably because of male chauvinism. They were considered as immature writers with soft-themed approaches, whereas the male writings were considered to be far better.

In a patriarchal world, women in all fields had to face difficulties but under the leadership of a few writers and their outstanding works, women became competitors to men and started producing some excellent works. With the wave of feminism, the women writers gained a strong foothold in this highly patriarchal field. The male writers were inclined to present the males as superior and somehow justified and encouraged the patriarchal standards of the society. But the female writers believed in equality and so presented both the males and females in both shades.

**Gynocriticism is the study of feminist literature written by female writers inclusive of female authorship, images, the feminine experience and ideology and the history of development of the feminist literary tradition.**

**Phallocentrism concentrates on the idea that masculinity is the central focus and source of power and authority. All male needs and interests are exalted while females are made subservient to the male desires.**

In the past few years the women writers in India have established a strong connection with the audience. Their works are not only appreciated in India but also worldwide. Indian English Literature has gained new heights due to the contribution of the female Indian novelists. Women writers, through their works, have presented the issues faced by women and the bias and the double standards of the society towards them. Females have, from time immemorial, been looked at and described from the male's point of view. The female authors, now, have not only given voice to the females but also presented the male figures from a female's perspective.

This research paper, deals with the depiction of the male figures by select contemporary Indian Women Novelists. The focus will be on the select works of **Anita Desai (In Custody)**, **Kiran Desai (The Inheritance of Loss)**, **Manju Kapur (Difficult Daughters)**, **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (The Mistress of Spices)**, **Jhumpa Lahiri (Namesake)** and **Kamala Markandaya (Nectar in a Sieve)**.

Seen in association with literature, some literary works lend themselves more readily than others to feminist analysis. 'Feminist analysis' refers to the ability to recognize and infer whether a piece of work reinforces or criticizes the patriarchal values. For instance: Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye' may be read as a novel that invites us to criticize the sexist behaviours and attitudes it portrays. Plus, the novel's feminist agenda is evident in its positive representation and appreciation of strong women – such as Aunt Jimmy, M'Dear and MacTeer.

Some literary works may offer conflicting response to patriarchal ideology, as in Mary Shelly's 'Frankenstein' (1818). An ambiguous stand on the feminist agenda makes the work stand apart. Caroline, Jastine, Elizabeth and Agatha come across as strong independent women, on the one hand, while, on the other, they conform to traditional gender

roles. These 'Madonnas' devote themselves to nurturing others to the point of sacrificing their lives.

Because feminist issues range so widely across cultural, social and political categories, feminist literary criticism is wide ranging too. Though numerous, their ultimate goal is to refine our understanding of women's experience, both in the past and in the present.

### **Portrayal of Male characters by Contemporary Indian Women Novelists:**

Females have, since time immemorial, been looked at and described from a male's point of view. Either there was a want of female authors to speak up for women or, even if there were some who wrote, their words were discarded for being imitative, or a mimicry of those of male authors.

It is only very recently that the works of female authors, particularly in the Indian Society, have come to be regarded and respected. They therefore, have, not only given voice to female characters, but have also presented the male characters from a women's perspective. They have done this through the male characters in their works.

#### **Novels:**

##### **NECTAR IN A SIEVE:**

'Nectar in a Sieve' is a novel written only a few years after India got independence and so the novel maintains the colonial flavour. It is a novel by Kamala Markandaya.

##### **Male-Female Relationships**

##### **Nathan - Rukmani**

A Woman's worth is gauged by the beauty she possesses and also by the rich dowry she can afford. Nathan, knew all about Rukmani's lavish lifestyle, but did not spare a thought for the difficulties she must be facing doing the dull household chores

**"Our relatives, I know, murmured that the match was below me, my mother herself was not happy, but I was without beauty and without dowry and it was the best she could do" (Markandaya, 12)**

We see Nathan indulging in self-pity when the crops did not do well, which means he had a sense of responsibility towards his family. Ira, after being abandoned by her husband, does not find

solace at her home. She is not supported by her father, who thinks it right of her husband, to have left her because she was barren. Nathan, though not an abusive husband, is an insensitive one. He does not take Rukmani seriously enough to pay heed to her suggestions.

### **IN CUSTODY**

Anita Desai is an Indian novelist and the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

#### **Deven - Sarla**

Deven commands Sarla every morning to serve him tea and breakfast before leaving for work clearly reveals his conditioning. Not only is Deven unwilling to lend an ear to his wife's complaints, but he is also often rude to her as well as to her parents. He, without batting an eyelid, leaves his wife and child behind in Mirpore in order to grab an opportunity. Deven, here appears ego-centric.

**"Sarla, as a girl and as a new bride, had aspirations too..But, by marrying into the academic profession and moving to a small town outside the capital, none of these dreams had materialized, and she was naturally embittered."**(Desai,69)

The worst part of Deven's character as a husband is that he, even when he has knowledge of his failure or wrongdoing, is too proud to acknowledge it. Nur, though a successful and renowned poet, comes across as a failure in his personal life. We see that Deven continues to adore him, even after he comes to know about his regular visits to the brothel. Nur, like Deven, is insensitive towards his wife's issues and keeps on brooding about his own problems.

### **DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS:**

Manju Kapur is highly influenced by feminist thinking and she declares herself to be a feminist.

#### **Kasturi - Suraj Prakash**

We see the relationship between Kasturi and Suraj Prakash. Through Suraj Prakash, Manju Kapur has depicted an uncaring and inconsiderate male. Kasturi is a victim in the hands of patriarchy. She was not allowed to raise her voice against her husband's sexual need which resulted in the eleventh child leaving her weak and frail.

The Professor, Harish enjoys the best of both worlds—in Ganga he has a servant who keeps his house clean, washes his clothes and rears his children while in Virmati he has an intellectual companion and sexual partner. Virmati never questioned Harish's decision because she believed:

**"woman's happiness lies in her husband's happiness"(Kapur,210)**

Flavia Agnes in her book, 'Law and Gender Inequality' says:

**"A woman must be dependent upon her father in childhood, upon her husband in youth and upon her son in old age. She should never be free"(Page 11)**

### **THE MISTRESS OF SPICES:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights diasporic women protagonists, living in two cultures, their alienation, isolation, exile, mental trauma, dispersion, dislocation on the level of diasporic consciousness particularly.

### **GENDER ROLES:**

The different roles and behaviours of males and females are shaped and reinforced by gender norms within the society **"One is not born a woman; one becomes one."**(Tyson, p.100). There are social expectations that define appropriate behaviour of males and females (for example, in some societies, being male is associated with taking risks, being tough and aggressive and having multiple sexual partners). The desire of females to break free from the shackles of orthodox society, that views males and females through different glasses, is shown in this novel through various characters.

#### **Ahuja - Lalita**

Ahuja is an example of the abusive husband who indulges in domestic violence. He is an egoistic, middle-aged man who has cheated his wife into marriage with him by sending her family an old photo of himself:

**"Aren't I man enough...."(Banerjee, p.16)**

Lalita's movement is paralysed by the strict vigilance of her husband.

**“Recently, the rules. No going out. No talking on the phone. Every penny I spend to be accounted for. He should read my letters before he mails them.” (Banerjee, 103).**

Even in the most intimate of moments, she could not express her unwillingness and if she did she had to suffer the wrath of her abusive husband who is the embodiment of patriarchy.

### **THE NAMESAKE**

The Namesake is the first novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. It was originally a novella published in The New Yorker and was later expanded to a full length novel. Through Gogol's story, it explores how race and class affect an individual's development, and what that has to do with people's relationships.

#### **Ashoke - Ashima:**

Both Ashoke and Ashima perform the traditional gender roles of the Bengali Culture. Ashoke is the provider of the family and Ashima is the perfect housewife. They move to Cambridge for Ashoke's job. On landing in Cambridge, of the two, it is the wife [Ashima] who undergoes this disturbance more than the husband as the male goes out and meets his companion in his workplace. Ashoke and Ashima had an arranged marriage. Though Ashima was afraid to move across the world with a man she barely knew, she dutifully did so, satisfying her family's wishes. She submitted to the patriarchal norms of her family and husband. They moved to Ohio, because of Ashoke's job. There was no interest of Ashima in it, but still she had to move, as the male is considered to be superior to a woman. Ashoke proved his male superiority as he was the provider of the family. Ashima became lonely and she could not do anything about it as she was dependent on Ashoke.

**“Had it been in India, there would have been plenty of relatives to stand by.” [Lahiri 38]**

Ashoke never makes an attempt to know what is going on in Ashima's mind. He never understands how lonely Ashima is.

#### **Gogol and Moushumi:**

Moushumi confides in Gogol that she never liked any of the Indian men who courted her. Being a woman, the encouragement to get married had been more intense for her. Patriarchy does not rule

in their marriage. Gogol provides all the possible aids to make Moushumi comfortable in the marriage. He wants to spend time with her and cater to all her needs. He tries to be the perfect partner in their marriage. But it is Moushumi who could not remain loyal in their marriage.

Though Ashima and Moushumi belonged to the same culture, they were entirely different. For Ashima, everything related to her husband is valuable but for Moushumi the things related to Gogol are just commodities carrying no importance. When Ashima is married she changes her surname but Moushumi does not because of Moushumi's self-independence and education, she did not submit to patriarchy, like Ashima. The generation gap also affected Gogol and Moushumi's marriage. There are different types of relationships in 'The Namesake' from the sweet and steadfast marriage of Ashoke and Ashima, to the passionate but doomed relationship between Gogol and Maxine, to the short lived, loveless marriage between Gogol and Moushumi.

### **THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS**

Kiran Desai is undoubtedly one of the most original and remarkable writers of her generation.

#### **Jemubhai Popatlal Patel - Nimi:**

Sai's grandfather, usually referred to as 'the judge', is a disliked retired member of the judiciary, and the husband in an abusive marriage. Remote, twisted and Cambridge-educated, the judge's presence distorts the lives of those around him. Inset into the stories of Sai and Biju runs the story of the judge's own youth and marriage. Baffled and disgusted by his Indian wife, he rapes her in a violent, gruesomely-described sex scene, is then revolted by the whole thing and orders the servants to wipe the whole house down with Dettol. From then on, he ignores her, hits her and, on one occasion, thrusts her head down the toilet.

**One day he found footprints on the toilet seat – she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it! – he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl, and after a point, Nimi, made invalid by her misery, grew very dull, began to fall asleep in heliographic sunshine and wake in the middle of the night. (Desai 173)**



## **Conclusion :**

We see that all the six novels under question have male characters playing an important role. But all of them belong to different sections of the society which influence their behaviour to an extent.

**Lower Class:** Nathan is a simpleton. He is a peasant who works on land, not his own and has to labour hard in order to ensure food for his family. He says some comforting words to his wife while she was crying after their marriage at having to leave her family. We later come to know that the hut in which Rukmani was welcomed on the night of their wedding had been built by Nathan himself. Taking advantage of being a female, Markandaya does not go on a defaming spree. Instead, she concedes to the fact that there can be good qualities in men as well. A serious flaw in Nathan, which is a common male drawback, is that he was disloyal to his wife. His gullibility and naivete may be held responsible for this act but it does not take away from the fact that Rukmani is deeply hurt at the knowledge of it.

**Middle Class:** 'In Custody' contrasts the slow death of a false friendship between Deven and Murad, and the birth of a true one between him and Nur Shajahanabadi. The story revolves around the calamities and roadblocks faced by Deven to interview a great Urdu poet. A lecturer at Lala Ram Lal College, Deven led a monotonous life. He taught Hindi to a bunch of students who made fun of him. He had an unusual and deep interest in the Urdu language. He comes across a typical middle-class man who struggles everyday to make both ends meet. Deven hardly spares a thought for the emotions of his wife Sarla.

That Deven commands Sarla every morning to serve him tea and breakfast before leaving for work clearly reveals his conditioning. Not only is Deven unwilling to lend an ear to his wife's complaints, but he is also often rude to her as well as to her parents. He, without batting an eyelid, leaves his wife and child behind in Mirpore in order to grab an opportunity. Deven, here seems ego-centric. The worst part of Deven's character as a husband is that he, even when he has knowledge of his failure or wrongdoing, is too proud to acknowledge it. The couple lacks a close bond.

Ahuja from the 'Mistress of Spices' belongs to a middle class family. He is the first generation

Indian-American. Through Ahuja Banerjee the author showcases an abusive husband who is also irrational and unloving. He is an embodiment of the patriarchal standards of the society.

Suraj Prakash is a typical middle-class regressive male. Kasturi was married to Suraj Prakash and produced children almost every year. Kasturi is a victim in the hands of patriarchy. She was not allowed to raise her voice against her husband's sexual needs, which resulted in her eleventh child. In the novel, readers can see an inconsiderate husband, unmindful of his wife's health. She is just an icon of sex for him. Between them, there is hardly any conversation.

Ashoke Ganguli, from the novel 'Namesake', written by Jhumpa Lahiri, belongs to a middle-class family. Through Ashoke Ganguli, Jhumpa Lahiri exposes the fact that a woman is made to play second fiddle to man. Ashoke and his wife Ashima perform the traditional gender roles in the Bengali set up. Ashoke is the provider of the family and Ashima is a perfect housewife. She manages the household chores and the children which an ideal woman is expected to do.

Jemubhai Popatlal Patel has a transformation in his character in the novel. He belonged to a middle-class family and, with the passing of time, he gets educated and later graduates to the intellectual class. At the beginning of the novel, he is shown as a retired Chief Justice. He is an angry, stern and spoiled old man. When he was young his family sacrificed a lot so that he could attend Cambridge. When he goes to Cambridge, he tries to become more British. He begins to see all things Indian as vile.

**Intellectual Class:** Harish is the professor from 'Difficult Daughters', who belongs to the intellectual class. Manju Kapoor through Harish tries to give us a picture of an infidel and an inconsiderate man in spite of having studied abroad. We see Harish cheating on his wife and involving in a relationship with a woman much younger than him. As a father too, Harish is uncaring and unloving. He enjoys the best of both worlds – in Ganga he has a servant who takes care of his daily needs and rears his children and in Virmati he has an intellectual companion and a sexual partner. The dual standards of the society are very prominent in this context because the patriarchal society never

questions him for cheating on his wife, whereas the same society brands Virmati as immoral and questions her character. Therefore, accepting that all the rules and regulations are for the woman.

**Diasporic Males:** Kenny from 'Nectar in a Sieve' is another gentleman in the true sense of the term. In spite of being a foreigner he is of immense help to Rukmani. He employs her son in his factory. He is always kind and considerate towards Rukmani and her family. Kamala Markandaya could have presented all men as cruel and evil but she does not do so.

Shamshur lives outside India and therefore is a diasporic male. Harish and Ahuja are embodiments of patriarchy but there is an example of a caring male in Shamsur from 'Mistress of Spices'. He is worried about his sister and encourages her to forget about her ex-husband. Another example is the grandfather from 'Difficult Daughters' who supports female education. Hence we see a very balanced portrayal of males by women novelists.

The grandfather from 'Mistress of Spices' is another Indian whose residence is outside India. Though in the earlier part of the novel he stays in India, later on he leaves. He proves to be a progressive male since he vouches for female education.

In the six novels under question we find extremism and bias done away with. The male as well as the female representations are well-balanced. In all these works, though written by women, the men have not been portrayed as black or the women not completely white. This attitude adds an edge to the work since this way it comes closer to reality. Just like the real world, men and women in these novels have their strengths and weaknesses.

Gogol, Ashoke's son belongs to the second generation and is completely influenced by the

western culture and tradition. He quickly becomes conscious of the difference between his parents' culture and the world in which he lives. He has three important romantic relationships throughout the novel, with Ruth, Maxine and then Moushumi and his marriage was unlike the marriage of Ashoke and Ashima. Moushumi does not submit to Gogol as Ashima does to Ashoke. Patriarchy does not rule in their marriage. Gogol provides all the possible aids to make Moushumi comfortable in the marriage. He tries to be the perfect partner in their marriage. But it is Moushumi who could not remain loyal in their marriage.

Biju, another ambitious character of the novel, as an illegal immigrant in the United States also undergoes the same kind of suffering. With great expectations he goes to the US, but his hopes and dreams fail. He belongs to the diaspora group of people. Biju faces a series of challenges as he enters an alienated world with a feeling of a migrant and an exile.

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