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Women's Quest for Identity: A Global Perspective

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Abstract

This paper proposes to examine the issue of the woman's quest for identity with reference to three different contexts: the creole woman's identity-crisis in the colonial context, the emerging woman's search for self-hood in the post-colonial third world, and the anguished quest of the 'free' woman of the first world for a meaningful life of her own. It is from this perspective that the paper will glance through the experiences of a creole woman of Jamaica and Indian women of two generations; these women—as depicted respectively by Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Jean Rhys, Anita Desai and Githa Hariharan—are apparently worlds apart from each other due to the situational-cultural-psychic disparities of their respective space-time continuum, and yet show a strange kinship.

Keywords

Quest for Identity; Kamala Markandaya; Ruth Prawar Jhabvala; Jean Rhys; Anita Desai; Githa Hariharan.

Indo-English fiction owes much to the historical phenomenon of juxtaposition of the two diametrically opposite cultures, namely the oriental and the occidental. It is natural that Indo-English writers should dwell on the problem of the cultural transplant's quest for identity. What is remarkable is the psychological insight, the familiarity and the ease with which the problem is dealt with by the women writers. The confrontation between the East and the West, the strange love-hate relationship that exists between the two, the cultural alienation and the loss of identity faced by the expatriates and immigrants are some of the aspects that are presented with a deep insight by writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal.

Oriental in cultural heritage and occidental by habitation, Kamala Markandaya seems to be familiar with the interaction of the two cultures and the resultant identity crisis. India's quest for its true identity in the context of cultural changes finds itself projected on the fictional plane of Kamala Markandaya.

Her novel *Possession* is a fictional projection of the quest for identity. Valmiki, a goat-herd and a born painter is discovered by Caroline Bell, an arrogant and insolent English heiress who takes him to England. He picks up western sophistication with an amazing speed and for some time luxuriates in the material comforts provided by Caroline. He fits perfectly into the mould cast for him by his mentor. Caroline tries to possess him physically, culturally and spiritually too. Critics read the novel as an allegory of Britain's attempt to subjugate India. Allegory apart, it is an individual's struggle to find his identity. Caroline's proprietorial attitude and her desire to own him frustrate Valmiki. He falls in love first with Ellie and then with Annabel. But Caroline succeeds in driving them out of his life. Val, as he is called by Caroline, begins to feel stifled and suffocated and out of his element. As H.M. Williams observes, “Valmiki becomes the artist lady Bell intends but at the expense of nearly destroying his

soul. He finds only waste and death in personal relationship and to recover his true self has to break with lady Bell and return to India."

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Jewish German by origin, adopted India as her country by marriage. She had lived in India for twenty four years before she left for New York. It is observed that "everything she has written springs from the fact that her marriage to an Indian architect brought her to India in 1951 and kept her there for twenty four years." She has the personal experience of the impact of India on Europeans. She speaks of the cycle of emotions every European living in India undergoes. She observes, "first stage tremendous enthusiasm—everything Indian is marvellous, second stage—everything Indian not so marvellous, third stage—everything Indian abominable."

In her *Esmond in India*, Esmond seems to have passed through all these stages. The initial attraction India holds for Esmond evaporates in course of time and he feels caught and trapped in India. He is considered an authority on Indian culture. He organizes excursions to historical places acting as an important guide. He marries an Indian girl Gulab and takes pride in his son. In course of time he begins to hate his Indian wife who, for him, now stands for India and he feels oppressed by her presence. He feels "trapped, quite trapped. Here in this flat, which he had tried to make so elegant and charming, but which she had managed to fill completely with her animal presence. His senses revolted at the thought, of her greed and smell and languor, her passion for meat and for spices and strong perfumes. She was everywhere, everywhere he felt her." He creates a little Europe of his own in his own home, a neat little flat with neatly arranged furniture. He takes lunch of cheese salad sitting alone at his smart little dining table. "Everything on the table was colourful and modern… so that it looked rather like a beautifully photographed full page advertisement in an American magazine."

In Kamala Markandaya's *Possession*, Valmiki's condition is akin to that of the monkey Minou which he carries with him—cut off from its kind, deprived of its natural habitation and freedom. His artistic talents refuse to bloom until the

crafty Caroline supplies him the necessary sustenance through the counterfeit letters supposed to have been written by the Swami, his spiritual mentor. Neither the proprietorial love of Caroline, his patron and mentor, nor his involvement with the Jewish housekeeper Ellie, or even his passionate love affair with young Annabel make him a happy man. In spite of his westernization, Val is not completely cut off from his roots and identity. On the personal level, it is a quest for identity on the part of Valmiki and "the spectacle of Indian talent encouraged, seduced and almost destroyed by the West adds to the East-West detachment-possession, reality-illusion structure, yet a further level of allegory and another aspect of the identity crisis."

Esmond too faces this identity crisis. He yells at his servants, ill-treats his wife and wonders what is happening to him. He is beside himself and obviously India is working on his nerves. Often when he "lay on his bed at night and knew her to be sunk in what he thought of as her animal sleep in the next room, he imagined himself dragging her down from bed and beating and squeezing and pounding that soft abundant flesh of hers. He would dwell on the scene and the sensation it gave him with such relish that he quite forgot himself, losing his identity of the man of culture, courtesy and refinement, so that when he returned to his normal self he hated her more than ever for bringing him to such a state."

Esmond's initial enthusiasm and love for India and its culture fail to insure him against the simmering discontentment resulting from the growing alienation. His fleeting affair with Shakuntala, the vain romantic girl, does not make him feel involved. Whatever solace he gets, comes from his English girlfriend Betty. In her article "Living in India," Jhabvala observes: "to live in India and be at peace one must, to a very considerable extent, become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume if possible an Indian personality. But how is this possible? And even if it were possible—without cheating oneself—would it be desirable? Should one want to try and become something other than what one is?" Esmond seems to share this problem with

his creator. He too is experiencing identity crisis. His decision to leave India for England makes him feel young and elated.

In the clash between Western materialism and Eastern spirituality, Caroline who combats for the possession of Val loses him to the Swami, whose strength lies in his renunciation of all possessions. On his own, Val goes to India, to his crevice in the wilderness and to his Swami.

Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* deals with the emotional disturbances experienced by Indian immigrants in England. Dev, who comes to England for higher studies, feels an alien. The difference between expectation and reality disturbs him and makes him feel self-conscious. He cannot pocket the insults and is perturbed when he is called a wog. His anguish at being rejected by the country where he chooses to live makes him cry to Adit, "I would not live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted." His experience in the Clapham tube-station expresses his disillusionment and sense of frustration. The terrible claustrophobia he undergoes is symbolic of his oppressive feelings.

Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* explores the evil and ugly nature of racial prejudice. The novel is an angry protest against the global problem of racial hatred. Srinivas with his wife Vasantha, migrates to England where he sets up a home. In spite of his best efforts to adopt the country of his choice as his own, he is treated as an alien. The anti-coloured agitation that erupts in England threatens his very existence. Srinivas' neighbor, Fled Fletcher, a frustrated youth, takes cudgels against him for no reason except that he is not of their own colour and race. He taunts and tortures Srinivas to no end. Srinivas bears it all silently as a passive affirmation of his right to be there. His passive resistance infuriates the thoughtless youth. In the meantime, he is affected by leprosy. This disease is both the "cause and symbol of the alienation from his neigbours." The death of his wife and younger son and negligence of the other son makes him feel terribly lonely. Mrs. Pickering, who has entered his life after the death of his wife Vasantha, gives him moral support. But the rejection by the

country he considers his own by adoption wounds him mortally. He asserts himself by wearing a dhoti and walking in the streets of London barefoot.

Post-colonialism is, in a way, an assertion of cultural nationalism, or the voice unheard so long, the voice of people who were formerly underdogs. Thus it is a literature of the woman, of the black, and other formerly colonized ethnic segments. One of the paradoxical phenomena of this rise of cultural nationalism in the ex-colonies, however, is that the woman writers' attempt thereto give articulation to the woman's own unique agonies and quests also often involves challenging some basic tenets of their respective cultures.

Anita Desai, in *Fire On The Mountain* draws an extraordinary portrait of an Indian woman at the turn of the mid-twentieth century. Nanda Kaul is by no means the type, common, run-of the mill Indian woman. She is unique in her elegant isolation,—thin and straight like the pines of Kasauli, high and empty like Carignano where she has retired alone after a long and busy life as wife and mother. Behind her façade of proud indifference, however, she hides a deep sense of futility, frustration and overpowering desolation in this last twilight of her life.

Nanda Kaul, the extremely beautiful dignified wife of the vice-chancellor, the perfect home-maker and admired hostess, had but led an empty life, devoid of any meaningful personal relationship, hardened by betrayal, withered under the demeaning indignity of having to carry on with a faithless husband. Her husband only gave her that much to keep her quiet, but had his real life-long affair with another. Nanda's own children, demanding and bothersome, were alien to her. The too many guests and visitors in the house but annoyed her. The ironical smile with which she used to carry on the tiresome burden of these unending duties day in and day out indicated that her emotional withering had set in years before she had finally retired to Carignano. She used to preside over the frequent dinners at her husband's house, always the model of the perfect, glamorous hostess in silk sari; but mentally she remained distant, aloof. Nothing seemed to touch or stir within. This was part of her resilience, the lonely clenched

fight she had to put up against the assaults of life. Coming to live at Carignano was but the logical culmination of her steeled withdrawal which had started long ago. The Cariognano house and the surrounding Kasauli hill-scape are, as it were, extension of her drained inner self. The dignified old lady who proudly holds aloof from relatives, friends and society in general, has for her compeer only the fire-scorched naturescape around, and the weather-eaten house at the top of the steep incline, open to the bracings of rain, storm and cold. The persistent dirge-like sound of the pine and cicade, their "noise of silence" is appropriately in tune with the interior monologue of Nanda, carried on in a note of bitter, fragmented recapitulations of the past.

Wide Sargasso Sea begins in Jamaica after the Emancipation Act of 1833, under which Britain outlawed slavery in all its colonies. The first part of the novella is told from the point-of-view of Antoinette Cosway, a young white girl whose father, a hated former slaveholder, has died and left his wife and children in poverty. The family's estate, Coulibri, is quickly falling into ruin, and Antoinette's mother, Annette, is rapidly sinking into a deep depression. Since her mother frequently rejects her, Antoinette spends most of her time alone or with her black nurse, Christophine, one of the few servants who has not chosen to desert the struggling family.

The second part of the narrative opens after the marriage has taken place. This section of the work is narrated mostly by Antoinette's new husband, a man who remains nameless throughout the text but who is clearly based on the character of Mr. Rochester from Charlottee Bronte's Jane Eyre. As the couple journeys to their honeymoon house, Rochester explains the circumstances that necessitated his hasty wedding. Evidently Rochester arrived in the West Indies and was immediately struck by the fever; as a result he is now questioning his decision to marry a woman he barely knows. Still, he reflects, there was a tremendous incentive for him to do so: his new wife's stepbrother has given him unconditional control of her entire dowry. This money enables Rochester, who is a second son and stands to inherit nothing under the English law of

primogeniture, to be financially independent, which is crucial since he has apparently accrued some dishonorable debt.

The wedding party arrives at Granbois, Antoinette's inherited property on another island where she spent much of her youth. Rochester is overwhelmed by the scenery, distrustful of the servants, and generally displeased with the honeymoon house. Antoinette tries to reassure him and help him understand the Caribbean way of life, and for a while this seems to work. Several weeks pass reasonably happily, as the two get to know one another through conversation and finally through consummation of their marriage. Both soon become addict to sex.

Then one day Rochester receives a letter from a man who calls himself Daniel Cosway and insists that he is Antoinette's illegitimate half-brother. In his letter, Daniel tells Rochester that the Englishman has been tricked into marriage with a madwoman, and encourages Rochester to come and visit him to get the full story. Rochester believes what he reads, and when he returns to the house Antoinette and the servants can sense that his attitude toward her has changed.

The point-of-view then shifts back to Antoinette, who is journeying on horseback to visit the wise old servant Christophine, a woman who is rumored to practice the dark art known as obeah. Antoinette explains that Rochester has become cold and distant, and begs her former nurse to use black magic to make him love her again. Christophine resists, suggesting that Antoinette leave her husband instead. Antoinette refuses, however, noting that under English law all of her money now belongs to Rochester. Christophine, appalled to hear about Antoinette's dependence on Rochester, finally agrees to help her.

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* describes the setup of a central south Indian Brahmin family. Devi, the central character returns to Madras from America to live with her mother, Sita. Initially, she is confronted by some difficulties in making adjustments with day-to-day realities. It was difficult to change the old order with her radical ideas, though she came from a brave new world. Her dream-like visit to America ends as soon as she is in India. Devi

prepares to live for and support her widowed mother and is soon sucked back into the maternal love. Sita was always and is still Devi's anchor rock, never wrong, never to be questioned, a self-evident fact of her existence. She believed most in the power of her own magic. Sita made discrete inquires and made thorough investigations of all candidates before Devi's marriage. What Sita thought to be a suitable for her daughter, filed on various levels, Devi had some expectations from her husband Mahesh to support and understand her on emotional grounds, but her expectations were never realized.

She finds a good friend in Mayamma, the old family retainer in the house. Devi listens to her life experiences with all attention and care: she tries to draw some useful essential from them in order to make her life a little better than what Mayamma had allowed occurring in hers. She blamed all and everything on herself, never complaining because she felt that the success of life for a woman depended on her ability to endure and move on in this male dominated society.

Devi's father-in-law, through his discovery, equips her with a philosophy to live with, "Devi, he chided, whatever is depended on others is misery, whatever rests on oneself is happiness."

Githa Hariharan's next novel is *When Dream Travel*. The novel is a retelling of the old story of Shahrzad and her sister Dunyasad. They are married to two brothers, the Sultan Shaharyar and Shahzaman, both of whom were earlier cuckolded by their wives. To prevent this from happening again, the sultan marries a virgin each night, and then beheads her in the morning. This grisly practice continues until Shahrzad, the Wazir's daughter, manages to keep death at day by telling him stories for a thousand and one nights. There are only two other characters who count: Dilshad, an insolvent and wily slave girl who betrays the Sultan by helping his son Umar to Usurp the throne, and Satyasama, a freak from the Sultan's Harem, whose body is covered with a sleek, lightweight fur. All these characters have a dream-like quality as though they exit in a trance. Early in the story Shahrzad dies mysteriously and much of the book concerns Dunyazad's efforts to find out how and why. The truth is revealed only in the last

chapter's surprise ending. The deaths of Shahrzad and Shahzaman and the Wazir by no means preclude their frequent reappearances, either in dream sequences or in incidents from the past.

Githa Hariharan demonstrates her control of the fictional craft in the book's carefully-planned structure. It is divided into two parts; the first unfolds the story of the four main characters: the second is a contrapuntal series of tales told by Dunyazad and Dilshad during their seven-day sojourn in the desert. In the major players are participants in some gory and grotesque happenings. They include accounts of a limbless, headless monkey-woman who refuses to die: a pool full of dismembered female body parts, an endless manor built by two brothers, a woman who feeds the hungry with her breasts, and more in this vein. Some of these tales are drawn out to inordinate lengths. A few are puzzling, if not downright pointless. Thus, Githa Hariharan depicts how women are oppressed in the Indian society as portrayed in these novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*.

When one fails to come to terms with one's ownself and reality around, one seems to face an identity crisis. This is true in the case of Valmiki in Kamala Markandaya's *Possession* and Esmond in Jhabvala's *Esmond in India*. Dev and Adit in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* face the crisis but come out of it when they realize what they need. Sarah, in the same novel, goes through the agony because of her inability to free herself from the emotional and sentimental attachment to her English self, though she is willing to accept her husband's country.

Finally it appears from the above discussion that what the earlier generations of creole and Indian women had achieved only partially and through much pain has been attained at last by modern women. Both the first world woman protagonist of Kamala Markandaya and the modern woman of Anita Desai have their ordeals of excruciating pain; but through this both emerge at the end, though mauled amputated, yet strong self-assured—one with the determination “not to see myself but to see” (rejecting the society/ male-

attributed image of herself); and the other to "walk on, seeking a goddess who is not yet made", "to stay and fight, to make sense of it all, even if it means to start from the very beginning."

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