
Teaching Gender Identity via Indian American Women Novelists

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The teaching of Indian American woman literature can be done in a way which reduces the Eurocentric bases that are included in traditional approaches to the teaching of English. In Indian literature written in English the struggle between traditional and modern discourse, Eastern and Western perspectives and values creates additional gaps which can provide sites for students' investigations into intercultural influences and conflicts. Students would be helped with the critical thinking skills they need in order to construct, through a range of both reading (and writing) activities, their own cultural identity and to deconstruct stereotyped representations of the cultural individuals which they meet in different literary texts.

Indian American writing does not express just marginalization or cultural disjunction, but abounds in examples of cultural binaries such as continuity/discontinuity. The cultivation of ambiguity is revealed with a series of cultural options which develop out of the experience of living simultaneously in two cultures, with two separate world views. These women writers uphold a sense of gender identity which acknowledges masculine and feminine views of the self trying to avoid being trapped within extreme versions of femininity and masculinity. The contrary values engraved in the stereotypes are used to legitimize some perspectives. Yet, the individualisation of specific Indian women carries the weight of particular historical connotations associated with Indian women in general. Undoubtedly, Indian American women writers were truly marginal and lived in a no man's land of discourses. They are compelled to ambivalent roles of being preservers of their original traditions and agents of change. A close reading of their novels opens one's eyes to the subversive ways in which Indian feminist authors build their texts, particularly challenging patriarchal assumptions through actions.

But, if one gives to some students the right to tell others what they must learn or know, one cannot have human freedom, and the sense

of all people's uniqueness, dignity and worth on which it must rest. Certainly, in theory, such a process remains simple, but often, one is incapable of dissolving one's hopes or even stimulating the efforts to understand differences without necessarily accepting them. Like all the investigations into the heart of the matter, i.e. into the foundations of truth, one is aware that one's understanding of feeling is limited, for what is good/ bad, true/false, deep/shallow is questionable for others. Undoubtedly, one does not have the same emotional attitude towards facts or events, i.e. life itself. At its best, the quality of one's life depends greatly on the quality of one's feeling and being mature involves probably the capacity to elide or to develop particular attitudes, and thus, not to be at the mercy of overwhelming feelings, otherwise one becomes immature. "Identity remains a threatening possession" (Steiner 1975:71), and the perception and expression of feelings are themselves very ambiguous subjects.

Aside from the fact that personal taste, personal history and other subjective factors come into play, what does the best mean in art and specifically in literary writing? There may be only one correct way to answer certain scientific problems, but there remains an infinite number of ways to approach artistic truth. As a particular mode of human activity, artistic work has to be measured by artistic standards. Experience would probably qualify any one to make judgments about artistic excellence. To a certain extent, to learn to perceive in writing, the reality and worth of the emotion in and behind, is to help our emotional and intellectual growth (Coombes 1991:89). The ability to read is a great enterprise, for to have a delicate reading, to quote Henry James, is to achieve full appreciation of what a writer has written, though the meaning of a word is full of different associations." We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion and nothing else. The touch-stone is emotion not reason (Ibid: 8).

One shares Bergonzi's view point that the novel supremely among literary form has satisfied our hunger (Lodge: 4). It reflects a human experience which is unique and always new and if novels are valued because they tell the truth, it follows, thus, that among the various literary forms, the novel although being fictive, is committed to ren-

dering experience with an enhanced genre of order and harmony (Ibid: 66). The novel which is "a slice of life" (Ibid: 279-280) gives a chance to learning from the experience of others and increases one's ability to learn more about oneself and to a greater extent provokes criticism and self-criticism. In other terms, it can help us to live, as nothing else can (Hagell 1978:130).

The post-colonial woman writer, who pertains to a racial, historical or religious group or common cultures, is, thus, a writer who has absorbed the culture and the ancient values that her scattered people had passed on through the past generations. Such writers also share the constant awareness of living in two cultures, knowing two allegiances: one to the receiving / host country, the other to the collective memory of their own people, an issue which includes also further differences of race and religion. Fictional books by those writers enter the discourse on ethnicity by exploring the dilemmas of identity-making in a somehow sophisticated cultural topography, i.e. a schema of a structural entity, as of the mind, field of study, society reflecting a division into distinct areas having a specific relation to one another. Indian American identity is identified by a given social context and is not denoted as a cohesive reality. The ethnic protagonist is permanently rethinking her social attitude. Such a volatility of Indian foreignness is expressed in states of anxiety, estrangement and irresolution. The internal instability of both mainstream and Indian culture, since each culture is itself heterogeneous and changeable, hampers the protagonist to commit herself to some values, beliefs which would reform her new identity. The experience of alienation, the presence of contradictory social stimuli, cultural discordance are revealed in their writings in the form of indefinable ethnic identity. Men and women are portrayed as being shaped by different cultural contexts which provide the raw-material for self-fulfilment. Yet, sometimes, it seems possible for the protagonist to negotiate some kind of provisional cultural identity, there is no ultimate strength since the content of this new identity is alterable.

Indeed, teaching post colonial woman literature will try to open connected debates. Particularly in pedagogy, the integration of post-colonial women writers in the curriculum creates opportunities for more mutual understanding and equality between women and men

in general, and mixed intra and inter-ethnic/cultural affiliations in particular. It can open up new thinking in new literatures by focusing on patterns of metropolitan experience and cross-border movement rather than reinforcing existing tendencies to marginalize communities on grounds of national or ethnic origin. It can contribute to more thinking about women's issues, notably, patriarchy, sexuality, socio-cultural roles and creation itself such as painting sculpture or architecture, and to eradicating stereotypes and shaking erroneous judgements. Exposure to another culture and to other ways of thinking and behaving leads to new ways of looking at one's own culture.

Furthermore, though there may not be direct cultural parallels, a glimpse into the culture and lifestyles of people living in other countries, especially India is beneficial. Certainly Indian and Algerian women share some common themes in their writing. While there are aspects of the culture of women in various countries being different, there is evidence to suggest that there are some of the common themes found in the literature of women from other countries, notably patriarchal oppression and gender inequality, woman quest for identity. One of the arguments that might be used to demonstrate that there is no similarity between the literature of Indian and Algerian women, for instance, is to point out that the last one does not address the issue of casteist behaviour. This seems to suggest that Indian and Algerian women are from different worlds and do not speak the same language. Yet, one has the benefit of reading Indian literature in English. It only takes a springy of respect to understand Indian women literature. Though there is some difficulty to master the homogeneity of the conceptual apparatus concerned, the concepts are to be interpreted according to the context, notably geographical, linguistic, religious, i.e. cultural, as a glossary with defined terms is not always found at the end of novels. In this sense, it seems interesting to find that Algerian / Maghrebian and African women develop parallel process of representation and misrepresentation as regards their function in a modern society. Further questioning could include specific areas of comparisons. While in Hindu

practice the traditional woman has no room of her own, to what extent do the Islamic harems where no man dare invade, provide their women the space which was lacking in the West for a female consolidation of identity? How far is the myth of the veil a far more complex phenomenon? Feminism, nationalism and veiling are inter-linked in Egyptian literature as the veil becomes a key symbol in the struggle for women emancipation, as it is shown in the writing of Ahdaf Soueif, Naguib Mahfouz and Nawal el Saadawi. In Maghreb-ian literature (Francophone literature), notably in Assia Djebbar and Ben Jalloun, the veil takes its significance from the forced unveiling of the Algerians by the colonizing French. To what extent is the veil a symbol of cultures which needs to reinforce a rigid obedience to male authority? Veiling remains a paradox. It may be regarded as a private space or subject to a different interpretation of the practice in a given culture.

Such questionings show, once more, that history or one's past cultural heritage plays a crucial role in the new identities being formed and represented in literature. Since post colonial Indian American writing stops to be "a literature of our own" (Elaine Showalter 1977) and becomes part of the common heritage of American men and women, teaching it remains a real challenge. On the one hand, their writing takes place within a complex cultural network where students do not possess shared traditions. ; on the other hand, beside foreign language learning and proficiency it requires a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture.

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