

## **Home and the Inner Lives of Homemakers: A Study of Women Protagonists in Select Indian English Novels**

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In the words of Roger Kennedy, having a 'home'<sup>1</sup> is akin to experiencing an emotion. It becomes more than a mere physical, concrete dwelling; it becomes an interior part of one's soul. Furthermore, the connotations for home can be multi-fold, allowing magnitude of interpretations as the dynamics of the space are imbued with an individual in his/her manners, memories, culture, and tradition. For instance, an immigrant's idea of home would be rooted in memory and nostalgia and for the reader of post-colonial scholarship; the idea of home would be interconnected with that of homeland and home rule. Likewise, in a capitalist patriarchal society, the idea of home is interconnected with gender and the means of production.

For centuries women have been conditioned to perform the unpaid work of the house. Women constitute the inner or private space, where domestic (unpaid) work of the household like cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing is performed; the opposite of the public sphere where industry (wage, labour, working hours) is situated, which is classified for men. The household work has become synonymous with women's work as it has been performed by women for so long. The issue has been most aptly noted by V. Geetha as:

The inside/outside dyad separates women and men, assigning women to the inside of homes, cultures – and men to the outer world, of labour, production and rule... and the outside is often a form for the exercise of local patriarchal authority... the home and hearth are conceptualized in folk, popular and much of literary culture – as an essentially gendered space, where the outer world of commerce, rule and war is seen as a 'man's world'. Words in most Indian languages designate the woman as the queen of the household, as its guardian angel, its custodian and so on; where as a man is described as the one that brings in an income, as a protector and guardian of the hearth in his capacity as a public figure and as one who fashions the world, makes history. (Geetha 144-145)

With so many entry points into understanding the essence of homes, this paper in its limited scope of the study would only focus on women in Indian households, through analysis of select Indian English novels. The study has been undertaken with the analysis of works by noted authors like Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), and Rama

Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977). The literary households in this paper are studied as motifs of self-expression by the women in their struggle with issues of class, tradition, gender inequality, and at large, social anonymity of their intramural struggles.

By carefully studying the portrayal and caricature of the women and the households in literature, one realises that homes chronicle the most intimate struggles of women that remain unseen and unacknowledged behind the closed doors. The veiled structure of power between women and the private space of household brews ecosystems engineered and operated by women. The homes and homemakers become symbolic of the marginalised histories waiting to be unearthed. In order to understand Indian households and the inner lives of women inside them, it would be unjust to neglect the bounty of work done by Indian women writers around the themes of family and households. The voices of women characters in literature, by women, are significant as they come from a space of double oppression, first from patriarchy and secondly from economic dependence. Dr K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly opines that "women are natural story-tellers!" (435) and writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Kamala Markandaya mark Iyengar's words true. They articulate their work with a unique understanding of womanhood that projects the unseen aspects of being a householder and a homemaker. Their works question the systemic effacement and negation of the self to fulfil the roles expected by society. Moreover, the representations of literary homes in these texts attempt to capture the complexity behind the societal misnomers correlating domestic bliss with agreeable homemakers. The lives of women inside the home are expected to remain static and unchanged with time and movement. However, it is seen that women are the first to sense and prepare for the changes happening outside that will ultimately affect their inner worlds in time.

## I

In human societies and Indian households in general, women shoulder the responsibility of primary care providers to their families and the household. One such household is portrayed in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) written by Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004). In the novel, the protagonist, Rukmani recounts the ordeals of her life. The story of Rukmani is located in a simple, unnamed Indian village that is threatened by the arrival of the new tannery. The journey of Rukmani takes the reader into the labyrinths of rural India, where misfortune has not lifted its veil through centuries after colonisation. She is married at the age of twelve and Markandaya through her observing narrative style has chalked out the transformation of a young girl into a woman through the protagonist's own words. Young girls without education are trained to make an organic

transition into the future roles of loving mothers, affectionate wives, and obedient sisters or daughters. In order to prepare them as efficient managers of their future households, they are taught to provide for the household in various ways, from finances to ration and medicine, they look after the smallest of things that may hamper the smooth running of the household machinery. Rukmani's journey is no different when she enters her marital household. Her transition is summarised by Nathan's remark, "She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination" (66).

Rukmani's land-owning ancestral heritage along with her ability to read and write generates much curiosity in the village women around her, yet her ability to learn and an amiable persona helps her gain their approval as one of their own. From childbirth to child-rearing the rural women become self-sufficient and codependent on each other. Each learns how the other is doing in her household through their regular house visits and holding open conversations about the pressing issues in their lives. The character of Rukmani is symbolic of the challenges faced by rural women who have no choice but to bravely face the hostility of nature and human forces alike. For a peasant family like that of Nathan and Rukmani's, the only assets at their disposal are labour and land. As owning land is a far-fetched dream for the poor farmers, the families could only advance their fortunes with the help of more labour. They live on a fine balance between hope and fear as Rukmani says, "Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction, and then another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter, we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear is a constant companion of the peasant" (Markandaya 144).

As the men leave for fields, the wives look after the household, the children, and occasionally help at the fields whenever required. The women characters, like the protagonist Rukmani, her daughters: Irrawaddy, Kunthi, and Appu, are represented in their journey of becoming complex mother figures. Markandaya looks at how mothers are born. She shows how every mother has a different journey into motherhood and society cannot weigh all on the same scale. Three prominent female characters have their children born out of wedlock in the novel. The theme of motherhood and fertility shape the desires and self-worth of women. Women who are either abandoned by their husbands or sons, like Appu and Ira, resort to prostitution to support themselves. Others like Kunthi become sex workers as they aspire to live a modern lifestyle that an independent income could ensure. The irony is that many poverty-stricken women fall pregnant and hold on to illegitimate children. The emotional and financial exertion a child brings to the family is directly seen as a reflection of the hardships faced by women in their childbearing years. The women who are past their youth, like

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the old granny of the village who supports herself by selling vegetables, become a daily reminder of the hardships faced by ageing single women. Rukmani fears that Ira might face the fate of the old granny, who dies alone in the streets out of destitution.

Here the idea of fertility plays a major role in terms of the agrarian rural economy. Markandaya has raised the issue poetically with an allegorical representation of the women and the land. Land and a wife without sons are of no use to a farmer. The rural economy of Indian villages weighs the value of women by the number of male heirs given by her to society. Susan S. Wadley rightly evokes this sentiment by pointing out in her chapter, "Hindu Women's Family and Household Rites in a North Indian Village" (1977) that:

Having sons is considered vital by women for several reasons: sons are needed to perform the ancestral rites, they provide "insurance" in one's old age (especially crucial if a woman should be so unfortunate as to become a widow), and they also make up the family labour force. Equally important is the emotional support that sons provide. (Wadley 117)

The rural economy is already fragile as it depends perennially on the forces of nature like weather and rains. Also, the farmers work on lands that belong to someone else, which makes them a tenant on the land. While the peasants cannot control the forces of nature, they are still liable as tenants to pay the rent of the land. Rukmani aptly summarises the nature of the relationship between the farmers and nature as: "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat" (Markandaya 112).

In the novel, Markandaya shows that the peasant women are further impacted by the demands of a growing family as they have no place or profession to earn for their family except occasionally working beside their husbands on the land. In such cases, women only fall prey to the demands of a foreign crowd ready to pay them for carnal pleasures. N.K. Jain feels that the novel presents "an authentic picture of village life in transition, particularly of rural poverty and hunger" (155). Through the main protagonist, Rukmani, Markandaya brings out the need that is inculcated in women to bear male heirs. Rukmani undergoes a coveted fertility treatment as she wants to beget a male child to her husband, Nathan.

She never questions the demands that are going to be made on her body and mind as she fears that her marriage will fall apart if she does not bear Nathan sons. The birth of her six sons ensures a stable marriage, vital for

sustenance in the village. In the absence of any wealth or inheritance of her own, she solely depends on her father's or husband's allegiance for shelter. Although her suspicions are never realised due to the help received from Dr Kennington, the reader eventually reads Nathan's justification of Irawaddy's broken marriage as he says, "we cannot blame him, he waited long enough" (Markandaya 92). Through his justification, one can understand the motivation behind the young Rukmani's actions. Here it is important to understand the cultural investment Markandaya's protagonist has made into the idea of her marital home and family. Her idea of wealth and social acknowledgement does not lie with modernity and material advancement that is signified by the tannery, but rather with her home and kin as noted by Wadley:

It is not surprising, then, those women's desires, as expressed in their rituals, are those of their world—the household— while men's concerns are focused primarily on the outer world. Since the world affects women differently than it does men, women's symbols of hope and prosperity are also different from men's symbols. (Wadley 121)

Rukmani is not happy with her sons, Arjun and Thambi, leaving the village to make money, and blames the tannery for the changes she is being forced to acknowledge and accept. Her other son, Raja, is caught stealing at the tannery and is brought dead to the house. Although financially the villagers benefit from the increased income, including Rukmani, she realises that the tannery exacts a heavy price in lieu of the modernity and money it offers. She says, "But the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye" (Markandaya 25).

The challenges that come her way become a threat to her life's only motive: a stable home with her family protected inside it. She negotiates her position, where she has to choose her way of dealing with these challenges. It is seen that she fights all the battles, be it the invasive tannery or infidelity. Rukmani's household becomes a spectacle of the cultural clash that happens inside the village. The tannery provides a new income avenue to the young and the restless of the village, while the old try to patiently pass through the hard times of rain and drought alike with the same submissiveness. The economic structure of the tannery goes against the farming and cultivation pattern for the villagers. Agriculture and farming involve the whole family in the means of production; the family is connected with each other in labour and leisure, whereas the tannery plants the seeds of capitalist exploitation. "They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us". (Markandaya 42)

The labour force is an impersonal unit of humans and can be replaced anytime. While the men are used for their skill and strength, the women become a completely detached body who are only to look after the house. The disconnect Rukmani begins to feel is on both the levels where her sons no longer want to help their ageing father on the land and also because here she cannot get involved as it is a foreign entity's space of production as A.V. Krishna Rao remarks: "Industrialization with its main emphasis on urban development and mechanization of the means of production and distribution results in the social dislocation of the family" (64).

The dynamics also change when it comes to modern relationships. The relationships inside the household start breaking apart once tragedy strikes the village. The marriage of Rukmani and Nathan sees various ups and downs throughout the novel, but not even once the couple decides to end their marriage. However, we see the other marriages falling apart as the characters start moving out in their independent search of livelihood. The women especially seem the hardest hit by economic novelty. Rukmani reports that most of the women turn to prostitution after crop failure as a last resort to earn money. Srinivasa Iyengar feels "Life has not apparently changed for a thousand year, but now with the invasion of industry and more technology sinister consequences issue" (43).

A.V. Krishna Rao considers the novel the "havoc of economics." He opines that "Kamala Markandaya in the *Nectar in a Sieve* has dramatized the tragedy of a traditional Indian village and a peasant family assaulted by industrialisation. Rukmani and Nathan, a couple in a south Indian village are the victims of the two evils - *zamindari* system and the industrial economy" (4).

## II

Along with a residential shift, a bride is expected to make a cultural and psychological shift in her outlook to completely align her personality with her marital household. Thus, to become one of the members of her husband's family, the girl/bride forgoes everything that can be a hindrance in the espousal of a new identity. However, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was witnessing a change in perspective as Elaine Showalter writes, "self-discovery" and "a search for identity" (Showalter 13) became the major themes of women's writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Indian English literature, one can see the caricatures of women protagonists who were struggling to hold onto their own identities rather than being defined by the face of their male guardians.

One such text where the question of identity is raised in a nuanced manner is Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*. The protagonist Geeta undergoes significant

cultural shifts in order to fit into the aristocratic family of Udaipur after marriage. From being a free-spirited young woman at her parent's house to a coy bride, her journey deliberates on the unmaking of the modern girl and the making of a liberal woman inside a traditional household. She is educated, young, and spirited in her demeanour. She has an opinion and is vocal about her thoughts, which makes her all the things that are shunned in the stoic households of the elite *havelis* (traditional Indian mansions).

Mehta's text presents an excellent canvas to display the tension between modernity and tradition, inside the stately Indian households. The contrast of beliefs between the modern upbringing of a metropolitan city like Mumbai and value systems inside the ostentatious *havelis* as portrayed in Bhagwat Singh's *haveli* in Udaipur serves as an excellent detail to study the contrast of class and gender ideas with respect to the geographical locale. According to Jasbir Jain, the architecture of *havelis* itself displays a structural divide between gender roles, with separate courtyards for men and women. The segregation of spaces can be seen as symptomatic of various classifications based on class and caste inside the *haveli*. Jain says, "traditional architecture often has separate living quarters for women referred to as the 'Zenanas', with men spending most of their time in the front portion of the house" (Jain 249).

Geeta and the *haveli* are juxtaposed in the novel against each other as opposing ideologies of modernity and tradition. The position of women inside the house is fixated as being beneath the men but above the servants. The women of the *haveli*, whether it is Bhagwat Singh's wife and mother or others who are primarily working in the *haveli* as maids servants, follow the norms and rituals of the household like a clockwork irrespective of age and designation as, "In the *haveli* men were regarded with awe as if they were Gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command. Women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care" (Mehta 21).

Mehta's novel, *Inside the Haveli* is not a treatise of radical feminism; rather, it realises the compelling force of tradition and cultural dynamics which constitute the essence of a society. Geeta realises pragmatics of a patriarchal feudal culture that branches out into orthodoxy and superstition in the *haveli*. She sees people of the *haveli* and village going to a fortune teller, who is simply a fraud taking advantage of the ignorance and illiteracy of the poor villagers. Along with superstition, the household inside the *haveli* promotes the *Purdah* (veil) system which constricts women's right over their own bodies. Sociologists Indira Parikh and Pulin Garg in "Inside the Haveli: Incarceration or Insurrection?" describe the traditional state of *purdah* in India where upper-class women live mostly indoors:

They come as brides and leave only for the funeral pyre. The husband's home is their prison, their castle, and their palace. They believe, or are made to believe, or have no other choice but believe, that this is all for their good . . . however, within the walls of their home, within the feudal system of a large joint family, run parallel themes of exploitation, intrigue and counter-intrigue, all revolving around the control of resources through legacy and heritage. This is the only life they know as wives. (Parikh and Garg 90)

Geeta, after a few failed attempts to revolutionise the *haveli*, realises that women cannot stand alone and have a point of view unless it is validated by the male head of the family. The women who were widowed or separated from their husbands like Pari ji, Bua, and Laxmi lived a hard life devoid of any hope of betterment or happiness in the future. They could not be educated as they did not know if any other narrative exists for them. Yet it is seen that each generation in the *haveli* is trying to patent a difference in the traditional set-up. As Geeta resolves that a servant's daughter must attain education along with her own, she begins to resist the histories of silenced women inside the *haveli*. In a moment of the tussle between choosing tradition or herself, Geeta has the best clarity of thought, "What if I cannot trace my ancestry beyond my grandfather? That is no reason why I should surrender; she was filled with rebellion and her face stiffened. She was determined not to be crushed by the *haveli*" (Mehta 100).

Geeta, in an attempt to save her own identity and self-erosion, chooses a cause that truly resonates with her personality. The idea of educating children and young girls from the servant families and making them independent marks Geeta's personal absolution inside the *haveli*. Along with teaching her pupils to read and write, she also introduces sewing and knitting classes for vocational purposes. The formal and vocational education comes as a necessary step for the *haveli* as cracks begin to show in the old regimen with the abolition of the aristocracy and feudal set-up. The aristocratic families like that of Bhagwat Singh and his ilk are seen struggling to match the lifestyle and revenue of the past and are forced to accommodate the realities of the present.

However, the idea of change is antithetical to the very sense of being of the *havelis* that stood as a symbol of class and tradition of the aristocratic lineages in Udaipur. The novel *Inside the haveli* subtly touches upon the issue of continuity, of passing on family and ethnic values across generations inside a feudal household. The *haveli* as a structure itself stands as a sensibility of the past generations. The protagonist Geeta comes as an outsider who is at first seen as a threat to the tradition with her city upbringing and education, other women comment: "She will never adjust. She is not one of us" (Mehta 29).

She is alienated due to her rebellious nature and her dislike for the ever silent women of Bhagwat Singh's household. Her conduct stays under constant vigilance both by the elders and the servants of the family as she struggles her urges to express and speak for herself. Yet, Geeta complies with the traditions and finds her own way around them. System of *purdah* for a city educated young woman is bound to be misinterpreted as restrictive and primitive, but it does not take long for Geeta to realise the power of *purdah* to shield her fierce emotions in precarious times as once said by Jung, the veil and *purdah* can be regarded as features of 'psychic empowerment' (Jung 19). She must follow the social mores that apply to her as the future mistress of the house yet she never wants to give away her individuality for the same, "Women behind thick walls had none of the exuberance of the women in the streets. They were like dressed – up dolls kept in a glass case for a marionette show. Women of the upper classes did not talk in the streets" (Mehta 110).

The idea of identity is important in Mehta's text as she depicts how the formation of the new identity inside the marital household is an outcome of a history of generations. The women among themselves propagate the myths and tales of a long gone past. For instance, Geeta's own mother teaches her, "Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk too much" (Mehta 16).

The setting of arranged marriage and the structure of an Indian joint family reflects the collective consciousness of the family life in India. This protagonist of Mehta takes the reader through various phases of a new bride's journey where she learns, adjusts, and develops new understandings inside the marital home. She becomes the flag bearer of the very culture that she tried to resist but also discards the practices that are oppressive in the *haveli's* cultural past. The coexistence of women as both outsiders and perpetrators of tradition brings a balance in the households of Rukmani and Geeta. Both these protagonists undergo a transformation for the sake of their families, yet they bring a negotiation into the coexistence of self with the other. The women in the village and the women inside the *haveli* display a strong narrative of power that women can possess inside the household as well. The women, realising the process of self-effacement into the domestic setting, become flexible in their approach to raise the family. They find ways to exert their presence in the house and make it their own space by creating subtle structures of economic and emotional independence. Geeta begins to appreciate the otherwise conservative *haveli* by involving herself into the upliftment of female servants. Nonetheless, there are a few protagonists like Anita Desai's Nanda Kaul in the novel *Fire on the Mountain* who stay perturbed by the proverbial domestic bliss.

### III

It is interesting to see that home becomes a medium of self-expression for the female protagonists. It becomes a political territory for women who keep reworking the cultural aesthetics in order to impart their own imprints in the given circumstances. While Rukmani and Geeta recognise their homes as products of labour and love, Nanda Kaul, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, considers her marital home as a domain only existing for societal obligations. She identifies her real abode in Carignano, a house devoid of any pretence, where she lives all by herself without any filial interruption. The memory of her previous house, her previous life only brings out a feeling of loss inside her. The third-person narration of her story only observes the alarming falsity of Nanda's marital abode:

The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense and busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her ... She had suffered from the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess. She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again. (FM 29-30)

Becoming a mother becomes a major responsibility for a woman in her life. The birth of an offspring is traditionally seen as the completion of the family unit and fruition of the marriage. With the arrival of an offspring, the women have shoulder added responsibilities to feed and care for the newborn as well as manage the household in her fragile mental and physical state. But it would be benign to assume that all women cope with motherhood and allied responsibilities in the same manner. Desai's Nanda Kaul is perturbed by the responsibilities of a homemaker and a mother. She feels that she is sacrificing her innate self in order to shape the household and the lives of her family and children. As Ladha Barathan says in *Female Voices*:

To women is attributed another selfhood as essential selfhood, but not that of the male. For a woman, anatomy is destiny and it is the centre of her being. Her role is that of the procreator and nurturer. She inhabits a colourful margin. It becomes her essence and paradoxically a path to her own essentiality. On the one hand she is said to have an essence, which defines her as a woman but on the other hand she is relegated as matter and can have no access to this essence. (Barathan 167)

The house she gets in Kasauli, Carignano, is symbolic of her desire to live by herself and for herself alone. Nanda constantly runs away from the reminders that still conjoin her and her previous station as the Vice Chancellor's impeccable wife. She finds a refuge in the haunting serenity of the woods and shuns the establishments that demand her to fulfil certain roles as a woman. She feels at a loss to concern herself with the politics of the world and the troubles of her grown-up children's houses. Nanda feels that she has done her share of penance by making and raising a family and she has earned her recluse in Carignano. But with the arrival of the sickly Raka, Nanda is forced yet again to fulfil the responsibilities of being the great grandmother and take Raka into her house. Motherhood in the Indian society is considered as both an accomplishment and an impediment to a woman. As Kate Millet protests in *Sexual Politics* (1970), "Sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest and ambition to the male" (26). Once she becomes a mother, she has to compromise on the way she lives her life and her identity as an individual. Gaining economic independence and finding their own foot has always been a challenging task for women in Indian society. The women act as pillars of emotional support and stability of the family, the freedom to have their own emotional understanding would be a luxury to many of them.

Nanda Kaul is seen having solace in her life only when she is left completely alone in the house not frequently visited by anyone be it her family or friends. She is the happiest when she is assured of her seclusion from the world. Desai paints a rather morbid picture of Nanda's house and her aloofness. In an almost melancholic romance, the house and the owner are bound together by their remoteness from the outside world and its formalities. The arrival of young Raka changes the balance of the house as she somehow does not fit into the world of the old yet; she has urges and is not satiated from every minimisation of human urge. For instance, in Nanda Kaul's house the food and the supplies are only meant to serve the older people. The child is constantly hungry and runs off to the jungle to satiate her hunger for food and a better company than in Carignano. Raka is continuously searching for stories that help her fight the reality of violence and loveless relationships much like her great grandmother, but while Nanda makes compromises throughout her life, Raka wants to create a new universe for herself. The story of their household is unique, but it is the best representation of their lived reality.

### **Conclusion**

The houses represent a reality that their protagonists are fighting against in these works. The households become symptomatic of a fight between the personal and the social beliefs of these women protagonists who sometimes are seen fighting the world to save their house or fighting the house itself to

save themselves. The economic settlement of the houses also becomes an important example in learning how the protagonists want to express their desires and want to build a lifestyle around their family.

Each of the women protagonists taken in this study becomes a unique manager of the household events in their own way. In their own ways, they carve out ways to mark their own territories when coexisting within a patriarchal structure. They do not depend on their husbands alone for experiencing independence; they exercise their freedom, be it intellectual or monetary.

### Endnotes

1. Roger Kennedy in his book, *The Psychic Home: Psychoanalysis, Consciousness and the Human Soul* (2014), talks about a home as a psychic structure that performs various symbolic functions for a person while assessing his being.

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