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TRANSGRESSING ROLE PRESCRIPTIONS IN WOMEN'S WRITINGS IN HINDI (1960-2000)



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ABSTRACT

The present essay deals with the writings of Hindi women novelists from the Post-independence period to the end of the twentieth century traversing their journey which had to break a few norms and transgress many boundaries. The trajectory of how Gender was perceived in the eyes of the finest women critics of America followed by a history of the novel in Hindi literature in India and present the linkages of this thought process to post-Independence emergence of women

writers in Hindi is the objective of the essay.

This essay is largely about the re-invention of these roles in Women's writing in Hindi over a forty-year period and attempts to provide an analysis of the relationship between women's writing and social change.

KEYWORDS

Women Writing, Indian Women Literature, Hindi Literature

RESEARCH PAPER

In 1970, when Kate Millett published her now classic work *Sexual Politics*, she spoke of the term ‘Patriarchy’ literally from the Greek, rule of the father:

Our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, the industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance—in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands.

Religion and custom have had control over social behavior in traditional societies and we have known this for a long time. However, the perpetuation of such beliefs, Millet asks in modern societies consisting of women who had education, financial independence and civil and political rights has continued to happen. Patriarchy has continued in some form of coercion or the other. The answer to this contradiction lies in the women’s conditioning. They have been made to embrace this kind of stereotyping from their childhood. They were trained to accept a system which segregated their lives into male and female spheres, appropriating their roles and assigning the power exclusively to the males. Millet blamed the role of the academics and social psychologists like Freud for perpetuating this segregation of sex roles. Another view about social roles has been analyzed by Elizabeth Janeway in *Man’s World, Woman’s Place* (1971) where she uses the term ‘Social mythology’ and traces the origin of the idea that ‘woman’s place is in the home.’ She shows this discrepancy of power between the man and the woman. According to her, history has provided us with the evidence that women belonged to the domestic sphere. This concept does not have a role for a man as a counterpart. The woman played the role of a mother, a homemaker and wife and this was the sphere she was allotted on the grounds that she was a female. No such constraints were put on men because their functions in their public roles had nothing to do with their masculinity. Shulasmith Firestone took the analysis further in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). She called the phenomenon of love as the ‘pivot of women’s oppression’. She puts forth the argument that love is an ideology which has been propagated to disguise the power imbalance in heterosexual relationships.

Juliet Mitchell in her famous work *Woman’s Estate* (1971) criticized Firestone for not highlighting the oppression of women and of only concentrating on the assignation of specific roles. Mitchell pointed out childbearing as one of the aspects of women’s oppression and calling their biological functions as oppressive. Whatever their disagreements, the two critics agreed upon the point of the relation of women’s oppression to the ideological association of women with the private sphere.

Women’s association with the private or ‘domestic’ sphere is because of their reproductive functions. They give birth to children and are naturally associated with their rearing and this appeared to be one of the most significant factors in their linkage to the domestic sphere. This view was brought forward in an influential essay by the anthropologist Michele Rosaldo in her book *Woman, Culture and Society* (1974):

Male as opposed to female activities are always recognized as predominantly important, and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men...an asymmetry in the cultural evaluation of male and female, in the importance assigned to women and men, appears to be universal.

Whatever the interpretation, whether the association of women's roles as belonging to this sphere is seen as universal and prevalent in all cultures as seen by Rosaldo and Firestone or as developing as a historical phenomenon like Janeway and Mitchell, it is quite clear that the biological realities of women's lives constantly paralleled with their psychological and cultural constructs.

What we need to do at this point is to analyze the concept of 'Gender' and how it has definitely played a part in role prescriptions in society. Norms that set ideal standards of behavior for men and women are diametrically opposed to each other. These norms are related to work modes, the way we relate to each other, our dress codes, the way we communicate and most importantly, our access to resources and power.

A norm is above all, universal and that is why it is acceptable. A woman should be a good wife and a mother, this is a generalized notion of a norm which most women adhere to. However, what is interesting is that not only is this an upper- and middle-class aspiration but also made to appear as a function of the female sex. Most women would naturally want to be good wives and mothers.

So, who is responsible for popularizing these norms? Norms persist because of the fact that we abide by them. There is a crucial role that is played by religion. Patriarchy is steeped in our Indian culture and the elements of patriarchy have been derived from our ancient and sacred texts.

Written in the Vedic ages, most of the texts in the Hindu tradition have always given importance to the propagation of male descendants through procreation. It has been seen as the uppermost goal in life and the woman is only a passive medium through which this goal can be attained or as a 'vehicle for the production of sons.'

Manusmriti, written around 5000 years ago, in which we get the specific set of principles and instructions to be followed by all the Hindus in their socio-cultural group is an important source of information regarding the status of women through the ages. According to Manu, the wife is the main source of Dharma, Artha, Kama and so an unmarried man is incapable of discharging his duties as a householder which is called Grihastha ashrama. If the wife of a man died, he would have to follow one of two paths. Either he should retire from life and go to the forest (Vanaprastha) or if he were to remain in the house, he would have to remarry as soon as possible after the cremation of his first wife. However, these rules don't apply to women. A woman who loses her husband has to give up all the pleasures, get her hair shaved, wear white clothes all her life and live on one meal a day for the rest of her life.

Marriage was known as 'samskara, sahadharmini, samyoga'. The smritis hold it as a bond or union till eternity and that both the man and the wife perform their duties according to their prescribed roles and responsibilities. Marriage was a divine union, 'the wife stood by the side of the man in life and through death in the gladder life beyond; she was verily the half of man.'

Regarding the status of women, Manu states:

Woman, be a young or an adult or an old, should not do anything, without the permission of her guardian. Before marriage, girl should be under the father, in youth, under the husband and if the husband dies, under the son; she should never be independent.

The status of a woman was completely controlled by the husband as Manu continues:

Though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure (elsewhere) or devoid of good qualities (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife.

Nineteenth century colonial India witnessed a lot of reformists like Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others who questioned dogma, and orthodox customs. However, when it came to re-examining masculine and feminine values, they took a milder approach. They propagated women's education but also reiterated that such an education should not interfere with the innate and God-given qualities of women. As Sumanta Banerji says in his book *Dangerous Outcast* (1998):

From the particular nature and capacities with which God had endowed women, it is quite clear that the subservience of women is God's will. By becoming strong therefore, women can never become independent...it does not become a woman to be without protection. An unprotected woman will not be respected anywhere.

Contemporary media grudgingly accepts that the world is now a changed place and women are increasingly visible in positions of power and responsibility. Yet, time and again we are told that a woman may be a District collector, a Police officer, a Scientist but she cannot afford to forget that she is essentially and fundamentally a wife and a mother. Thus, masculine and feminine identities are forged through what the society wants them to be. There are role prescriptions which are dictated by our social consciousness for both women and men. If they act according to these role expectations, they are lauded and censured if they don't.

There are contradictions in their respective spheres as well. The woman's role at home is that of a wife and a mother and that of taking care of the domestic work. That of a man is in the public sphere, in the world outside where he earns his livelihood. However, what the woman does at home has no monetary rewards; in fact, this work is not considered work at all whereas for a man his work is productive because it has social visibility and public validation. The woman's work is just an extension of her duties as a wife and mother. Man's earning therefore becomes the primary income and his work is real work.

As Patriarchy defines the woman's role in the family, it also makes quite evident that even in her father's home, a woman is seen as a dependent on her father and brothers. Her role is a transient one in the household because she has to leave for her 'actual' home after marriage. There too, she is treated as an outsider till she gains validation after she bears a child and attains motherhood. The rootedness that she has been looking for all her life, comes only with motherhood.

Some women continue their struggle to fight their individual battles in order to achieve some semblance of freedom. They are invested in redefining their roles and try to escape from patronizing and controlling relationships. They make all efforts to create a legitimate identity of their own.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the writings of Hindi women writers who have been exploring these issues for decades. Hindi fiction was a male dominated domain till the onset of the National movement in the early decades of the twentieth century. As more and more women came forth to take part in the freedom struggle, there was a tremendous growth of women writers and who wanted to be visible in the public domain.

It is imperative to look at the growth and development of the Hindi novel in the twentieth century at this point. In Hindi literature, it was Premchand who first realized the real form and power of the novel. The novels written before his are different in subject matter and purpose but they are similar in a single aspect. They do not possess the depth and distinction of the novel genre. They were focused mainly on entertainment and sometimes on entertainment with moral instruction. In fact, both these trends are connected with the age-old tradition of Indian story telling. Devki Nandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta* (1891) and

Chandrakanta Santati (1896) are some of the most important Hindi novels written before Premchand. In these and other early writings in Hindi literature, the traditional values and age-old role models are upheld. Women were expected to follow the same norms as the ancient scriptures prescribed for them. Monogamous and faithful, patient and fortitudinous, accepting and upholding of all the virtues strongly embodied in Sita and Savitri.

Pariksha Guru (1883) considered to be the first Hindi novel, written by Balakrishana Bhatt becomes an interesting study in so far as it crystallized the ideology of the time. It is the story of a rich merchant's son who goes astray and then brought back on the path of redemption by his faithful and loyal wife, who is portrayed as a modern day Savitri. Just as the mythic Savitri brought her husband Satyawana back from the clutches of Yamaraj, this one is responsible for his regained honour.

During the fifty-three years that lapsed between *Pariksha Guru* and Premchand's *Godan* (1936), a great deal changed in India, in life and in literature. The advent of Premchand signifies the beginning of a new era for the Hindi novel. Like his predecessors and contemporaries, Premchand showed an abiding and sensitive interest in the plight of women. However, his novels present a cherished ideal of the traditional Hindu woman as the role model for his readers.

Dhaniya in *Godan*, although she bears no outward resemblance to either Sita or Savitri, is portrayed as a devoted wife, bearing steadfast, deep and devoted love towards her husband. She also finds her ultimate fulfillment in motherhood. Wives in Premchand's novels are not always illiterate, many are educated and aware women, but most of them accept their roles as wives and mothers as handed out to them by their tradition and religion. Indu in *Rangbhumi*, Sukhda in *Karmabhumi* and Ahalya in *Kayakalpa* are a few examples.

Thus, it is clearly a conservative model that Premchand upholds for women. His ideal women characters are self-effacing, traditional, devoted women who make it possible for their men to achieve success. However, there were writers like Ajneya who in 1951 portrayed a love relationship free of any restrictions and promiscuity in *Nadi ke Dweep* where Rekha, the female protagonist is a strong, independent woman and is also rebellious in her struggles towards love and fulfillment.

In the latter half of the 20th century, we come across many writers, mostly women who have focused on the rewriting and reinvention of a woman's role in their works. As Adrienne Rich mentions in her book *Of Woman born* (1976):

We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it, not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us.

Consequently, in the 1950's and the 1960's, we had women novelists like Krishna Sobti and Usha Priyamvada followed soon after by Mannu Bhandari, Raji Seth, Mridula Garg and others. Most of these writers have focused on themes related to role prescriptions and the women in their novels are caught between conforming to and breaking out of their traditional role definitions.

Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marjaani* (1967) is a novel that prefigured the second wave feminism in Hindi literature and I would, therefore like to begin with that. The last novel that I discuss is Chitra Mudgal's *Awan* (2000) which is a turning around in many ways. The 'free woman' of *Mitro Marjaani* is supposedly independent but in reality, is locked into emotional dependence and cannot break away. In *Awan*, the protagonist manages to get a resolution of her own free will.

When the novel *Mitro Marjaani* was first published in 1967, the readers were shocked by the title of the book and even more so by the bold, outspoken protagonist Mitro. At a time

when chastity, modesty, silence and self-effacement were the model attributes for Indian women, Krishna Sobti's novel came as a shock to the readers. Her female protagonist Mitro transgresses each of these normative behaviors. Not only is Mitro brazenly outspoken, she also talks about her needs in conjugal love.

The novel is about a middle-class Punjabi family with a conservative outlook, consisting of an aged couple and their three sons and daughters-in-law living together in a traditional house with an inner courtyard and small rooms. The eldest daughter-in-law Suhagwanti is sober and mild and the youngest cunning and quarrelsome. Sumitrawanti or Mitro, the second son Sardari's wife is outspoken and aggressive. In a house where women observe purdah and speak in muted tones, her tirades can be heard all over the house. Mitro cannot tolerate any curbs on her freedom and is totally against any kind of injustice. Thus, Mitro refuses to fit into any 'role' that is assigned to her. Mitro's free expression about her unfulfilled desires is the most shocking thing about her. She gives herself importance and also cares about her sexual needs and is not afraid to speak out, notwithstanding her conservative family. Mitro is an exception to the rule. Writing about Mitro, Sobti said in an interview (2013):

She is not merely a daughter-in-law, daughter, sister-in-law and Sardari's wife—she is more than that, something more.

Thus, by transcending all these roles prescribed for her, Mitro establishes her autonomy in her family by positioning herself as equal to a man.

Sobti's earlier novel *Daar se Bhichhudi* (1958) uses a different kind of narrative structure but is very close to *Mitro Marjaani* in its thematic concerns. It is the story of Pasho who has to leave her maternal grandmother's home in order to survive. Her mother's brothers feel threatened by her youth and are afraid she will bring them shame and dishonor like her mother. Their plans to kill her make her run away from home. From here onwards, the novel takes the form of a journey and as she moves from one family to another, from one house to another, she realizes that the woman's role remains the same everywhere.

Sobti offers no solutions, only states in metaphorical terms the conditions of a woman's life. In doing so, she exposes its stark reality. While in *Daar se Bhichhudi*, the repetitive pattern, the cyclical route, all lead to the perpetuation of the age-old divisions and roles, in *Mitro Marjaani*, roles change, compromises made and male authority is eroded. Patriarchal authority rests on force and Sobti's ironical gaze finds that it can be upset by a simple act of not covering one's head or not lowering one's glance.

In later part of the novel, procreation is seen as the primary basis of marriage and perhaps the only justification for it. Suhagwanti, by becoming pregnant conforms to this role to perfection while Mitro is afraid that if she fails to conceive, she may not be accepted as a daughter-in-law. Mitro's veiled reference to her husband's inadequacy and impotence are also a questioning of the role of procreation in married relationships.

Therefore, on the one hand, Mitro is defying her role of a submissive daughter-in-law and voicing her protests, on the other, she is craving to fit the role of the procreative woman and feels threatened when she is unable to do so. Sobti's portrayal of Mitro is full of conflict and contradiction, trying to negate the very 'role' she secretly validates.

Usha Priyamvada is a well-known name in the realm of Hindi fiction. Priyamvada's novels are about the urban middle-class women. Her novels focus on the encounter between the individual and her milieu—a context in which the milieu appears overwhelming.

Usha Priyamvada's novel *Rukogi Nahin Radhika* published in 1968 came out as a revolutionary piece of women's writing as it is about a woman's return to her country and her

home after five years after a failed relationship. She cannot be categorized easily and is temporarily, not playing any of the traditional 'roles' society expects her to. She is a daughter but one who abandoned her role and ran away, she is not a wife yet and as far as her family is concerned, she is too old to be married anyway.

Radhika cannot be 'slotted' easily and that is her predicament as a woman. Akshay, the man who is attracted to her, wants to make a commitment but is hesitant because of her dubious past. Her independent, outgoing personality and individualism are all overshadowed by a sense of uncertainty in the novel. There is a question mark attached to Radhika throughout the narrative and all attempts to 'situate' her properly fail. As in Sobti, Priyamvada's novels have no solutions. The 1960's novels by women writers deal with a lot of questioning and that itself was a marker of their commitment. The pattern continues in Raji Seth whose personal life is an adequate starting point which may reflect some of the experiences which contributed to her distinct writing style. As the elder daughter-in-law of a feudalistic UP family, she must have required much grit to transgress ingratiating female 'roles' with an endurance which shielded the creator even as it fed her.

Raji Seth crosses many boundaries in her novels. Her reflection of women in the spaces of life and relationships struggling through the isolated predicaments of multiple roles which are often conflicting is unparalleled. Her stand is best reflected by a statement that Doris Lessing once made in London while addressing an audience after she won the Nobel prize for literature in 2007, she was asked if she was a feminist: "How can any writer who is a woman not think and write like one?" she said and Raji Seth's works are a poignant testimony to her stand.

Her short story *Apne Viruddh* (1981) is a portrayal of Ruchi whose persistent drive for creativity causes a rift in her relationship with her husband. Shyam too, is an aspiring writer and had professed that he could not ever witness the death of a writer. Ironically, he is unable to accept the creative urge in Ruchi. It is his male ego which denies the woman in his life any outlet for self-expression.

Ruchi's conflicting roles of a 'good wife' and a woman writer trying hard to express her creative urges leads to her dilemma of whether to transgress the boundaries which have been drawn for her. She burns all her poems protesting against herself as it were, so that she may remain safely cocooned in her socially prescribed role acceptable to her husband. Thus, the relationship survives and is maintained 'against herself', an act which justifies the title of the story.

In *Tatsam* (1983), Vasudha's evolution from a pious, ideal widow to a full-fledged wife is free of even the faintest notes of censure or accusation. Vasudha blames no one for the many isolations she has to bear, destined for a woman stepping off the track. A woman can control her destiny by the exercise of her own individual and existential choice and not by the prescribed roles that society assigns to her. Her life can and should be lived on her own terms. The desire to break out of conventional and destined roles to achieve something worthwhile takes her on a journey which is full of complications. Raji Seth does not offer any concrete solutions because her fiction is real and not some fantasy.

An intense and psychological portrayal of the same and many more subtle problems faced by the modern contemporary woman are found in Mannu Bhandari's fiction. She occupies a prominent place in the world of Hindi fiction writers. Spontaneity is the hallmark of her writings. She has published many short story collections like *Trishanku*, *Yahi Sach Hai*, *Main Haar gayi* and *Ek Baar Aur*.

Her novel *Aapka Bunty* (1971) has acquired the status of a classic. Her boy protagonist Bunty is at the center of the novel which explores the fragmented life of a modern woman trying to find her own individuality amidst the multiple roles that the society assigns

her. The interactions with her estranged husband create confusing patterns of behavior for the child. As Bhandari says in *Mere Sakshatkaar* (2016):

Ordinarily the women in our society live under family ties which form the very basis of their evaluation—an ideal daughter, ideal wife, ideal sister or ideal mother: whether transcending these relationships, she could have an independent personality, any desires and ambitions of her own, any dreams of her future life is considered irrelevant...it never occurred to anyone to recognize or accept her as an individual. But whenever she rose to fulfil her personal ambitions, she was questioned...look at Shakun, she is the Principal of a college, but when she decides to remarry, she faces inner conflicts between her role as a mother and as a woman and that's because of Bunty's rejection of her new life. (My translation)

Hindi Fiction of the post-independence decades is not preoccupied with the thematic concerns of equal rights for women, but with the conflicts and struggles of implementing their individual freedom in a society which still operates according to traditional role prescriptions.

In the Nineties decade, Chitra Mudgal's novel *Ek Zamin Apni* (1990) gives us for the first time, a woman protagonist who infuses a new meaning to her role and makes new choices in terms of action. Exercising a choice of this nature means that the woman has to extend herself beyond the home and to interface with the wider environment and the world of 'men'. It means accepting and asserting her legitimacy in the wider world and stepping beyond the stereotypes.

Ankita, the heroine of *Ek Zamin Apni* is searching for a space for herself in this consumerist world. Her search is not limited to exercising her own agency, it is to create a space for herself in the man's world. It is a world where not just men but women are out to 'get' other women. Mudgal does not incriminate only men. She believes that women need to free themselves from their cliched ideas of freedom and liberation. Ankita's search for her 'self' does not end with her divorce from Sudhanshu. It begins from that point.

Another character in the novel is Neeta who is a model, single and independent. When Ankita reprimands her for wearing scanty clothes in a fashion show, she points out that Ankita is the kind of woman who 'sets' roles for women and therefore limits her:

Why are you cursing the modern woman for maligning the social image of women, why curse the men? Why don't you curse the kind of woman who puts a ton of sindoor in her hair after marriage and is proud to be her husband's slave? Leave the illiterate but when fresh graduates do these kinds of things, what would you say? If they have to be independent, they have to get rid of these markers of slavery---sindoor, toe-rings, mangalsutra? (My translation)

Ankita's role-playing is complete with her taking custody of Neeta's infant daughter. Nita's inability to deal with the stigma of giving birth to an illegitimate child reveals that it was easy to live her life as a successful model as long as she could keep her feelings and her physical involvements separate but as soon as she gets emotionally involved with a man and becomes a mother of his child, she cannot cope with the duality of her 'roles' and the life of a single woman and therefore, takes the easy way out.

What we observe here then is that the Hindi woman writer of the nineties and after struggles to create a path in the shifting sands. Regardless of all the guilt and apprehensions that their heroines face, they opt to review their lives and create a choice for themselves. This

choice is to add substantiveness to their lives. In the moment of making this choice, they accept and own up to their potential of being more than just their 'role-playing selves'. Change cannot be thrust from outside or be of an alien value structure. Women must find strength in their womanhood. Women need to look at themselves not as an exception to the feminine norm but the norm itself. For this, the norm needs to be redefined and this is what the contemporary woman writer is trying to do.

Ankita portrays the role of a single mother and breaks the stereotyped closure of the romance novels which end with a happy marriage. By giving a conclusion to the heroine moving on to a journey of self-exploration, Chitra Mudgal challenged the conventional narratives of both the contemporary world and the genre itself.

Chitra Mudgal's next novel *Awan*, published ten years after her first in the year 2000, takes this ideology forward in more ways than one. *Awan* or the Kiln takes up multifarious thematic concerns, politics, class struggle, women's movement, problems of youth. The heroine Namita clashes with three ideologies—the socialist, the capitalist and the humanist. She goes through a series of roles in the novel. She plays the 'son' her parents would have preferred; she plays the daughter who is disillusioned by her father-figure Anna Saheb and she plays the wife and would-be mother that Sanjay Kanai saw in her. Each one of these characters want to use Namita for their own purpose.

The real triumph of the novel is at the end. Namita wants to bring up Sunanda's child and stay with Kishori Bai. She refuses to fit in any of the slots that society has created for her but creates her own. She has 'matured' in the 'kiln' of life. Mudgal has placed her protagonist above all the 'roles' of a woman. If *Ek Zamin Apni* was a tentative step towards self-reliance, *Awan* is a full-throated laughter at the vagaries of the life of a woman. *Awan* shows that a woman can chart the course of her own life and succeed.

Chitra Mudgal's novel makes an attempt to reassert traditional values about a woman's biology being her destiny but motherhood is seen as a redeeming factor in her life of isolation. The heroine of Mudgal's earlier novel *Ek Zamin Apni* lives outside marriage enabling the author to create a narrative which functions as a critique of the ideological foundation upon which the narratives of courtship and marriage have been erected.

That women should choose to live outside patriarchal arrangements (as shown in the conclusions of Mudgal's two novels) is of course deeply threatening to those who believed such arrangements to be essential to the stability of the social order.

But the threat is compounded if the women who abstain from marriage are articulate, educated and middle-class. These novels show how unmarried motherhood represents a move for the better for the heroines who become more assertive, emotionally aware and responsive to other people.

They interestingly update earlier literary representations and narrativize a dream of motherhood in which its pleasures are possible with the minimum of sex, the complications of men and the burdens of marriage. (Millett, 1970)

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