

# **Research Plan Proposal**

**Reconstruction of Women's Identity in Kamala  
Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* and Krishna Sobti's  
*To Hell With You Mitro!***



**For Registration to the Degree of  
Masters of Philosophy**

**IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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## **Research Problem**

Indian English literature originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under colonial rule. In recent years, it has attracted widespread interest both in India and abroad. It is now recognized that Indian English literature is not only part of Commonwealth literature but also occupies a great significance in World literature.

The emergence of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan and Raja Rao was the most remarkable event in the realm of Indian English fiction. The writing of these novelists moved the Indian writing in English in the right direction. The first generation male writers of Indian fiction in English reflected the contemporary social practices and portrayed women in their traditional subservient roles. The women's perspective on the world gradually emerged with the arrival of women writers on the scene and this prompted the male writers to rethink and redefine their construction of female identity.

Indian women novelists too have given a new dimension to Indian literature in English. Indian women's writing began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with poets such as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who modeled their work on the Romantic tradition of the West. Thereafter, the Modernist idiom including the liberal and forward-looking values (that were more or less also the values of India's freedom struggle) and feminist themes were ushered in by authors like Nayantara.Sahgal, Rama Mehta, Kamala Das and many more. Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Krishna Sobti, on the other hand, captured the spirit of Indian culture and its traditional values. Most of these writers are known for their unconventional views and bold writing as reflected in their novels. Since then, the enduring, self-sacrificing image of a woman of the old world has been replaced by the independent woman who is in control of herself and her life.

In my dissertation, I propose to compare one novel each by Kamala Markandaya and Krishna Sobti (*A Silence of Desire* and *To Hell With You Mitro!*, respectively) and discuss the literary construction of an evolving womanhood in India - since the 1940s - and the factors impinging upon it, eg. cultural diversity, similarities and/or differences in family structure, the role of patriarchy, etc. Further, I would examine the women protagonists and other characters' relationship with land and the struggles which they pass through and eventually empower themselves in the process thereby reconstructing their selfhood and redefining their identity.

The chief questions that I would thus investigate are : how Markandaya and Sobti present an upheaval and turmoil in the lives of their women characters in a middle class Indian society; how both have presented age-old values and culture through their women characters, reworked the image of the 'New Woman' and her quest for identity and combined it with the issue of female desire. Both the novels, that would be taken up for analysis, have women at the centre of action who are brave and bold and stand up against the prevalent gender-based norms to seek an independent identity. Some additional dimensions would include examining how the women characters rise above the given constructs of silence and subversion; their sense of self- concept and their conception of a new identity. I would also focus on their ways of coping; their inner strength and determination, resolve and resilience. I would especially take into consideration Sobti's style and technique (e.g: her use of the interior monologue in her writings) to examine how women's silence can also stand for rebellion, not necessarily for passivity and/or submission. In testing my hypothesis, I would make a detailed study of the primary texts with reference to secondary sources by various literary and sociological critics. I also plan to include interviews of the two writers.

## **Definition of Terms:**

**New Woman:** The concept of New Woman was a feminist ideal that emerged in the late 19th century in the West and has had a profound influence on feminism well into the twentieth century. The term 'New Woman' was popularized by the American writer, Henry James for referring to the woman who pushed the limits prescribed by a male-dominated society. Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* is one of the earliest examples . giving us a glimpse of such a woman. The post-Independent Indian woman novelist too talks about the New Woman in terms of the West's construction but sets her story largely in the Indian context and portrays a woman who seeks self-fulfillment through self-expression and thus fashions a new identity for her self.

**Cultural clash:** A conflict arising from the interaction of people with different cultural values; a misunderstanding and disagreement between cultural events, etc.

**Women's oppression:** Is the injustice and inequitable use of authority, law or physical force to prevent women from being free or equal. The women were thus kept down in a social sense.

**Self-concept:** It is a term used to describe a person's conception and expression of their individuality. Self-Identity is related to self image, self-esteem, the capacity for self-reflection and an awareness of the self

**Patriarchy:** Patriarchy is a social system in which the male acts as the primary authority figure, central to social organization, and also holds authority over women, children and property. The term implies the institution of male rules and privileges and entails female subordination.

## **Background**

The earliest Indian women writers, in the 18th century, wrote about a woman's perception and experiences within the enclosed domestic arena. The Indian society, however, gave priority to the worth of the male experience. It was assumed that the male authors' works would get more priority and acceptance in society. Women writers' literary contribution was, therefore, undervalued because of patriarchal assumptions.

In the nineteenth century, more and more women actively participated in India's nationalist movement against the British rule which also led to the (re)emergence of women's literature. Their works mainly concentrated on the country's freedom struggle. Over the years, the world of feminist ideology began to influence Indian literature as well so much so that in the twentieth century, women's writing was considered a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statement.

The last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writing. Works by contemporary women writers such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Kiran Desai, as well as regional writers like Krishna Sobti, Ismat Chughtai, Mahashweta Devi, Amrita Pritam and many more deal effectively and sensitively with taboos that have existed in society since long as well as issues relevant to the time. These writers describe the world of today's woman and her life experiences with stunning frankness; their

works give us a glimpse of the unexplored female psyche, the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife in a dead marriage, and the like.

Writers such as Krishna Sobti and Kamala Markandaya reflect the 'New Woman' who has realized that she is not helpless and not dependent on others anymore. She is an equal partner in a marriage for she has also become a direct money earner and she is not merely confined to house work. Both Sobti and Kamala portray strong women characters who are prepared to meet the challenges of life, come what may. They have explored female subjectivity and made use of themes that range from childhood to womanhood.

Kamala Markandaya belonged to that pioneering group of Indian women writers who made their mark not just through their subject matter, but also through their fluid, polished literary style of writing. A post Independence writer, Markandaya took upon herself the initiative to transform the traditional woman into a 'new' woman in her literary works. She has shown her readers the face of an evolved and empowered woman who seeks fulfillment through self-expression. Her novels mirror a new awareness of the fulfillment of her women characters' sense of identity, without compromising on their traditional individuality in a postcolonial space. The women in her novels are gifted with depth and the basic principles of thinking and are also deeply aware of their value system. These women survive out of hardship and discover their identity, sometimes living inside the norms of society and sometimes even escaping it.

For them, living is more important. Markandaya thus portrays the image of liberated women of modern India through the life and times of her women protagonists.

In *A Silence of Desire*, Markandaya portrays the assault of Western skepticism on the Hindu faith of Sarojini, the female protagonist. The novel unfolds a family drama by studying the husband-wife relationship. It reveals how men and women torment themselves and each other by silence on many occasions when they actually require an unburdening of their hearts by giving vent to their feelings. The novel stresses mainly the internal conflicts of Sarojini and is an imaginative commentary on the psychological maladjustment of a middle-class woman, deeply religious and traditionalist. The story thus focusses on the strong bond of love and dedication between the members of a family and their willingness to make things work amongst them.

Krishna Sobti's contribution to Indian literature crosses the boundaries of culture. Her innovative use of language and technique, and refreshing delineation of strong women characters opened new vistas in Hindi literature. Her style and idiom impart an authentic touch to the themes and situations she portrays. The essence of her creativity lies in her honesty and eagerness to reach the truth and to look *into* things, rather than *at* them. She guards her freedom as a writer and as an individual zealously. Her writing covers a vast range of issues, including the Partition, upheaval and turmoil in the Indian

society, man-woman relationships, feudalism and the dissolution of human values.

Sobti's *To Hell With You Mitro!* is the story of Sumitravanti (Mitro), the unstoppable middle daughter-in-law of the Gurudas household. Her courage is apparent not only in the audacity with which she taunts a closed society, but also in her ability to change her own attitude when she feels it necessary. Perhaps, it is the basic honesty of her nature that allows her to face herself and all that she has believed in as unflinchingly as she faces her husband's violent wrath and mother-in-law's awed remonstrations. Through Mitro, Sobti has thus portrayed a gutsy, indomitable woman who likes to live life on her own terms.



## Review of Published Literature

Anita Myles in her book titled *Feminism and Post Modern Indian Women Novelist in English* has shown the rise as well as the creative release of feminine sensibility in the literature of modern Indian renaissance. She discusses how women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya mirror a new awareness of fulfillment of female identity without losing individuality. In Markandaya's *Two Virgins*, for example, Lalitha - the protagonist - is a woman who has survived the hardships of life and discovered her own identity by both following and rejecting societal norms.

Jasbir Jain focusses in *Women's Writing: Text and Context* on how women's writing has slowly come into its own for several reasons. She draws our attention to both the manifestation of female sensibility, feminine reality as well as to its significance as a means of bringing about an awareness of this reality. After Independence, women's writing has taken a steady growth. The 'new' woman, Jain discusses, has learned to express the untold narrative of being a woman. It is in this context that she analyses Krishna Sobti's bold women protagonists in her novels. In *Mitro Marjani*, we have the portrayal of a very powerful strong woman character who embodies female desire and elemental sexual expression. Sobti unabashedly discusses an extra-marital relationship which is perceived negatively by the family members in the novel.

Leela Dube discusses the construction of gender in *On The Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India*. She examines the

process of socialization of a Hindu girl through rituals and ceremonies whereby they are trapped in repressive institution such as child marriage, dowry, and prohibition on women's education. She further explores the gender-based discrimination created and propagated by society and which has been taken up as a theme by both Markandaya and Sobti in their writings.

Bijay Kumar Das in *Postmodern Indian English Literature* has discussed the developments in Indian English fiction and its characteristics. He feels that the 'locale' has shifted from the village to the metropolis of the country and then abroad and that in the post 1980s, love, sex and marriage or the failure of it, were some of the leading themes in Indian English novels.

S.K. Khan in *Studies in Indian Women Writing in English* attempts to study the fate of Indian women in a conventional and - at the same time - a fast developing society as well as to determine the extent to which modernity has triumphed over the constraints imposed by traditions or prejudices. In other words, Khan describes how strong have been women through chaos and crises. The book also tries to capture the mood of women writers who have emerged as a force to reckon with and have made their mark in the world of letters.

## **Research Methodology**

My research methodology would consist of close reading and analysis of primary sources supported by a significant number of critical writings which deal with the subjects of self, identity and women's issues. My approach would be interdisciplinary and I plan to consult books on Sociology and History as well. To make my interpretations more significant and relevant, I would work within the specific guidelines of critical theories. My primary attempt would be to study the various relationships that exist in the novels of and Kamala Markandaya and Krishna Sobti. I would also focus on the identity of the two writers' women protagonists and their journey from silent acceptance to bold resistance. My study would thus examine the universal sufferings of women and how each of their experiences feeds into their quest for redefining their identity.

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