

**GENDER AND CASTE IN THE ANGLOPHONE-INDIAN NOVELS
OF ARUNDHATI ROY AND GITHA HARIHARAN.
FEMINIST ISSUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**

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The current postmodern calling into question of the existence of master-narratives which attempt to represent unquestionable universal Truths has entailed emergence of small personal narrations which provide readers with new perspectives opened up by other previously silenced subject positions. During the last few decades, there have been numerous attempts to recover subaltern memories that had been traumatically suppressed or apparently forgotten. This is the case of many post-colonial women writers who fill their books with personal stories foregrounding the political importance that giving voice to those previously silenced has for their own past and present historical context.

In the belief that literature is not an isolated discipline but closely related to other social activities, Dr. Antonia Navarro-Tejero provides us with a lucid study of a complexity of feminist issues in contemporary India through the detailed analysis of two well-known Anglophone-Indian novels. In her book *Gender and Caste in the Anglophone-Indian Novels of Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan. Feminist Issues in Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Navarro-Tejero focuses on the analysis of Roy's *God of Small Things* and Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* in order to explore the different ways in which the subaltern comes to be subjugated in contemporary India. While Hariharan's novel deals with the oppression of women of the upper castes in an urban setting, Roy portrays the hypocritical permanence of an invisible caste system in a supposedly casteless rural Christian community

which marginalises those characters who try to break with long-standing gender and caste taboos. Thus, by drawing an exhaustive and well-argued comparison of these two novels, Navarro-Tejero's excellent choice of novels allows her to offer a remarkably wide vision of the complexity of the female experience in post-colonial India which helps to break the traditional stereotypes that for so long have simplified the Western perspectives on female oppression in the East, more concretely, in the Indian subcontinent.

The opening chapter of the book provides the reader with a general overview of the historical evolution of gender theory in India. It carefully relates the historical, social and political context with the most prominent literary productions in every period. From the general introduction, the author moves to concrete aspects of Indian literary composition and ends the chapter with an introduction to the main aspects of the two novels to be analysed in more detail in the following chapters. Navarro-Tejero illuminates the reader with her broad knowledge of female Indian writing and at some points in this chapter she interestingly compares the political and literary struggle of women in India with that of their Western counterparts. For instance, in note 16, she reveals that women's role of self-abnegating mothers, daughters and sisters is not an exclusively Indian issue, as Western feminists such as Virginia Woolf had already tackled the subject in *A Room of One's Own* where she described the same function imposed on English women of her time. For all the interesting feminist analysis of the complex representation of the female condition in Anglophone Indian literature, I would have welcomed a more extensive treatment of the feminist struggle in the East as compared with that of the West, since the author proves to be familiar with the issue and could have done a very interesting cross-cultural study by connecting similar ideological discourses at work in the oppression of women in both Eastern and Western societies carried out under the apparent disguise of different cultural peculiarities.

Driven by the need to tell personal stories that have always been marginalised in favour of official versions of history and society offered exclusively by those groups in power, many contemporary post-colonial women writers have made use of the autobiography or bildungsroman as the most appropriate literary genres for the expression of the construction of a new identity which had been previously erased. These writers provide what Tress has labelled "counter-memories" of the past (1991: 69), and it has been argued that this recovery of repressed and obligatorily forgotten memories has undeniable importance as it is above all an act of survival for the subaltern (Felman 1993: 13). Both Hariharan and Roy invariably do this, which is why, as early as in the second chapter of her book, Navarro-Tejero moves on to analyse the unconventional use of the Western form of the Bildungsroman by the Indian women writers as a clever way of exposing the clash between the psychological and social development of female subjectivity. Analysing in detail the

three stages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, Navarro-Tejero draws a rigorous comparison with examples from the two novels that puts to the test the social constrictions that subjugate the development of female subjectivity to the patriarchal social norm.

The three following chapters are devoted to the main forms of oppression for women in India: the family, religion and the state. In Chapter 3, the author focuses on the stories of discontent of the female characters in both novels within the family, how women are used for economic transactions in the patriarchal model of the family and how they are often physically and psychologically abused by the male figures, no matter the caste, the level of education or the religious community they belong to. The ideology that supports the vision of women as second class citizens and thus justifies their submission to patriarchal roles is often based on traditional religious myths taken mainly from the Hindu culture. Navarro-Tejero argues that both Roy and Hariharan propose in their novels a revision of these myths, which they do not consider to be male chauvinist *per se*. The author mentions other mythological narratives with powerful female heroines which have been suppressed, and proves how most of the myths have been interpreted and manipulated by male Brahmins in order to maintain the privileges of their own group. That is why the apparently privileged upper-class Brahmin women are also shown to be sexually, emotionally and psychologically repressed in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, and in *The God of Small Things* Roy ironically portrays the extreme suffering of a Christian woman from the moment she decides to break the boundaries of class, religion and the apparently invisible caste system of the Syrian Christian community. Navarro-Tejero makes an exhaustive comparison of the two novels in order to show the pervasive female oppression across all the different communities and how the traditional patriarchal manipulation of Hindu myths is also present in other religious communities. This cross-cultural analysis allows Navarro-Tejero to offer the reader a broad vision of the female condition in Indian culture which goes beyond the stereotype of the voiceless low-caste Hindu woman. Nevertheless, the comparison of Hindu and Christian communities in India could also have been extended to include the myths found in the Christian religion not only in India but also in the Western world and thus offer an analysis of world-wide scope. In Chapter 5, the last one devoted to the specific forms of female oppression, the author focuses on the State, which helps to maintain institutional forms of oppression for the marginal groups, not only women, but also children and the Dalits. Navarro-Tejero manages again to widen the scope of her analysis to different levels of social oppression through several passages from the two novels in which institutional oppression is present both in the Brahminical culture and in the communities ruled by a supposedly communist ideology.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the final reconciliation of male and female traditional cultural antagonisms that both novels provide and that Navarro-Tejero analyses in Chapter 6. She first tackles the issue of the difficulties that manless women (widows or single women) have to face in modern India and how Roy and Hariharan defend the dignity of these women and the need to develop an independent female identity which should not rely on the presence of a male figure for its realization. Roy and Hariharan also emphasize the difficulties a psychological reconciliation with the maternal involves, as mothers in their novels represent not only love, but also oppression for their daughters, since they have traditionally been associated with the preservation of the status quo, based on the patriarchal norm (San Juan 2002: 61). After this reconciliation has healed wounds born by female characters of the two generations, Navarro-Tejero defends the androgynous alternative as the solution proposed by these novelists, the union of masculine and feminine values which no longer oppress any individual. This androgynous ideal is present in both the form and the content of the novels, and has political implications for the representation of the national interests as reflected in them; in this sense the author highlights the importance of the memory of individuals who have historically been relegated to silence, and the conventions of this kind of recovered-memory-driven fiction which are present in these two novels in particular and the female post-colonial fiction in general. The book ends with strong emphasis on the political dimension of these personal stories, as, in Navarro-Tejero's words, "the quest for the self becomes a quest for a nation, a nation to be changed, rules to be revised and myths to be retold" (2005: 143).

Navarro-Tejero takes up again the main points in the book to draw her final conclusion in the clearly written final remarks of the book, which is a real eye-opener on the complexity of the female subjectivity in the different "Indias" that are to be found in the South Asian subcontinent. This carefully structured and reader-friendly book is a rewarding read not only for scholars and students involved in the analysis of feminist issues in post-colonial India, but also for anyone interested in the literary productions and cultural expressions of this fascinating country, who will surely enrich their knowledge of these issues by this relevant contribution.

Works cited

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