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## **New Women in India: Study of Women's Position in Post Colonial Indian Writing through Analysis of Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop***

**Priyanka Mahajan**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Lovely Professional University  
Phagwara, Punjab  
&

**Dr. Jaideep Randhawa**

Department of English,  
Lovely Professional University  
Phagwara, Punjab

### **Abstract:**

The present paper explores the position of woman in Indian society in its pre and post independence era and studies how a concept of 'new woman' has evolved as a by-product of feminism. This new woman is a hybrid of western influences and her native culture. No wonder, women in India have been occupied in varied forms of literary activities for centuries but their writings have always been undervalued because of the sway of culture. A number of post-colonial modern women writers have distinguished themselves by bringing the unheard voices to forefront. Rupa Bajwa India's new literary find, in her debut novel *The Sari Shop* has personified her vision of women empowerment through depiction of new women. The purpose of this study is to underline the categories and attributes of new women as portrayed by Bajwa in this celebrated work.

**Keywords: New woman, Post Colonial, Cultural influence, Empowerment.**

### **Introduction**

The present paper is an attempt to underline the position of woman in Indian society and analyze how feministic wave entered and grew in Indian Writing in English and gave birth to the concept of 'new woman'. The position of Indian woman has been totally different from those of the West. Indian woman was subjugated since ages. She was under the authority of man. The status of Indian woman in the medieval period (8th to 18th century) had been decided by the patriarchal set up and nobody ever dared to challenge it. This period was believed to be the 'dark age' for them. During the Gupta period, the status of woman was very low as she was denied the property rights and education and her duty was to serve her husband in her life till death and even after death. The women were denied subsistence separately from her husband even in "The Laws of Manu" that is considered as the major set of commandments for Hindus. In Indian

patriarchal society, a husband was considered God, however, cruel and indifferent he may be. She had been taught since her childhood that she had to obey her husband and family were not offered any chance to think about her identity.

Different factors were responsible for woman subjugation. They could be categorized as social, cultural, traditional, and so on. Culture and society had imposed many kinds of norms on her and she was supposed to follow them religiously, she did not have the right to cross the “Laxaman Rekha”. Attacks from the distant religions and cultures worsened the women’s condition. The Muslim assailants brought with them their own traditions and customs. Now families felt unhappy and burdened on the birth of a girl child as they believed, a girl child would require additional care as she has to be protected from the eyes of intruders. Indian people started craving for a boy child as he would not require overprotection instead will be support the family as an earning hand. Thus, an unkind environment developed around woman giving rise to the wicked social & religious practices like “Child Marriage”, "Sati", “Jauhar” and constraints on providing education to girls.

Other religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity when compared to Hinduism, were a bit moderate. Women in these societies enjoyed far more freedom, an easy access to education. Emperor Ashoka in his regime allowed the women to participate in spiritual sermons. Hiuen Tsang states “Rajyashri, the sister of Harshavardhana was a distinguished scholar of her time” (25).

### **Start of Women's Movement in Colonial Era**

The continuing sufferings of women, the harsh struggle for the parity in pay and the ongoing fights for the rights to use birth control measures are main noticeable features of the gender discrimination that has existed in Indian society and that woman had to fight for. The women’s movement in India began in the 1920s, building on the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movement. This movement progressed during the period of high chauvinism and the freedom struggle for freedom, both of which shaped its form. The year 1930 is considered as a transitional point in the history of Indian feminism as women’s place in the family was readily understood and acknowledged. It was evident in larger involvement of women in the freedom movement. About feminism in India, Suma Chitnis (1951) rightly opines thus “the most distinctive feature of this movement was that it was initiated by man. It was only towards the end of the century the women joined the fray...” (Kenyan Review Vol. VIII). Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindernath Tagore, Annie Besant, and others supported the role of women. Women were allowed voting rights in certain groups. A rise could be seen in the number of schools and colleges for women

### **Indian English Fiction of Colonial Era**

For the first time in India, the teaching and learning of English was introduced during colonial regime. This led to the birth of Indian English fiction. In last few years, “it has attracted widespread interest both in India and abroad” (Dhawan 52). The first Indian novel *Rajmohan's Wife* was written by Bankim Chandra Chatterji. This novel was serialized as *Wife in the Calcutta Weekly The Indian Field* in 1864 and was published in the book form only in the 1930s. *Rajmohan's Wife* is about the effects of bad marriage on women. The suffering of a middle class housewife Matangini caused by her husband Rajmohan forms the subject of the novel. This was the time of social reform and it must be noted that the first Indian novel is not a historical romance but a social novel. *Rajmohan's Wife* proved as a trend setter. Since its publication, a considerable number of writers have presented the Indian woman as selfless beings performing the roles of a daughter, wife and a mother being muted by the patriarchal set up around:

R.K. Narayan, born in an orthodox Hindu society, depicted the predicament of women locked up within the confines of an orthodox society which has nothing to offer her except material refuge. In this society a woman has nothing of her own except her body. *The Dark Room* written and published in 1938 is a compassionate depiction of sufferings of women. It demonstrates the fact how significant women's responsibilities are there in family and in social life. “What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything that she has is her father's, husband's, or her son's” (*Dark Room* 88). This helps us to understand the status of women depicted in his novels. The authors like Bhabani Bhattacharaya, Kamla Markandaya and Manohar Malgaonkar have also projected Indian woman as tolerant, submissive, innocuous and easily satisfied with her lot.

Women's movement of colonial period was different from that of the West as depicted by two Indian novelists Bankim Chandra Chatterji and R. K. Narayana. Where in the West, the women was guided by the notion of ‘Self’, Indian feminism in colonial era was inspired by the historical circumstances and values.

### **Impact of Western Feminism on Post Colonial Indian Fictions**

Major changes took place in the post -colonial India; the rise of the middle class in India brought new values. With the growth of software and Information technologies in India, the companies started recruiting women force and this resulted into the refashioning of family ideals. V. Rainakrishna Rao exhibited his dislike towards the "sheer grasping suffragette", lamenting the loss of ideal images of Sita and Savitri. The Western feminists greatly influenced the women of the East and contributed a lot to the emergence of New Woman in India. The democratic liberal ideas of Marry Wollstonecraft and J.S. Mill had already brought the concept of “woman empowerment.” *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by the leading 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist Virginia Woolf laid emphasis on the necessity of releasing the women from the control of patriarchal domination. Woolf discusses how a woman writer seeks within herself "the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber," inevitably colliding against her own sexuality to

confront "something about the body, about the passions (Woolf 20). The feminists such as Simon de Beauvoir who wrote *The Second Sex* (1949) observed that men fundamentally oppress women and treating them as 'Other'. Man occupies the role of the subject and woman is the object to be suppressed by the subject, man. Western education and liberal political ideas gave power to women to demand rights and equal status in the society.

One can say that Post colonial period or Post independence period witnessed a radical change in the representation of women in Indian writing in English. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Susan Viswanathan and Arundati Roy have given us new women protagonists, who are educated, modern and question the traditional customs and traditions. Bishun Kumar (2011) in "Contemporary Feministic Echoes in Anand's Novels" states that

In Anand's novels, features of modernity begin with Sohini's resistance against her physical exploitation in *Untouchable* and proceeds to Leila's revolt against her sexual harassment in *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Maya revolts against the conventional system of arranged marriages... (64)

Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* (1938) is an excellent study of massive transformation brought by the Gandhian movement in thirties, into the lives of the Indian woman. The dual personification of woman as the devi and the dasi that has ruled the mindset of patriarchy since ages, also led to the emergence of the woman. The cold images of omnipresent & supreme goddess Kenchamma and the Pariah Rachanana's wife symbolically represent the new women who resist conventions and escort the war of independence.

With the passage of time, most of the women writers of post colonial period including Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Geeta Hariharan and Mahasweta Devi shifted their emphasis from the away from long-established picture of enduring, selfless women who were defined only in terms of their sufferings towards the depiction of inconsistent female characters struggling for their identity. These novelists passionately followed the models of the Western women writers, set their goals to spread the ideal of women empowerment.

Years after the 1960s marked a transitional phase in the history of Indian fiction in English as it like its western equal, shifted its emphasis from communal towards the personal sphere. The use of nuclear armaments in World War-II caused mass devastation. Turbulence and nervousness prevailed all over the world. Such chaotic state of affairs resulted in mental conflicts and decline of ethical values. Consequently, human beings started losing peace and harmony. The psycho-analytical theories of self, devaluation of self, neurosis, sexual repression and nausea given by Dr Karen Horney in *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950) and Sigmund Freud in "Life and Work of Sigmund Freud" (1953-1957), published in three volumes, impacted greatly on the post-colonial writers such as Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee, Kamala Dass,

Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, Shobha De and Rupa Bajwa etc. as they explore the psychological insight into the subtleties of the human mind and the society.

### **New Woman in India: A Concept and Reality**

The birth of “new woman” in India is a reality as the concept and position of womanhood has changed in the modern context. Sharad Srivastava in his book “The New Woman in Indian English Fiction” (2001) writes:

A new woman is ‘new’ if her basic concerns are deeper than merely seeking equality with men, asserting her own personality and insisting upon her rights as a woman and as an equal being. (97)

Attitudinal shift can be seen in the woman who longer shies away from taking the initiatives. This new woman is an assimilation of western influences as well as her native culture. She is a hybrid who despite of all kinds of upheavals, is able to strike a balance among diverse spheres of her life.

The cultural influences of patriarchy have always exerted serious influence on women’s writings. One can say that women’s works have been underestimated because of the cultural mindset about the better appeal of men’s experiences. One finds a small number of noteworthy names in the domain of women’s writings because any work or discourse which stepped outside the standard norms or tried to challenge the well established male sovereignty of authority was bound to be labeled as a insignificant work. But there are a number of women writers who have distinguished themselves steadily in this male dominated terrain. They have refused to follow street and state censors and succeeded in bringing unheard voices to the forefront. The post-colonial modern Indian novelists depict a “new woman” in their fiction. Their new women are the product of modern mercantile society, one who revolts against the traditional social set up. They are more assertive, more liberated in their views and more active in accepting all the challenges of life like men. There is a consistent growth in her behavior and attitude. This evolving new image of women has created a crisis in family and society and has shaken the foundations of age-old institutions like marriage and motherhood. A modern woman is career-oriented because she knows that it is her economic dependence which empowers a male to dominate his wife and subject her to physical and mental torture.

### **Attributes of New Women: an analysis of Rupa Bajwa's The Sari Shop**

Rupa Bajwa, India’s new literary find created commotion in the realm of contemporary Indian-English fiction with the appearance of her debut novel, *The Sari House* (2004). Born in Amritsar, Punjab in a Sikh family, she started her writing career as a book reviewer and columnist in various famous publishing concerns such as ‘The Telegraph’, ‘The Tribune’ and

'India Today'. She writes immense reviews and articles. Bajwa's next novel *Tell Me a Story* published in April 2012 was also received with huge response

The novel *The Sari Shop*, taken up for this present study, is an outcome of her microscopic observation of her hometown. One finds in it a straightforward projection of class dynamics prevailing in Indian society, mortifying control of wealth, the bare and tedious subsistence of lower middle class people and their discontented life in post independence era. Because of unpretentious portrayal of the events and the characters of her hometown, the novel caught so much of attention among critics and reviewers. Pathak (2015) rightly states that

Rupa Bajwa in her debut novel *The Sari Shop* presents two diverse contradictory faces/ aspects of India. It projects, on one side, the rich and epicurean India and contrasts it with the poor, exploited and deprived stereotyped characters. (International Journal of Linguistics and Literature 1)

Although Bajwa faced a bit of censure yet she won an international acclaim for her narrative. She was honored with a number of prestigious literary awards such as Grinzane Cavour Award 2005, the Commonwealth Award 2005 and India's Sahitya Akademi Award 2006. The novel was also listed for the Orange prize for fiction in 2004. It has also translated into several languages such as French (*Le vendeur de saris*), Dutch (*De Sariwinkel*) and Serbian (*Prodavnica sarija*).

The trend towards social change encouraged women to initiate women's movement in the twentieth century with a new energy. No wonder, women were inspired to enter into business and offices for jobs. The middle class women came ahead and explored career opportunities in the offices, schools and colleges. By bringing women into fiction, feminist literature and feminist criticism has positively contributed towards the growth of woman. Today, even the political parties are using it as a means to win faith and confidence of citizens. Feeling the spirit of this social change, Bajwa has taken up women as the subject matter of her very first novel *The Sari House*, depicting their varied experiences from hypocrisy of empowered ladies to plight and traumatic experiences of underprivileged women. *The Sari House* represents the contemporary Indian middle-class struggle. Her skill in making psychological exploration of subconscious and unconscious levels of her women's psyche remains matchless. The novel offers a representation of class discrimination through its characters and skillfully replicates the class divergence, difference of opinion between educated and wealthy segments of society. In an interview Rupa Bajwa stated thus:

I wrote about my people, about the world I grew up in. I wrote in response of my own society; even though I do believe that human nature remain essentially the same everywhere. And, so being acknowledge by people from this society is definitely important and satisfying. (3)

The streets of the holy city of Amritsar build the background of the novel. "The bazaars of Amritsar were busy places where, every day, throughout the year, transactions were made, prices were bargained over, shops were opened in the morning and shut in the evenings" (Bajwa, *The Sari Shop* 2).

The main action of the story takes place in the Sevak Sari House which is an attraction and purpose of visit for women of all types. It is a prominent place where women assemble to buy new saris. This place is also a replica of trend, style, social influence and economic background. It is Ramchand's powerful imagination which Bajwa has cashed in creating her female world. In fact, it is through his eye, we get to know about the images of different women, their problems, their hypocrisies, sophistry, their boredom, unresponsiveness and their vanities.

Just as there is a rich assortment of sarees in Sevak Sari Shop, same can be said of women presented in this novel. A gallery of female characters, all distinct and apart in style, language, mannerism and ideology have been presented in it. In one way or other, they have been presented as the products and victims of the commercial world. One group of women presented in the novel includes well educated and esteemed women. These women lead a life of empowerment, personal preferences and self-determination represented by Rina Kapoor, Mrs. Sachdev, Mrs. Bhandari and Mrs. Gupta etc. Post feminists are an appropriate term that can be used for them. Within this category, there are further subgroups- one is of domestic housewives of rich & affluent families and other is of learned working women. What brings them together under the umbrella of new women is that they are ruled by shopping culture, style, trend, hybridism and absurdity. To look modern and updated as per the needs of society, most of them lay a special importance to their female physique.

Rina Kapoor, the daughter of a known business family is at the top of list of new women presented by Rupa Bajwa in this novel. She leads a lavish life and is away from any kind of economic worries. She is very choosy about everything: "I was thinking I must be very careful while buying both clothes and jewelry. I don't want the usual conventional bridal trousseau. I want a collection that is mix of traditional and contemporary styles" (67). She wants to pay due regard to her traditional values but at the same time also desires to assume a modern style. "Mother, there are other things in the world besides money. You know, this is a big world, and out there, there are people who are considered very high status because of their learning, because of the work they have done" (91).

Rina has done masters in English Literature. Certainly, she is special from other girls around her. "I like to read, I like to explore new things, I like to take every day of life as a new experience" (81). She is a 'new woman' in the sense that she is progressive, open minded and socially conscious. Her strength lies in her spirit of combat and her enthusiasm for education. This post graduate girl with the power of her determination and reason revolts against the

traditional patriarchy and persuades her industrialist father for marriage to a man of her choice. When her father learns that she is in love with an army officer, he is not happy and says: “marry a rich man and go the kitty parties” (82). She doesn’t see her life limited only to wealth and material comforts rather loves to think and do out of box. She believes thus: “Look at the family I belong to, but that is not at all it is not the end of the road for me” (81). After her marriage, she makes her mind to establish her identity as a novelist. She plans to write about the struggle of lower class workers for their existence. Ramchand, “trembling sari-wala standing by the security guards and had heard him lie about being invited by her to the party” (186) is the inspiration behind her work. Few days after her wedding, Rina visits Sewak Sari shop to know more about Ramchand’s life and his struggles. Rina’s interactions with Ramchand depict the growth of new woman of Bajwa as these conversations help her a lot in drawing a pen portrait of her protagonist 'Sitaram' and preparing the first draft of her novel while she is still on her honeymoon. Though completely ridiculous and full of odd characters and supernatural effects, Rina's novel is well designed and wins admirable reviews. But ironically Bajwa attributes the major part of Reena’s achievement to her rich economic background when she writes:

If she had been a plain, unmarried girl from an ordinary family, it wouldn’t really have much news in Amritsar...But since Rina was recently married, rich, glossy and permed, and wanted to draw the attention of the cream of Amritsar, she did.  
(186)

Mrs. Sachdev is the Head of the English department in a local college “terribly knowledgeable and well read” (26). She also writes columns for Sunday Tribune. She is confident, socially well connected and enjoys self-sufficiency. She motivates and admires Rina for her daring decision of marrying into a service class family. Mrs. Gupta, Mrs. Sandhu, Mrs. Kapoor and Mrs. Bhandari also represent new women of Rupa Bajwa. Most of them in this extremely distinctive category are house wives whose life is thought to be confined to the domestic affairs only. But they have changed the conventional definition of domestic sphere by achieving female sovereignty and independence by establishing a space for themselves in crucial household decisions. They are liberated women, who are intelligent, independent, self confident, willing to acclimatize any change and self efficient. These new women of Rupa Bajwa have twin personality. Amongst their own social circles, they pretend to be highly sophisticated, compassionate, talented and well respected but their real gets revealed only when it comes to their dealings with poor people. They are suffering from superiority complex as is manifested in their approach towards the shop assistants. For them the poor are the slighter mortals whose existence is possible only by serving them. Bajwa has in fact brought the bleak reality of Indian society where rich & affluent women perform the role of oppressor and poor women become the other i.e. the object to be victimized. Naomi Wolf calls them “the power feminist generation In Fire with Fire Naomi Wolf (1993) calls them the power feminist generation who are ‘unapologetically, ‘free-thinking’, ‘pleasure-loving’ and self-assertive” (Wolf, Fire with Fire 149).

The other group of women presented in the novel comprise of those who dwell in the lowest sections of the society in miserable condition and continue to live with this traditional drudgery and confinement. They are the economically fragile counterparts of richer women presented in the novel. In their lives, optimism, expectation and violence are lastingly intertwined. The plot of the novel consists of horrendous incidents of stealing, molestation and killing. At any point of time, the narrative does not appear vulgar and coarse. Bajwa reveals the puzzled state of Indian women who strives hard in search of her existence. This makes the novel a valuable document in any debate or discussion on new woman. Her women dares stand against the patriarchal suppression and the corrupt economic system of Indian society though their raised voices get subdued in a highly selfish world. This group is represented by Chander's wife Kamala, and Sudha etc. They raise their voice not to become equals to men but to remain stuck to their fundamental right to live and to be considered as humans. Sebastian (2013) states thus:

The chasm that separates the privileged and the less privileged in a multicultural, multilingual Indian urban society is deep... the strands of victimization. (6)

Kamla is a new woman of Bajwa. She is not petrified of her failures in life rather she personifies courage and determination. She uses violence to record her revolt against the wealthy and well off people of Amritsar. Bajwa has created the character of Kamla using all the stylistic devices of humor, sarcasm and imagery. She is the only character who shows valor to face the oppression at the hands of capitalist society. She is beaten and molested yet she dares to hit Ravinder Kapoor with a stone to show her strong remonstrance against the exploitation done by the capitalists. The financial burden of life and the suppressed desires end up in causing miseries to her. Her plight is depicted thus: "Her face was deeply lined, though she could not have been more than thirty, even less perhaps" (104).

### **Conclusion**

Bajwa's female characters are insightful, self-conscious, intelligent and inventive. Her women desire to revolt against the labeled roles assigned to them by the society. The new woman emerges out of them, in context of her socio-cultural ethos and economic standards prevailing in the society. The picture of woman and her roles decide her dilemmas and changes required on her relevant world. Bajwa differs from western feminism in the point that she is a loves liberty beyond constraints of life. She neither glorifies nor attaches any emotional significance to the Indian womanhood keeps the focus of her discourse on reflection of woman as woman, and woman as a human being outside her family and her personal relations. There is emergence of "career woman" who wants to get rid of the clutches of the chains of male domination. The New Woman as an expert tries to sort out disputes and counter all the challenges against her career, within and outside her home.

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