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## Contradictory Representations: Gender Stereotypes in Chitra Banerjee and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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### Abstract:

Gender stereotypes exist in every culture and every region and it gets reflected in the literature of that region. Nigerian literature is rich with portrays of women who are weak and are treated as subservient to the males be it at home or outside, the same is true about Indian literature and its portrayal of women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, two female authors from these continents deal with feministic issues and the protagonists are women in their works who are subjugated to all prevalent gender stereotypes. They are portrayed as someone who are weak, bonded and caged in the societal and familial norms. But there is the other side to these depictions where these women change track and become strong who not only change their lives for better but for the people around them.

**Keywords:** patriarchal, feministic, Chitra Banerjee, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Purple Hibiscus, Mistress of Spices, gender stereotypes.

### Introduction:

Since the beginning of evolution both men and women are assigned roles, behaviours and mannerism that are distinctly different to each other. These feelings and mannerisms were decided according to their gender or the biological sex. The word Gender is derived from a Latin word meaning genus and until recently is used to mean the biological genders like feminine, masculine and the neuter gender. Women were supposed to be dedicated to hearth and kids where as men were expected to render financial support to their families. These gender roles led to stereotyping of roles and they became so engrained in our mind sets that any move to get away from these stereotypes was opposed strongly.

As literature mirrors lives and society of the times they are written, they depicted men and women strictly according to these accepted stereotypes in the society. For instance in the famous novel *Pride and prejudice* Miss Bingley says, "Oh! certainly," cried his faithful assistant, "no [woman] can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved." (*Pride and Prejudice*, chapter 8)

Margret Atwood extends the same sentiments in the modern society by saying “All you have to do, I tell myself is, keep your mouth shut and look stupid” (A Handmaid’s Tale)

### **Gender Stereotypes in Indo Anglian Literature**

Indian writings also represent the man woman conflict and the gender stereotypes. Shashi Deshpande in her novel writes “A wife should always be few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA you should be a BA. If he is 5'4'tall you shouldn't be more than 5'3'tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage...No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care it is unequal in favor of the husband. If the scales tilt in your favor, God help you, both of you.” (2008)

We have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century where new inventions, technology and digitalization has effected every aspect of our life but the amazing thing is the gender stereotypes still persist in this knowledge century. Literature still represents such stereotypes minutely like the yesteryears. Be it the Nigerian literature or the Indo Anglian literature.

In Indo Anglian literature women are a subjugated category who are dominated by the male in all spheres of life. R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, the novelists of yester years have presented the woman as pitiable and sufferers in the hands of men. Meena Shirwadkar observes that early works of Anand and Narayan are dominated by the male point of view. They have both shown girls as subordinate creatures, as pictures of pity and suffering.

In *That Long Silence* written by Shashi Deshpande, Jaya’s troubles in marriage stem from her husband’s tolerance towards any deviation from her role of a subservient wife. Vanitamami advises her that a husband is like a ‘sheltering tree’, which must be kept alive at any cost, for without it the family becomes unsheltered and vulnerable. She does so but finds herself and the children the more unsheltered and insecure. Anita Desai has also depicted the oppressions and vehemence faced by women in Indian society. Women characters in her novel become disturbed and suffer as they live in a tight watersheds and are unable to express themselves. Maya, Raka, Sita, Monisha etc. are the characters in her fiction who bear the brunt of the manhood and patriarchal society in some form or the other.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Nigerian Literature**

Nigeria has faced Civil war and the women especially have seen lot of turbulences but still the gender stereotypes continue to flourish with aplomb. Nigeria like the other African continent is patriarchal in its outlook and the women are thought to be inferior to men, a second class citizens emphasizing the views of Simone de Beauvoir in her work *Second Sex* says that “Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male.” (Simone De Beauvoir, 1949). This attitude causes a distinct marginalization

of women. In Nigerian National anthem asks all compatriots to “Serve their Fatherland” obviously immune to the strife and sacrifices of the women in the country. With the society being managed by the men the way women are represented in literature is also in stereotypical roles of mother and one taking care of the family and the household. In the words of Ebele Eko “These writers invariably cast the women in strictest sexist roles of mothers, wives, submissive to the norms and regulations that restricts them.”(Ebele Eko,1986)

Reiterating the same feelings Charles Nnolim says, in the works of Achebe, Ekwensi and Amadi, women are largely stereotyped as "helpless, "Let's not reason like cowards", said dependent, brutalized, disparaged...prostitutes or concubines or good time girls" (1989 : 59).

Chinuba Achebe presents gender stereotypes in his work *Things Fall Apart* which clearly shows the status of women. He says in his novel through the character Okonkwo “He ruled his household with a heavy hand”(Chinuba Achebe,1958). Even the crops were distinguished between man crops and woman crops. His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop. Wole Soyinka presents these stereotypes deftly in his play, *The Lion and the Jewel* through the characters of Sadiku and Baroka and Siddu. Women are foolish and gullible as compared to the men is illustrated through the female characters.

### **Gender Stereotypes in *Mistress of Spices***

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Mistress of Spices* presents the stereotypical women who live under the shadow of their fathers and husbands. Except Tilo the protagonist of the novel every character in the novel is undergoing humiliation, sufferings or violation just because she is a woman. Geetha, the independent minded girl wants to marry a boy of her own choice but her desire to do so is nipped in the bud as the parents and especially the grandparent who believes strictly in a patriarchal culture that woman should not be set free to choose the man of her choice. He further deplors her way of dressing, talking, which he feels are against the strict traditions of an Indian Hindu house hold. Another character in the novel Lalita is married forcefully against her wishes and she gives in to her parent’s wishes. Her sorrow knows no bounds when she learns that she was cheated and married to an old man, Ahuja. When she is unable to conceive she goes to a doctor and finds that everything is right with her, she requests her husband too for a checkup, who in turn beats her mercilessly. She gets fed up with the marital rape she had to endure every night, the mental torture and flees to get help from a woman shelter. These women, Geetha, Hameeda and Lalita portray the gender stereotypes in the novel. They are typical women who are guided and controlled by the men around them. Both of them do not get the necessary breathing space and their desires are never even thought of. This establishes what the Manusmriti says on women, “Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under the custody of their husband when married and under

the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently.”

Hammeda, who is given talaq by her husband in India for not bearing a son for him comes to stay with her brother in Oakland. Birth of a female child in India is thought to be only the fault of a woman though biologically the male is responsible for the gender of a child. Hameeda and many others like her are made an easy prey in form of talaq which is represented by Divakaruni in a touching way. Hameeda tries to rebuild her confidence in a multicultural society and falls in love with Haroun who is her neighbour, but unable to move forward as she is restricted by the age old traditions and her brought up.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Purple Hibiscus**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her much popular book, Purple Hibiscus writes about two women the mother and daughter who are under total control of their father. The beginning of the novel itself establishes the fate of the female in the work, “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother jaja, did not go to the communion and papa flung his missal across the room and broke the figurines on the ‘etagere’.”(3) Kambili and Beatrice both suffer silent torture. Beatrice as a wife of Eugene who is a devout Catholic, bears his anger manifested in the form of beatings and violation of her body. She endures miscarriage but suffers it silently as she feels that woman has a subservient role. She teaches the same to Kambili her daughter who too suffers under the dominant role of her father. He beats her severely for eating a morsel during the “Eucharist fast”. He does the same many times, so much so that she feels out of place in her own house, is nervous and unable to voice her own feelings. Kambili is a social misfit as she is scared every time and does not say anything at all even in the school so much so that she is a backyard snob by her classmates) “But I did not worry too much....It was like carrying a sack of gravel on my head every day to school and not being allowed to steady it with my hand “(52) In spite of all these Eugene,her father is her role model and she is in awe of him. It is only when she visits her aunt Ifeoma she realizes what she was missing all these years.

### **Contradicting the Stereotypes**

In contradiction to these gender typecasts, both the authors break the myths of gender stereotypes and present their woman with panache and gusto. In Mistress of Spices, Nayantara, Tilo, Maya the different forms of the same woman stands for and helps the diaspora of Indians in handling their trials and tribulations.Tilo gives antidote to Lalitha and says “Daughter, remember this, no matter what happens. You did no wrong in telling me. No man, husband/not, has the right to beat you, to force you to a bed that sickens you”(105).Tilo breaks the biggest myth surrounding beauty.She appears old and bent and spends her time in giving various spices to the needy. She is not a typical woman who waits for the things to happen to her but in turn takes things in her hand. She casts a spell and becomes the mistress of spice instead of living an ordinary life. Towards the end also when she meets Raven, she breaks the rules laid down by the Old Mother

and takes her original beautiful form. She even dares to run away with him to a place where she could live her new life. When earth quake happens she again takes a bold decision to come back to her city and serve the needy. She crosses all her stereotypical thinking and shows her strength by saying no to running away and comes back to Oakland with Raven, she has learnt to say “NO, that word so hard for Indian women”(81)

Chimamanda also breaks the quintessential role of a Nigerian woman engulfed by the traditions of a patriarchal culture and portrays her female characters as learning from their experiences, finding out what is good, taking a bold step ahead to break the confined uterine walls and plunging ahead to live their lives independently with no qualms. Kambili, the teenager emulates her aunt and comes out in support of her mother. Beatrice takes a much bolder, though a radical step of poisoning her husband. Aunt Ifeoma an independent lady lives according to her own rules and brings up her children also with the same attitude. She does not see herself as a woman whose life is meaningful only virtue of the fact she is married to a man and bears children for him. She does not only exist to give birth to babies or fulfil domestic needs. The woman whose roles are multifaceted outside of marriage can make a career for herself, contribute to discourse on the state of the nation and society, freely express her opinion on critical issues without mincing her words and rule her family as well, more beautifully than what a man can do. She does not fall prey to her brother Eugene’s patriarchal and suffocating rules. She also takes cudgels against the University where students and faculty suffer the authoritarian management alike silently for the fear of imprisonment, harassment and dismissal from the duties. She stands against this tyranny and expresses her feelings without any fear. Her carefree life and views effect Kambili and her brother who take a leaf from her and learn to voice out their feelings. “That night, I dreamed that I was laughing, but it did not sound like my laughter, although I was not sure what my laughter sounded like. It was cackling and throaty and enthusiastic, like Aunt Ifeoma’s.” (89).

### **Conclusion:**

Women are placed in juxtaposition in the both novels and the writers show them with laser pointed finesse in the role of a woman who is subdued, cannot stand on her own and quite contrary to that women who defy the norms, stand not only for themselves but for the society and the mankind in general. Aunt Ifeoma and Tilo though are from different cultures and different geographical regions are portrayed as strong women who take on the world and are not scared. They shatter the stereotypes of gender and are beautiful by their virtues and their inner power to stand strong against all odds. These are the true portrays of women of 21<sup>st</sup> century who are autonomous and self- sustaining, and can be taken as role models for the whole womanhood.

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