

## **BREAKING SILENCES THROUGH THE WESTERN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: THE NARRATIVES OF THE ASIAN AND AFRICAN WRITERS**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Constant cultural and social repression and authoritarian subjugation of basic human rights have impelled the rise in number of Asian and African women to seek a 'new narrative' to resist the norms of race, gender and religious fundamentalism. These 'native voices' are either heard through mediating assistance in the writings by the Western women who make an attempt to bridge the gaps between 'the silence', 'the voice' and 'the publication' or directly through the narratives/memoirs assertively articulated by the 'silenced' women. Women in the precarious situations resulting from the political upheavals such as civil wars, the coups, the invasions and the intrusions have been striving for a more meaningful living within and outside their closed worlds. Furthermore, foreign invasions have exposed the suppressed women to exotic cultures which have ignited a spark in them to resist racism, fundamentalism and inequality of all kinds. These women are supported by other women through various International NGOs. A coterie of women from these organisations themselves have survived wars or live in exile due to civil disputes but have refused to be a victim and channelled their experiences into helping women worldwide. These NGOs play crucial role in backing women in reconstruction, reconciliation and rehabilitation. These NGOs provide emotional and financial aid, right awareness, vocational and technical skills training and access to income generation tools. In the recent times the creative writers have ventured to depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, thus encouraging women to stir their inner selves so that they may themselves choose the lives that they actually want to live.

**Key words:** Silence, Voice, NGOs, transcultural, transnational, Eurocentric, Third world

The Asian and African regions have been considered as the patriarchal belt where the ingrained attitudes have undermined and belittled the value and intelligence of women. The civil wars and foreign intrusions in these countries have led to mass migrations, thus exposing the veiled women to the bigger world. The exposures have set them thinking about their own lives and stories in relation to the issues of gender, class, race, religion and ethnicity. Over the last decade, many popular narratives have been voiced or written/translated in the West, both by Asian/African and the Western women writers, making an attempt to unravel and unmask the lives of the women of these turbulent nations. The social activists and feminists (both Eurocentric and those from the Third World) have well responded to such narratives. The literary texts are acknowledged as a tool to give voice to women's traumatic experiences. However, the traumatic realities and the actual plight of the silenced and subjugated expressions are still looking for a meaningful attention.

A number of women from worldwide Non-Governmental Organisations have been striving to channelize their experiences into helping the women of the war-torn countries. However, there has always been much more to be handled than what appears on the surface. The main objective of these NGOs has been to mobilize women to change their lives by holistically addressing the unique needs of women in conflict and post-conflict environments, with the assistance and help of European and American women. The focus is on despondent women to unfold their faculties, to discover their own truth as individuals and further to evaluate their own possibilities. Though NGOs try their best to assuage the agony of women, there are hidden agendas that need to be interrogated as even these

organisations often fall short in their goals. They can't cross the theoretical boundaries as they have to work within the strictures of the Coalition Authorities that are often resisted by the target patriarchal societies in the pretext of the social fabric. The 'honour' question amongst the communities to which target women belong is often the orbit which the most well-meaning NGO workers cannot break through. Usually denial and fear of social rejection prevent women from seeking help. Not many women raise their voices against dishonour due to the fear of rejection in public.

The transformation of silence into language is an act of self-revelation which is not always an easy and acceptable process in the lives of women belonging to the communities under study. Language is the powerful tool to communicate pain and trauma but the subdued women of the Third World countries do not have an access to the channels of expression beyond the borders of their own countries. Through their exposure to alien cultures, women of Asia and Africa have themselves shown some courage to speak out and express their ignominy and torment. During the recent years life stories of women in 'burqa', 'niquab' or 'hijab' have attracted the attention of the Western publishers such as Random House, Interlink Books, Vintage Books, Free Press, Gotham Books who have flooded the foreign market with the memoirs and autobiographies of and by these women. Such publications are an answer to the complexities of women's freedom which is always under grim shadows of ideologies and 'isms'. Actual help may come from across the continents where the freedom of expression is less biased. The Western women writers and the publishing houses are engaged in the process of bridging the gap between the 'silences' and the 'voices'. This process of undoing the silences of subjugation is working in two ways. Firstly, women coming from more congenial environments of the West are reaching out to narrate 'their' tales and secondly 'these' women themselves are resisting pressures to express directly through memoirs and autobiographies. Women writers like Nawal El Saadawi, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Zainab Salbi, Latifa and Leila Ahmed are culturally mobile, sometimes by choice and often as a result of circumstances. The experiences of cultural derangement and transnational experiences create for these women writers' opportunities to physically engross themselves in multiple cultures/territories and foster plural and flexible identities. In this process, they usually acquire bilingual/multi-lingual command to express the underlying currents of transition and upheaval. They challenge the norms of their native societies and try to translate the intense emotions into communicable language in their own voices or with the aid of other educated women. At another platform, Western women writers like Marie-Therese Cuny, Jean Sasson, Delphine Minoui and Linda Coverdale have worked as mediators and translators for the subdued women like Mukhtar Mai, Najwa Bin Laden, Joanna Al-Askari, Maryam, Aman, Nujood and Mayada who narrated their woes to them and got assistance in raising their voice against suppression.

These narratives/memoirs are the autobiographical expressions of the women who are stirred by the experiences of dislocations, transcendence of physical and cultural borders, in the light of the global developments. These narratives portray the traumas of women narrators as an individual as well as their societies. They need significant reinforcement to pierce the cocoons in which they are wrapped to fly in the liberated air. Each time they stand up and act to traverse the boundaries, send forth a ripple of hope which would build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance and give succour to reconstruct their identity.

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