

A Land of One's Own

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*Women and Land Rights
in Literature and Society*

By

Lata Marina Varghese

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Preface	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	11
Women and Land Rights in Indian Literature	
Chapter Two	31
Women and Land Rights in Indian Society	
Chapter Three	51
Women's Land Rights in Kerala: A Case Study of Pathanamthitta District	
Conclusion.....	73
Bibliography	81

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Dr. Lata Marina Varghese

PREFACE

Land, as one of the scarcest of natural resources, has always been a bone of contention since time immemorial. Nothing in human history has evoked such fierce passion or horrible bloodshed than disagreement over access to land resources. Land has always been a crucial social asset in the formation of cultural identity as it is related to male power, prestige and economic security. Women throughout the world are rarely landowners. Although 50% of the world population are women, less than 10% own land or have land rights. In a predominantly male society that makes up this world, women have always been discriminated against. The deep rooted gender- biases are clearly reflected in women's lack of access to and control over land. So to the oft asked question as to why women need independent rights to land? The answer is quite simple. Just like men, the status of women in all societies is directly linked to their right to access, ownership and control of land. Land ownership has a direct impact on the relations between men and women, which is reflected in a range of practices, including division of labour roles, and other resources between men and women. Traditionally, rural women have been responsible for half of the world's food production and their specialized knowledge about genetic resources for food and agriculture makes them essential custodians of agro-biodiversity but now due to patriarchal gender discrimination, women's productive role in the food chain has been displaced. This has led to women's increased marginalization with their contribution to the economy and society remaining either ignored or mostly underpaid or largely unpaid. Women's rights to land are therefore a critical factor in increasing their social status, economic well-being and empowerment.

Indian women, except in certain matrilineal communities, have had virtually no customary rights to land due to the various personal laws that govern them although attempts have now been undertaken to make land tenure laws more gender-equal. However the unpalatable truth is that the incorporation of such noble intentions into public policy in India has been extremely slow and even today it remains just an issue of marginal concern. In fact women's land-related concerns are a much neglected area not just in governmental and non-governmental institutions but also in academic scholarship.

This book brings within its purview the issues of women's land rights within the Indian context. Not only does the book provide a framework

from where an analysis of women's land rights in literature and society can be assessed but it also provides the critical perspectives of various writers who have previously conducted research on this particular topic. In addition insights gleaned from international and national legal documents regarding human rights and women's land rights, in particular have been incorporated to facilitate a better understanding of the topic.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are entitled to certain basic and ‘natural’ rights that define a meaningful existence. Human rights are the basic standards of equity and justice without which people cannot live in dignity. Equal dignity of all persons is the central tenet of human rights. Human rights can thus be defined as the inalienable and indivisible rights held by all human beings, and yet ironically their abuse is a daily occurrence. The notion of ‘natural’ rights was propounded in the seventeenth century by the philosopher John Locke, who urged that certain rights are ‘natural’ to individuals as human beings, having existed even in the ‘state of nature’ before the development of societies and the emergence of the state (Weston 2000). As natural rights are intrinsic and independent of rights provided by the state, it cannot take them away. The American independence movement of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 were inspired by the ideal of ‘natural’ rights, and both movements sought to challenge governments that curtailed the natural rights of people. It was during the French Revolution in 1789 that natural rights were elevated to the status of legal rights with the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man’, which defined the ‘natural and imprescriptible rights of man’ as “liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression” (Article 2, Declaration of the Rights of Man, 1789). This declaration of natural rights was deployed in several political and social movements through the nineteenth century. For instance, the suffragette movement was premised on the natural equality between men and women.

Historically, human rights have been classified in terms of three generations, viz, (i) civil and political rights, (ii) economic, social and cultural rights, and (iii) solidarity rights. The evolution of human rights or civil rights, according to T. H. Marshall, comprises three stages: first, the emergence of civil rights such as liberty and freedom of speech; second, the arrival of political rights with active involvement in the political process; and third, the development of new social and economic rights such as welfare, housing and education. Although human rights violations can and do take place in any sphere, through any medium, the discourse on human rights is articulated primarily through the state, the machinery that exists to protect them. Rights are meaningful in the context of a state that

recognizes them, and education about human rights is an empowering process.

The League of Nations having failed in enforcing and safeguarding international peace and security, it was only in the aftermath of the gruesome Second World War that the need to acknowledge and safeguard human rights was articulated at the global level in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. One of the main goals of the United Nations is to promote and encourage respect for human rights. Apart from detailing the rights and freedom of individuals for the first time, it was the first international acknowledgement of the 'inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family and the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world' (Para 1 of the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The UDHR was premised on the principle of universality and non-discrimination. Article 1 states that 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights', without 'distinction of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (Article 2 UDHR). But as it was in the form of a Declaration it was not binding on its signatories. However, upon its adoption, the Commission on Human Rights (which was appointed by the Economic and Social Council of the UN) began to formulate a treaty that would be binding on states, so as to effectively realize the rights recognized by the UDHR. In 1966, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which together formed the International Bill of Human Rights. This bill laid the foundation for the formulation and adoption of human rights treaties and incorporated concerns relating to equality, non-discrimination, education, health, social security, administration of justice, social development, violence against women, and the status of refugees and minorities.

Women's human rights are a revolutionary notion. This radical reclamation of humanity and the corollary insistence that women's rights are human rights have profound transformative potential (Yogish, 2005: 65). A woman's human rights framework equips women with a way to define, analyze, and articulate their experiences of violence, degradation and marginality. During the UN Decade for Women (1976-85), apart from establishing universal standards to promote and protect women's rights, the United Nations held four international conferences on women—at Mexico city in 1975, at Copenhagen in 1980, at Nairobi in 1985 and in Beijing in 1995—which set new bench-marks for the advancement of

women and the achievement of gender equality, although differences of opinion were expressed in discussions on issues like inheritance rights, the role of culture and religion, and the role of the family (Moghadam 1996). The equality of rights is also explicitly asserted in the three articles of the UN Charter. The Charter's provisions on women's equality offer a clear and compelling basis for asserting advancement of the political and legal status of women. But despite the regard for the principle of non-discrimination being embedded within the UDHR, ICCPR, ICESCR, and other human rights agencies, women are not treated equally at the global level. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was established in 1976 to redress inequalities. But even CEDAW acknowledges that discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, and is an obstacle to the participation of women on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries. This, in turn, affects the development of family and society as a whole. But some nations have expressed reservations against certain provisions of the CEDAW, with several Islamic nations objecting to it on the grounds that it may conflict with the Islamic Shariah system of law.

Human rights have evolved and developed as a reaction to oppressive institutions, politics, and practices. Based on Aristotle's notion that 'equals are entitled to equal things', and that formal equality is a principle of equal treatment, the Indian Constitution guarantees and posits formal equality under Articles 14, 15, and 16. Although Article 15(1) of the Indian Constitution prohibits all forms of discrimination, under Article 15 (3) power is, however, vested in the State to make special provisions for women and children. The Indian Constitution exemplifies the 'common understanding' of basic human rights as it incorporates the principles outlined in UDHR in the form of Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State policy. The National Human Rights Commission of India (NHRC) established under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, together with the State Human Rights Commission, inquires into, and investigates complaints of, human violations. Owing to the overwhelming patriarchal structure of Indian Society, women have been relegated to a secondary status and have been subject to various legal and social discriminations. The framers of the Constitution, having recognized the need to remove such inequities made special provision to redress the same. The National Commission for Women (NCW) has thus been established under the National Commission for Women Act in 1990. The NCW as a statutorily constituted body is empowered to consider matters relating to the deprivation of women's rights. It also conducts studies and

investigations into problems arising out of discrimination and atrocities against women and recommends strategies for their removal.

The first concerted assertion of the rights of women came in the form of the Declaration of Sentiments in 1848, when under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton women demanded equal rights. Thereafter, the liberal feminist movement secured the right to vote, the right to access educational institutions, the right to secure employment, and the right to equal pay for equal work, amongst many other rights. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of 1993 (which was the outcome of the World Conference on Human Rights) promoted women's rights as human rights. It emphasized that the human rights of women and girls were an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. However, in India, within the family, gender constructs create gender roles, which are legitimized by legislation that impinges on equality amongst men and women leading to gender discrimination. Further, personal laws provided different sets of rights and obligations, which has led to discrimination amongst persons belonging to different religions, thereby violating the right to equality enshrined in Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution. Personal laws have often been exploited to the disadvantage of women. However, the Uniform Family Code (UFC) will, it is hoped, incorporate the positive aspects of all personal laws and take into account the anomalies within the existing laws.

On the whole, the United Nations and the Constitution of India have made great efforts in promoting women's equality of rights by setting standards, norms and formulating strategies. Nevertheless, the vast arrays of standards, strategies and declarations have not made much difference to the vast majority of women. But with the shifting of the global focus from the political disputes of the rich and advanced industrialized nations to the poor, less-developed, and developing countries, questions have been raised on the relationship between poverty and oppression and of the violation of human rights of disadvantaged sections of the society, including women. Coincidentally, women represent a large proportion of the world's total poor, and the majority are from the developing nations.

Most of the world's estimated 1.4 billion poorest people are still rural. Yet the majority lack ownership (or any secure rights) to the land that is their principal source of livelihood. Land empowers. Its significance lies in its self-determination, identity and economic security of an individual. Land rights are civil rights of fundamental importance to an individual, and it does not merely mean ownership rights. Rights are claims that are legally and socially recognized and enforceable by an external legitimized authority. Rights in land can be in the form of ownership or usufruct (that

is, rights of use), associated with different degrees of freedom to lease out, mortgage, bequeath or sell. Land rights also stem from inheritance of an individual or joint family basis, from community membership, from transfer by the state, or from tenancy arrangements, purchase, and so on (Agarwal 19).

In India, agriculture is the main source of livelihood, and land is an essential element of identity. Collective rights and community control are seen as hallmarks of this identity, guaranteed by the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution of India. In principle, collective rights can promote gender equality by guaranteeing all members of the community access to land. In practice, however, it does not necessarily work in this way, as landed property has historically been linked with male identity. Therefore, women's demands for land are seen by many men as disrupting the struggle to establish a collective identity and gain collective rights (Rao 10). Hence, the discourse of 'community' is often used to deny women access to land as 'individuals'. Further, men's well-being is primarily seen to depend on their ability to perform the 'provider' role. But with the changing economic and policy environment, their inability to do so is creating a crisis of masculinities (Chant 2000). The assertion by women of their rights is a demand for recognition, but it is construed as a challenge to male authority that needs to be controlled. Men, therefore, struggle to reshape their identities and masculinities by engaging in aggressive behaviour to ensure discipline (Osella *et al.* 2004). Women who publicly assert their rights to land are branded as '*dain*' (witch) in North India, especially in Bihar and West Bengal, and are harassed and killed (Mishra 2003). Hence, in the struggle for land rights it is becoming increasingly clear that it is critical for women to win land rights for establishing more equal gender relations, both within and outside the house. However, Bina Agarwal in her analysis opines that policy-makers and NGOs (including women's) groups, in India as well as in most of South Asia, seem more preoccupied with employment as *the* indicator of women's economic status, to the neglect of land and property rights.

India has a long history of land struggles, especially in South India during the 1940s and 1950s, like the Telengana struggle of 1946-51, the Thanjavur movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and, of course, the Tehbhaga movement in Bengal. The first land struggle in India to explicitly take up the issue of women's rights to land was led by the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini in Bodhgaya district in Bihar in 1979. Nevertheless, when the lands were finally distributed, the titles of land were in the names of men, with the exception of some widows. The women who had participated in the struggle felt it was unjust and persisted

with their claims, leading ultimately to their getting the titles, countering multiple tiers of resistance, from the family, and the community, including male activists, the state and the bureaucracy in the process (Manimala 1984). Another successful land struggle was from Maharashtra in 1980, where male farmers were persuaded to voluntarily transfer a piece of their land to their wife's name (Kishwar 1997). In 2002 Janu, a tribal woman leader of Waynad district of Kerala had exposed patriarchal biases in the land reforms implemented in Kerala. In Gujarat, women's organizations had formed a coalition to pressure the state to ensure land rights for women.

The understanding of inequality, particularly gender inequality, and the consequent avenues for solidarity to negotiate one's identity, are not uniform across societies, or even within societies. Women are not a homogenous group. Women's identities are negotiated at different levels within the household and in the community, as well as by the bureaucracy and political leaders. For men, land is clearly prized for the status it gives, the sense of identity and rootedness, and membership in the village decision-making bodies, rather than its economic value alone. Women's contribution to the economy or society at large remains unrecognized, largely underpaid, and mostly unpaid, and they have little access to government-provided opportunities, formal-sector employment and social security. Therefore, women's struggles around land represent their struggle to gain social identity as complete beings and not just homemakers. Poor women are often ill treated everywhere-in the family, in the community and in society. Rural women have little or no control over resources or on the income earned for the family. For most women, especially in the rural context, land is their only source of livelihood. Unfortunately, most women waive their rights to the land in favour of their brothers. Dependent on male protection, they bargain away their right to land in exchange for the promise of kin support in times of distress.

The specificity of the manifestation of gender relations in historically and culturally contextualized forms helps clarify why women might not all have similar interests in matters of land. It is also equally important to recognize that women's claims to land have always been different from those of men. So while some women support women's rights as central to their economic survival, others oppose them, depending on their perceptions of what they have to gain or lose. Although in India there is considerable legislation to support women's rights, with Articles 14, 15 and 16 making equality before the law a Fundamental Right of every citizen of the country, the claims for equality can be conflicting, as the claims of some would be recognized over others, in a context of limited

resources. Research, nevertheless, shows that women's capacity to access and use land is important for economic growth and for poverty reduction.

Worldwide, women's land rights are increasingly being put forth as a means to promote development by empowering women, increasing productivity, and improving welfare. However, little empirical research has evaluated these claims. Women who own land are significantly more likely to have the final say in household decisions, which is a measure of their empowerment. When women have access and secure rights to land, they are better able to improve the lives of their families and themselves. But women in many poor countries do not have access to land or lack secure property rights to the land they do possess. This dearth makes women even more vulnerable to poverty. Feminist analysis has shown female poverty is in many ways distinct from male poverty. Poverty is indeed a gendered experience (Jackson 1998), often leading to a phenomenon commonly referred to as the 'feminization of poverty'. Women living in poverty are often denied access to critical resources such as credit, land and inheritance.

The World Health Organization has noted that women continue to lag behind men in control over essential resources, including land. Eighty-six per cent of female workers in rural India are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. But rural women's lack of land rights limits their access to the other livelihood assets that flow from the control of land, and women without land as collateral have often also been excluded from institutional credit. Land rights confer direct economic benefits as a source of income, status, nutrition, and collateral for credit. Assets and income in the hands of women results in higher calorific intake and better nutrition for the household than when they are in the hands of men. So improving women's land rights makes a powerful contribution to household food security. Further, secure land rights provide women with greater incentives to adopt sustainable farming practices and invest in their land. However, women may not fully participate in these benefits as members of a household if they do not share formal rights to land. Control over land and property can have multiple meanings, such as the ability to decide how the land and resources are used and disposed of, and whether it can be leased out, mortgaged, bequeathed, sold, etc. However, legal ownership does not necessarily carry with it the right to control. Gender equality in land rights is thus both a livelihood objective in itself and a powerful means of eradicating poverty.

According to Article 17 of the Universal Declaration, a) everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others, and b) no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of property. However, women, who

perform two-thirds of the world's work, earn only one-tenth of all income and own less than one-tenth of the world's property. Almost seventy per cent of the world's people living in poverty are women. So women remain economically disadvantaged, which makes them vulnerable to violence. In contemporary society, female poverty has assumed importance as female-headed households are on the increase due to: 1) rises in the number of unmarried women, divorcees and widows; 2) separation; 3) male migration; 4) lower calorie intake and other deprivations when compared with men; and 5) declining trends in employment for women in agriculture and village industries. Besides these, cultural and social restrictions create an economic dependence on men which is reinforced by difficulties women encounter in inheriting property.

Women's land rights, however, intersect with other problems such as discriminatory inheritance patterns, agriculture and development issues, gender-based violence, the appropriation and privatization of communal and indigenous lands, as well as gendered control over economic resources and the right to work. Consequently, the interdependence of women's human rights highlights the importance of women being able to claim their rights to land, in order to lessen the threat of discrimination, different forms of violence, denial of political participation, and other violations of their economic human rights.

The debilitating effect of women's unequal rights to access and control of rural land has received very little recognition, although women's contribution to the family (both economic and social) as well as to a nation's economy has been well documented. Women's empowerment, equal rights for men and women, and an equal share of property, etc., are some of the issues discussed every day, but the stark reality is that these issues are still "unresolved". Not much has actually been done to create equality between the male and female gender. "Why do women need to own land?" is one of the first questions often asked. Most landless rural women can answer this question very simply: "Owning land would give me security in case my husband leaves me or in case I am widowed." Many women live in landless or near-landless households, and even when a woman's family owns land, she rarely personally owns any part of the land.

Globally, women's land rights are becoming an area of increasing urgency and concern as discrimination against women over land, property and inheritance rights continues to keep them in a subordinate position, even today. Lack of access to, and control over, land and property constitutes a violation of human rights and contributes significantly to women's increasing poverty. To put it another way, access and control

together lay the foundation for women's empowerment, and international human rights instruments have time and again reiterated their commitment to women's empowerment by binding the State Parties to ensure women of their basic right to life, survival and livelihood. However, ensuring such a right is clearly a matter of law and policy.

This book traces the disjuncture between men and women's formal equality before the law in India, an issue particularly well illuminated by the gap between women's land rights and the actual ownership of land. The land rights of women in this book are taken in their broadest sense to mean land as property and not just agricultural land, although for rural women that is the main source of livelihood.

The structure of the book comprises three chapters, apart from the Introduction and Conclusion.

- The Introduction traces the origins of human rights and shows how women's land rights have been dealt with at the International, National and State level;
- Chapter One, 'Women and Land Rights in Indian Literature', analyses how novelists of Indian English Fiction, especially women novelists, have dealt with the issue of women and land rights in their works;
- Chapter Two, 'Women and Land Rights in Indian Society', presents how Indian society, which is mainly patriarchal, has dealt with the issue of women's land rights and how personal laws also discriminate against Indian women, especially in their right to land ownership;
- Chapter Three, 'Women and Land Rights in Kerala: A Case Study of Pathanamthitta District', deals with the issue of Women's land rights in Kerala, which once followed the matrilineal system of inheritance but has now, especially after colonization, become more patriarchal in its outlook and discriminates against women in their right to own land. A case study of Pathanamthitta District has been made to prove this point;
- The Conclusion sums up the findings of the task undertaken.

Objective of the study

- To trace the origins of women's land rights and to evaluate how policies of the government regarding land, land usage and ownership of land by women have been dealt with at the international, national and state level;
- To examine how Indian English literature, especially fiction, has dealt with the question of women's land rights;

- To understand how Indian society has dealt with the problem of women's land rights;
- To probe how the issue of women's land right has been dealt with in the state of Kerala.

Research Methodology

The methodology is in general descriptive, although Chapter One and Chapter Three are mainly analytical. Data collected through structured questionnaires and interviews have been used for the case study to highlight the issue of women's land rights.

CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN AND LAND RIGHTS IN INDIAN LITERATURE

“Does one man dare to deprive another of his birthright to God’s pure air which nourishes his body? How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? And yet my friends, man has dared in the case of Indian women. That is why you men of India are today what you are: because your fathers, in depriving your mothers of that immemorial birthright, have robbed you, their sons of your just inheritance. Therefore I charge you restore to your women their ancient rights...” (Sarojini Naidu).

Women’s human rights include their right to land and property, which is a critical factor in determining their social status, economic well-being and empowerment. Sarojini Naidu, at the historic Calcutta Session of the Indian Social Conference of 1906, very ingeniously linked the suppression of women’s rights in India with the loss of the country’s freedom. Land is a livelihood-sustaining asset. Millions of women worldwide depend solely on land for a livelihood, especially in rural agrarian economies where arable land is the most valued form of property and productive resource. Traditionally, it has been the basis of political power and social status, and for a significant majority of rural households it is the single most important source of security against poverty. For many, it even provides a sense of identity and rootedness. But the scarcity of productive land is a major force against women’s rights to own and inherit land. In addition, their right to property is unequal to those of men, and their rights to own, inherit, manage and dispose of land and property are under constant attack from customs, laws and individuals. Irrespective of the economic status of the family, man is the centre, and woman is the marginalized. Therefore, one of the main goals of the United Nations is to promote and encourage respect for human rights and advocate equal rights for both men and women. Studies, however, reveal that few women own arable land, and even fewer effectively control any. The social and economic implications of this are wide-ranging.

Pre-independence India had a feudal agrarian structure. A small group of large landowners, including absentee landlords, had land rights. The vast majority of cultivators did not have any rights, or had limited rights as tenants or sub-tenants. The poor mostly leased-in land for subsistence. According to the UNICEF report on *Gender Equality* (2007), women perform 66 per cent of the world's work, and produce 50 per cent of the food, but earn only 10 per cent of the income and own one per cent of property. In India, 80 per cent of the working women labour in the fields and hence can be seen as major food producers, yet fewer than 10 per cent of them own land. But women rarely speak, and hardly ever perceive the inequalities in the division of labour in agriculture because they are culturally legitimized. Land is a major resource of production, and lack of control over this important resource has constituted a limiting factor to women's productivity. Besides, women's lack of bargaining power within the household also curtails their economic independence. In a predominantly male-dominated Indian society, where gender-biases are deep-rooted, women have always been discriminated against. This discrimination is reflected in women's lack of access to, and control over land, and property in particular. Generally, it is women who suffer more owing to land deprivation and discriminatory cultural practices. In India, since it is not customary for women to own land, their access to land depends on marriage, and to which they retain access as long as they remain in their husband's household. According to Bina Agarwal, effective and independent land rights for women are important on at least four counts: welfare, efficiency, equality and empowerment (4). But lack of accessibility to land has created increased poverty, frustration, constant disputes and enmity between men and women.

Literature is a reflection of life. As such, contemporary literature reflects the problems and malaises of modern life, replete with the phenomenon of migration, displacement, dispossession, alienation, fragmentation, stress, depression and neurosis. Fiction, being the most characteristic form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English literature. It has become a powerful instrument in the hands of women writers to espouse social concerns and to delve deep into the psyche of Indian woman. Indian women novelists in English have been presenting woman as the centre of concern in their novels. Most women in fiction and in real life have to grapple with conflict situations. The contemporary Indian woman in her march towards emancipation and womanhood has to struggle not only with the insensitivity of a chauvinist Indian society but also with the indoctrination of centuries that has endeavoured to fashion her into its mould of 'womanhood'. Indian

womanhood is constituted, 'invented', 'imagined' and 'defined' by a multi-layered accretion of myths to hide the virulent exploitative nature of patriarchy which uses this myth of Indian womanhood to transfix it on an essentialist notion of 'purity' to establish a regime of caste, class and gender oppression. But changing social dynamics have brought about an increased awareness among women regarding their socio-economic-political and educational rights. Helene Cixous, in '*The Laugh of the Medusa*', states that women's writings encode authentic female experience. The Indian woman, passive or aggressive, traditional or modern, serves to reflect the author's quest for psychological insight and awareness of social realities. Indian women, in view of their limited freedom and insular mode of life, are mercilessly denied opportunities and are often at a great disadvantage when compared to men. The women writers have certainly brought a strikingly fresh sensibility to Indian English literature through their endeavours to lay bare the oppressive and anti-human values system of society. They subtly indicate that society is often indifferent and vindictive towards women, and have therefore tried to destabilize the social power of male domination in their novels by presenting women's side of the social world.

The focus of this chapter is on the land rights of women in Indian society as reflected through Indian literature, especially in Indian English fiction by women writers. For this purpose I have chosen two novels, Kamala Markanday's *Nectar in the Sieve*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Although many Indian writers have dealt with issues of land, dispossession, hunger and poverty, especially in rural India, none has explicitly referred to women's land rights. Even Markandaya and Roy have only obliquely referred to it in their novels.

Post-Independence Indian English fiction constitutes an important part of world literature today, and women novelists have made significant contributions to it. The novelists of the pre-Independence era were influenced by Gandhian ideology and tried to create a literature of social concerns. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Bhabani Bhattacharya dealt with issues of social concern. Mulk Raj Anand, in fact, attacks the caste and class system in India. Through his novels, he upholds the rights of the mine-workers, factory workers, the land labourers and the daily wage earners. All these writers were concerned with the poverty, hunger and exploitation of India's teeming mass of poor people, and, like Kamala Markandaya, show women and girls suffering from poverty, repression and family restrictions without having any sense of identity or self-awareness. Submissiveness and obedience to male dominance and tradition has been enforced upon them. Even R.K. Narayan in his novel,

The Dark Room, portrays the plight of an Indian woman through his female character, Savithri, when she says, "I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's...Didn't I say *a woman owns nothing?*" (Italics mine).

Post-Independence Indian fiction in English embodies various images of Indian society in terms of its traditional values and practices as well as its changing ethos in the process of its transition from an agrarian to an industrialized and urbanized socio-economic order. Many writers have portrayed the problem of the place of women in society, but few have voiced concern over the denial of even basic human rights of women in a male-dominated patriarchal Indian society. Of late, there has been vigorous development in thinking about women and their role in society. For the majority of women writers their gender has had some effect on their experiences and their perceptions of the world, and this is reflected in the nature of the work they produce.

Women have a significant place in Markandaya's novels. Women novelists in English have reflected, in their writings, a sharp concern with the role and status of Indian women in terms of social and familial power. Kamala Markandaya's novels embody a profound and sensitive understanding of the feminine and the female in the Indian ethos (Misra 40). Women in her novels fall into two distinct categories: (a) those who acquiesce in their traditional roles and perceive ideal womanhood in terms of being an obedient daughter, a subservient wife, a protective mother and only a marginal participant in decision-making; and (b) those who militate against the constraints of traditional Indian womanhood and attempt to assert social and sexual power in the face of socio-moral resistance. Most of Markandaya's novels have women narrators. Her novels explore feminine consciousness by assessing Indian womanhood's confrontation with male reality. Not being a radical feminist her novels are not an outright condemnation of a repressive male-dominated society, neither are they accounts of the victimization of women (Rakhi 102).

Kamala Markandaya, unlike other Indian women writers, is chiefly preoccupied with the problems of the tragic encounter between traditional Indian values and cultural practices on the one hand, and the industrial and urban outlook on the other. Her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, a harrowing tale of agrarian bankruptcy vividly captures all the socio-economic factors that affect the lives of peasants in colonial India. It has been applauded at the national and international level for its 'faithful portrayal of rural India' (Mehta 298-99). The plight of the tenant farmers in British India, with its total lack of modern infrastructure in the agricultural sector, the farmer's

abject poverty, humiliation and a constant fear of being uprooted, the torture inflicted by the landlord and his agents on tenant farmers—all these are vividly portrayed in the novel. The hierarchy of social classes in Indian villages is based on distinctions of caste and financial status in the context of an agrarian society. As B. Kuppaswamy aptly summarizes:

Since the village economy is based primarily on agriculture, the ownership of land gives rise to an agrarian class structure. There are the landowners who form the upper class on account of their wealth and proprietorship. There is the middle-class consisting of the tenants who take the land on lease for cultivation from the landlords, and there are the agricultural labourers who are employed on a daily basis by the landlords or the tenants to help them in the cultivation of the land (475-76).

Thus, landowners, farmers and traders constitute the core of the traditional Indian rural community. The landlord in the erstwhile Zamindari system was a rich person who amassed wealth and social power by exploiting the poor, who were denied even basic human rights. The money-lenders were another category that exploited the poor and held an important place in the rural economy. In times of natural calamity such as famine, drought and flood, the poor farmers and workers were forced to borrow money from such money-lenders, who often insisted that the villagers pawned their land and houses which they more often than not never recovered, since they were unable to pay back the loan. The illiterate and downtrodden peasants consider all their hardships and misfortunes as their fate. It is this fatalistic attitude that keeps the marginalized groups like women and the lower classes in India in a subordinate position. The novel *is* a vivid record of the hungry rural peasantry whose life is afflicted by the existing social institutions and rituals such as child marriage, widowhood, neglect of female children, slavery, landlessness, homelessness, casteism and illiteracy (Misra 2). Markandaya seeks to explore the predicament of the individual in a caste- and class-ridden society subjected to a process of radical change.

Nectar in a Sieve is the story of an agrarian couple Nathan and Rukmani. The story is narrated by Rukmani, a peasant woman whose rustic life is shattered by the intrusion of industrialization and the transition that was sweeping all over India in the 1940's. Her references to her father's diminishing status at the beginning of the novel set the stage for the economic changes sweeping through India. The brief paragraph about Rukmani's wedding is packed with sociological commentary on the changing times: "Four dowries are too much for a man to bear". The youngest daughter of a village headman, Rukmani had dreamt of a grand

wedding but this was not to be as, with changing times, her father had lost both power and prestige. Her marriage to Nathan, a tenant farmer was a shock, yet her husband's love and tenderness and their happiness in working together for a good harvest are rewards enough. These moments are precious like nectar, which if put through a sieve can be drained away.

Rukmani, though literate, is not free from the prejudices against the girl child. The novel also exposes the traditional attitude of Indians towards a female child right from her birth. Rukmani's disappointment at the birth of a girl child is typical in India, especially for Indian farmers who need manpower for reaping and harvesting. Her reaction at the sight of the first-born is, "what woman wants a girl for her first-born?" (19). She sheds tears of weakness and disappointment. She supports her husband's view that a male child is an asset and a girl child is a liability to the family. Like all Indian women who cherish the desire to be the mothers of sons, she is aware of her husband's desire for a son "to continue his line and walk beside him on the land" (20). So her happiness knows no bounds at the birth of their sons. But ironically the couple cannot lead a happy and prosperous life even after five sons are born to them. Nathan even thinks that educating a girl child is sheer waste of time and money.

In India, a daughter becomes a burden to the family because of the dowry system. Rukmani herself is a victim who was given in marriage to a landless labourer because her father was unable to find a better groom for lack of wealth to afford a good dowry. Although they are poor, even a tenant farmer like Nathan has to give a dowry for his daughter's marriage. So Ira is married at fourteen with a dowry of hundred rupees, the maximum amount her parents could offer. Rukmani is forced to utilize their meagre store of corn which she had saved for hard times. As a result, the entire family had to starve when the crop failed that year due to heavy rain: "It rains so hard, so long and so incessantly...the waters rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field sank under and was lost" (39). Yet with all its bareness and fertility, the land pulls Rukmani's soul to itself. Markandaya well documents Rukmani's attachment to her land, even though she does not own it. Rukmani gives a graphic picture of the farmer's life of hardships, of fear and of hunger when she says:

This is one of the truths of our existence, as those who live by the land know; that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labours from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children, and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact too, is within our experience. In our life there is no margin for misfortune (136).

They live out this misery with calm acquiescence until the onset of real disaster on the land as well as the rural economy, when a tannery is set up in the neighbourhood. It starts expanding by acquiring cultivable lands of the village and thereby disturbs the fragile rural economy and mars the beauty and peace of the countryside. In addition to this man-made menace, when nature acts as a hostile force in the form of drought and flood resulting in the failure of crops, the tenant farmers are forced into starvation. Heavy storms cause havoc to the poor farmers whose huts, made of flimsy materials and crudely constructed, are reduced to a heap of mud and rubble "...with their owner's possessions studding them in a kind of pitiless decoration" (45-46), while the tannery, made of cement, stands unaffected. The ruthless landlords and the merciless money-lenders hardly care to come to the rescue of the poor starving farmers, who are forcibly evicted from their beloved land. When all their savings are consumed, Nathan and Rukmani are forced to approach Hanuman, the rice merchant, who heartlessly rejects their plea for rice. So they are forced to approach Biswas, the money-lender, to whom they offer their last two silver coins in exchange for rice. But he too declines to help, demanding more money. The only protesting voice against this social inequality and injustice is raised by the compassionate English missionary doctor, Kennington, who asks Rukmani, "Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand-cry out for help-do something?" (47-48). The villagers cannot cope with the changing social situations brought about by the industrial onslaught which snatches not only their land and property, but also their sons, promising them employment and better financial prospects. But the exodus by the rural people to the urban areas only aggravates their poverty and misery through dislocation and homelessness.

The picture of social inequality, the exploitation of the poor and the unhealthy consequences of urbanization has been painted by Venkatamani in *Murgan, the Tiller* (1927), Mulk Raj Anand in *Coolie* (1936), and Bhabani Bhattacharya in *So Many Hungers* (1947), and *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954). Kamala Markandaya also presents a realistic study in her novel. She clearly shows that it is not only Nathan's family which has to undergo severe economic and social afflictions, but also the whole community in the village. So there is a perceptible shift of socio-economic activity from land to factory, and from village to city. The younger generations leave their parental profession of tilling the land for better financial prospects. Thambi explains to his father, "If it were your land, or mine, I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return?" (56).

In the past, people were entirely dependent on agriculture, but with rapid population growth, agriculture is no longer capable of sustaining an ever-expanding family. As a result, there is growing poverty in Indian villages, with the younger generation showing a distinct tendency to migrate to cities in search of a livelihood. Arjun and Thambi explain to their parents about their decision to go to the Ceylon Tea plantation. Arjun argues with Rukmani, his mother, by stating: "There is nothing for us here, for we have neither the means to buy land nor to rent it-would you have us wasting our youth, chafing against things we cannot change?" (72).

Nectar in a Sieve is an epic of Indian life at the grassroots level. In this bleak picture of Indian social life, the darkest zone is the neglected poor Indian women. In the male-dominated Indian society, how can a woman, no matter how hard she works for her family, when she is denied even basic human rights like freedom of speech, articulate or demand land or property rights? In the agricultural sector, which is unorganized labour, the women labourers are paid lower wages than men for the same work, and there is no one to raise their voice against this gross injustice.

Further, women are subjected to exploitation and oppression because of their ignorance and innocence. Rukmani's daughter Ira, who was married to a peasant boy at the age of fourteen, is abandoned by her husband five years after marriage because she fails to beget a child. She is thrown into a life of degradation and debasement when she becomes a prostitute in order to feed her little brother Kuti, as her parents have been thrown off their land and have no means of sustenance. Rukmani, as mother, can neither protest nor object. She quietly endures everything, as she did in her youth, when Nathan has extra-marital relations with Kunti.

Rukmini, may seem to be the typical archetypal suffering wife, docile and submissive. But she is literate, as she has been taught to read and write by her father, the village headman, an act that invited the derision of the womenfolk of the village. Rukmani therefore has a progressive approach to life. Although misfortunes stalk her with poverty, and starvation is her lot, it does not dehumanize her. So she is even willing to be displaced from the cherished land: "Yet there was no option but to accept the change..." (100). Her spirit of acceptance and endurance helps her to put up with all kinds of adversity. Even though Rukmani mainly remains passive through all her hardships and suffering, she develops a spirit of rebellion when the peasants and rural folk are deprived of their traditional means of income. Rukmani is aware of the stark reality: "To those who live by the land there must always come times of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty" (136). The village dealer Biswas's inhuman treatment and greed offer a realistic picture of rural India. The greedy dealer

demands an unimaginable price for rice he has hoarded, and the tenant farmers have to pay an exorbitant price for a handful of rice, and thus Rukmani and her family lose everything they own.

The cruelty of nature, either in the form of flood or of drought, was a constant threat to the Indian peasants, apart from the greed of hoarders who aggravated the situation, in addition to the unrelenting landlords who demanded the rent from their tenant farmers no matter whether there was flood or drought. Dues had to be paid to keep the land for cultivation during the next season. It was this hope of a good rain and a good harvest that kept up the farmer's spirits and sustained their hunger.

Cultivation as a way of life received a setback with the advent of industrialization through the setting up of a tannery. It shook up the very fabric of their village and dislocated and uprooted people from their land and traditional livelihood. And it is the binding influence of Rukmani that holds her family together to survive this ordeal. When the young men of the village realize that the land is no longer reliable in providing them with sustenance, they gradually leave behind their hereditary professions and migrate to the towns. The anguish experienced by Rukmani and her family clearly portrays the anguish of the other peasant families at being displaced from their cultural roots.

The tannery stands as a great landmark of progress, but for Rukmani, it has a sinister presence, even though she is aware that the real causes of the ruin of her family are inclement weather, crop failure, landlordism, the money-lending system and the defective land tenure system. The disparity between the rich landlords and the poor land-lessees, which was once vertical, now becomes horizontally distributed, where anyone who has a job at the tannery is better off than those involved in the old ways of paddy cultivation and farming.

The disintegration of family life, social discrimination and moral chaos is highlighted in the novel. With economic disparity comes moral depravity. The tannery soon becomes a symbol of immorality and exploitation. Ira, Rukmani's daughter who was returned home by her husband because of her barrenness, took to prostitution in order to feed her dying brother. The irony is that in their abject poverty it is the daughter who helps the family financially. In the traditional Indian society, the moral depravity of the male is never questioned, whereas women always submit themselves to the desires and pleasures of men. Nathan's extramarital relationship is silently endured by Rukmani for the sake of a peaceful marital life. Even though portrayed as an ideal housewife, Rukmani rises against the social forces confronting her, although she can in no way prevent the outcome. Rukmani opposed this invasion of her

family life and yet she too had to reconcile to it when two of her sons, Arjuna and Thampy joined the tannery. She was made to realize the hard fact that land was not enough to sustain them: “Not a month went by but somebody’s land was swallowed up...” (47).

The last blow to Rukmani from the tannery comes when the land Nathan rents from the landlord is taken by the tannery for further expansion. Rukmani and Nathan were part of the land that they cultivated. And so when they are parted from the land that they cultivated, their souls get uprooted. Displacement causes a crisis of identity, and the uprooted persons suffer from this crisis. Rukmani and Nathan migrate to the town and have to face hardships, uprootedness, insecurity and loss of identity. This eventually drives them back to their village, although Nathan dies on the way back. The life of an average Indian peasant woman is thus succinctly conveyed by Markandaya through “dense data, understatements and monosyllabic words” (Parameswaran 58).

The patriarchal system that is entrenched all over the world, barring certain exceptions, has established norms for women over the centuries for controlling the behaviour pattern of females. In her book, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet presents a framework within which the patriarchal family operates whereby one group of persons is controlled by another in a relationship of dominance and subordination. The role, status or position of a woman in a family is clearly subordinate to that of a man, and in a patriarchal system women are even denied an identity of their own. As Shouri Daniel states: “...she has no shape or form. She is everything or nothing. She is fluid. Pour her into any mould and she takes it...” (12). As she is a void, she becomes a being only in so far as she can be regarded as an object in relation to the man, who is of course the subject.

Indian women have been traditionally portrayed as the paragon of resignation and patient suffering. Binodini, in Tagore’s *Chokerbali* (1903), is perhaps the first Indian woman who rebels against social norms by claiming an identity of her own at a time when widows were socially ostracized. She is portrayed as a bold, unconventional character who loves a married man, though ultimately she submits herself to the social code of self-denial and self-sacrifice. In free India, women enjoy political rights and rights to education and jobs. Arundhati Roy, as a post-Independence Indian writer, discusses this change. Her novel, *The God of Small Things*, unfolds the problems besetting women in a male-dominated society. The backdrop to the novel is the post-Independence Kerala of the 1960’s, but the issues it explores are the social attitudes of Indian society. The novel highlights women’s status in society—especially a divorced daughter’s rights in her paternal home where she has no *locus standi* and against