

REVISITING THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL
CHANGE ON INDIAN FEMALE MODELS IN INDIRA
MAHINDRA'S *THE END PLAY*

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This paper discusses how Indira Mahindra's *The End Play* (1995) represents the effect of social change on women's ideology and the society surrounding the sequential female generations – the grandmother, the mother, and granddaughter. Hence, each female character represents a different model, thereby representing its own ideology and social position. The paper also explores the effect of social change in relation to issues such as marriage, work, women's rights, divorce, betrayal, women's virginity, and the stereotypical images of women – all of which are related to Indian Feminism. However, before embarking on this discussion, it is vital for this critical investigation to identify the concept of ideology, and feminist theories and movements in India.

Key words: Indian women, social change, ideology, female models, The End Play, Indira Mahindra

Introduction

Women's fiction is one of the realistic mirrors to women's struggle in history, especially in third world countries such as India, in which Anupama Chowdhury states. "It is an irony that on the one hand, we worship Mother Goddesses, and on the other, our own mothers are exploited mercilessly."¹ Moreover, although social change in India enhanced women's positions in society through civil rights, it still did not give women their full equal rights in domestic life or even change false ideologies within women that belonged to the generations that had accepted inequality as a true ideology.

¹ CHOWDHURY, A. *Historicizing, Theorizing, and Contextualizing Feminism*, p. 34.

This paper discusses how Indira Mahindra's *The End Play* represents the effect of social change on women's ideology and the society surrounding the sequential female generations, the grandmother, the mother, and granddaughter. Hence, each female character represents a different model, thereby representing its own ideology and social position. The paper also explores the effects of social change in relation to issues such as marriage, work, women's rights, divorce, betrayal, women's virginity, and stereotypical image of women – all of which are related to Indian Feminism. However, before embarking on this discussion, it is vital for this critical investigation to identify the concept of ideology, and feminist theories and movements in India.

In defining ideology, one is sure to enter an area of philosophical, political, economical, and social debatable conflict, in the sense that many scholars identified 'Ideology' from their conscious or unconscious ideological perspective, so where does subjectivity or objectivity stand in each definition? Will Morrisey – an independent scholar – answers this question by stating that “ideology combines beliefs and moral opinions pertaining to the social, economic and/or political system, [in addition] ideology also comprises beliefs about human nature, its malleability or permanence, and its divine, natural, or historical origin”.²

In relation to feminism, Anupama Chowdhury summarised the three waves of feminism and stated the essence of feminist waves in general perspective is that “all are concerned with a woman's inferior position in society and the discrimination faced by them because of social, economic, political or cultural order”.³ Moreover, to explore the history of feminism in India, Anupama Chowdhury provided a survey that extends from times in pre-independent India to the present day, thereby documenting different phases of feminism. India had three feminist movements that tackled vital issues such as widow immolation and remarriage, prohibition of child marriage, property rights, equal education for women, and the establishment of different feminist organisations, which contributed in the third phase by developing the confident and independent women of India.

Female Models: Negotiating Generation Differences

Now, the discussion will examine each ideology and social position of the three female sequential generations as stated earlier, as they are family related; therefore beliefs and moral opinions which constitute their ideologies move or change from one generation to another. In addition, through analysing these

² MORRISEY, W. *Ideology and Literary Studies*, pp. 55 – 56.

³ CHOWDHURY, A. *Historicizing, Theorizing, and Contextualizing Feminism*, p. 29.

three female models, the discussion will examine the themes and characters that measure the effect of social change as represented in the novel by Indira Mahindra.

The first generation model is the grandmother, who represented the character of a disciplined, conservative woman. Nani-ma represented an inherited ideology of the patriarchal system although, as a woman, she was a contemporary open-minded individual and aware of the crucial issues that women called for in the first and second phases of the feminist movement in India. The first point that the character of Nani-ma represented as a false ideology was the preference of male children over females, because females in the patriarchal system are considered socially inferior. Moreover, it is an implanted ideology in the minds of males, and it is expressed and transmitted to women's beliefs from birth that males are superior to females, all of which confirms how ideology works in social practice: "Ideology both constructs and is constructed by the way in which we live our role in the social totality."⁴ Because of such false ideology, Nani-ma wished for a male son, and not a female daughter, and due to giving birth to Bimla and facing labour problems that led to the impossibility of a second pregnancy, the mother expressed a sense of hostility towards her daughter. Gungoo exposed the reasons of hostility and described how Nani-ma compensated for the disappointment of giving birth to a female by adopting a male: "When Nani-ma was told that she had given birth to a girl, she didn't want to see her ... Mamoo was barely three years old when Nani-ma had taken him from a poor relation of hers."⁵

The grandmother fits the profile of many feminist studies as what the scholar Ira Raja classified as "The aging woman - initially seen as belonging to a generation so deeply complicit with patriarchal values ("tradition") as to be beyond reconstruction."⁶ Nani-ma absorbed the ideologies of the patriarchal society and is bound to traditional ideologies; although she is aware of social change and women's rights in society, she expressed un/consciously the ideology of the masculine society that women were unequal to men.

The second point that Nani-ma expressed in contradiction to women's struggle against inequality is her ideological belief that women were only suitable for domestic life, as wives, through arranged marriages, not through women's right to choose a husband. Nani-Ma represented the woman, who due to time and oppression surrendered to the ideologies of the patriarchal society,

⁴ HUTCHEON, L. Discourse, Power, Ideology: Humanism and Postmodernism. In *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, p. 178.

⁵ MAHINDRA, I. *The End Play*, p. 19.

⁶ RAJA, I. *Desiring Daughters: Intergenerational Connectedness in Recent Indian Fiction*, p. 358.

and became a passive individual who tried to apply a false ideology on her daughter: “Nani-ma argued, quarrelled, sulked, stopped talking to her husband ... to make him bow to the traditional pattern. She wanted him, like the others in the Kashmiri clan of Allahabad, to arrange their daughter’s marriage.”⁷ Moreover, Nani-ma expressed her ideology in the attempt to persuade Gungoo that marriage is the ultimate goal in a woman’s life: “You’re trying to be different just like that. Deep inside you must want to get married.”⁸ The grandmother’s implanted ideology considered that the appropriate place for a woman is domestic life, and that social change in modern India, which gave women more equality in society, is something negative. Hence, her own ideology compelled her not to consider any other options. Furthermore, Nani-ma evaluated the social change in India that enhanced women’s opportunity in education, work, and civil rights as a negative outcome: “Nani-ma started bemoaning how everything had changed for the worse. With education and the new rights given by Parliament, women had started thinking of themselves as equals of the men folk.”⁹ Furthermore, Nani-ma considered the rightful place for a woman is her home under the hegemony of the husband, while taking domestic problems as something that women must tolerate and accept. Therefore, in the sequence of events, and upon discovering that her daughter Bimla decided to leave her husband, Nani-ma expressed her false ideology by rejecting her daughter’s return to their family lodging, Atal-retreat: “All I know is that a woman has to stay posted to her home.”¹⁰

A clear ideology about marriage by Nani-ma was the debatable argument with her granddaughter Gungoo, in which she emphasised the importance of arranged marriages in domestic life: “What about your marriage? Isn’t it Bimla’s duty to see that a scandal due to her leaving her husband doesn’t spoil the chances of arranging your marriage into a desirable family?”¹¹ It is obviously a shame to fail in marriage because a failed marriage does not only have an effect on the separated woman, but also on her daughters according to social norms.

The effect of social change on women in civil rights, regarding ownership and work in India was a contradiction to Nani-ma’s ideology. As a woman, Nani-ma, considered that the improvement in a woman’s situation regarding property and equal opportunities in work as something unpleasant in modern India due to her false ideology. In the novel, Gungoo explained two contradicting points that in reality benefited Nani-ma as a woman.

⁷ MAHINDRA, I. *The End Play*, p. 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

First, before 1955, women did not have the right to inherit any material assets, not from their fathers nor husbands, therefore as a widow, Nani-ma would have become under the legal obligation to suffer from the custody of a male relative. However, the Hindu Code Bill of 1955 changed all that, and women were able to inherit material assets. Therefore, Nani-ma became the owner of Atal-Retreat as Gungoo explained: “In the absence of a direct male heir all of her husband’s assets would have been inherited by a next-of-kin male.”¹² A second point representing a contradicting ideology is that although Nani-ma objected to the idea of working women, and considered domestic life as the proper place for women, she worked as she owned her own dairy farm, and was the boss-lady of many female and male workers. The same civil rights that Nani-ma criticised as being the negative effect of social change in India were the same that gave her equality and the right for work and property.

The second generation model is the mother Bimla, who represented the educated, strong, working woman, and who belonged to the second phase of women contemporary to the feminist movements in India. Nevertheless, Bimla’s early life as portrayed by most of the events represented a state of ‘stillness’, in the sense that she tolerated and accepted to be silent during different stages of her life. In the beginning, she represented a passive female accepting oppression with no resistance, but afterwards, events revealed that she was a self-sacrificing woman who exchanged her own happiness for the sake of her loved ones. First, Bimla as a Hindu renounced the man she loved because her parents objected due to Hindu and Muslim conflicts in India: “Your Nani-ma was the first one to object, but it wouldn’t have mattered if your Nana had not also objected. He would normally have come around ... Hindus and Muslims distrusted each other.”¹³ There were religious conflicts that had dominated India since 1947 which led to the separation of Pakistan (India-Pakistan Wars).¹⁴

Secondly, after the death of Bimla’s father, she accepted the first proposal of marriage to escape her mother’s hostility; therefore, she married Shiv Sahi from Bombay. However, in the following years, Bimla discovered her husband’s betrayal with the widow of his uncle, but she kept silent, not for the false ideology that her mother as expressed earlier, but for the sake of not losing her children. Bimla knew that she lived in a patriarchal community who would stand in favour of the man at all costs. The confrontation between Bimla and her daughter described how she sacrificed her freedom from a life of humiliation to

¹² Ibid., p. 37.

¹³ MAHINDRA, I. *The End Play*, p. 27.

¹⁴ INDIA-PAKISTAN WARS. In *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* [online], 6th Edition.

keep her children safe and under her supervision: “What makes me mad is that you took all this shit because of us.”¹⁵ Anupama Chowdhury described the realistic domestic life in India, in relation to the previous situation, by stating: “Indian women are expected to be pure and faithful as wives, though husbands are not required to be so.”¹⁶ Bimla, therefore cared more about her children than her own happiness because of her fear of social and patriarchal beliefs.

Moreover, as represented through narration, Bimla was a contemporary woman and an advocate to the feminist movements in India, in which women gained substantial benefit from the new liberating laws of equality for women. Nevertheless, Bimla submitted to the ideology of the patriarchal community she lived in; therefore, her life did not represent that proposed form of a liberated and independent woman: “She was one of the first adult generations of women to benefit from equal rights with men. [In contradiction], she had been so evasive with her own life. She hadn’t exactly taken advantage of the social change of her period.”¹⁷

At a later stage in the novel, Bimla decided to make a take step forward and leave her husband in Bombay, India to go to Lahore in Pakistan, to stay with her old love Shafi Ahmed: “Can you ring up Anil Dhar in Delhi? Tell him about the Davidsons’ news, and that I want to go to Lahore ... As long as Shafi wants me to stay with him.”¹⁸ The first interpretation for her bold step is the desire to stand beside Shafi Ahmed during his illness as he suffered from cancer; in addition to that, Shafi Ahmed never married after their forced separation. The second interpretation for leaving her husband might be that she simply could not tolerate the everlasting betrayal of her husband especially that her children became aware of this unbearable situation, and they were now old enough to take care of themselves. So, she decided to break free from domestic oppression which she endured for long. Bimla adopted a liberated ideology acknowledging her status and her social position as an independent individual, dumping off the burden of the patriarchal system represented by her mother, husband, and society who used conservative false ideologies – the stereotypical image of women in society – and her own children as a way to dominate Bimla’s freedom and individuality.

The third generation model is the granddaughter Gungoo, who is the narrator and the main character in the novel; Gungoo represented the effect of social change in a variety of multiple dimensions. Gungoo interacted enormously with the various themes, viewpoints, and characters that represented the effect of

¹⁵ MAHINDRA, I. *The End Play*, p. 99.

¹⁶ CHOWDHURY, A. *Historicizing, Theorizing, and Contextualizing Feminism*, p. 35.

¹⁷ MAHINDRA, I. *The End Play*, p. 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

social change in modern India in relation to women and men, either positively or negatively.

First, marriage as the main theme expressed a contradiction in Indian society in relation to social change. Although women had gained enormous equal opportunities in work and civil rights, nevertheless, the problems of inequality dominated domestic life and the ideology of the first generation, who applied false assumptions on later generations. Gungoo narrated the situation of a middle-class bride whom she had met on a train while coming to Allahabad; the girl was almost 18 years old and without finishing her education, her family forced her to marry a man that she had never met: "On her own, she told me that she had studied only up to high school ... Her parents had forced her into marriage."¹⁹ In addition, the anonymous bride expressed a desire to finish her education, but not by equal-right, but rather by controlling her husband through sex, a thing that represented how the patriarchal society influenced the ideology of young women in India: "That's how she meant to make her husband do whatever she wanted."²⁰ This shows how women strive to maintain domestic and professional life as well because of social restraints.

Furthermore, Gungoo narrated how even high-class educated women that belonged to joint families in India, and who at the same time occupied an independent position as working women, still suffered from arranged marriages. For example, in the situation of Sita Sahi, she left her husband's home on the first night of the wedding because the groom turned out to be a homosexual: "The groom chosen for Sita by Lalaji turned out to be abnormal ... the groom was a sexual deviant."²¹

In the novel, as Sita Sahi left her husband's home after the first night, Gungoo portrayed the stereotypical image of women in domestic life within the ideology of the patriarchal society. She described the vows of marriage from day one in the life of a bride: "You know what is said traditionally to every bride as she leaves her father's home to go with her in-laws ... Don't leave your husband's home to return here, endure his dictates, stay there no matter what your fate dictates."²² In other words, women must endure the imprisonment of arranged marriages no matter how the situation turns out.

As for the problem of arranged marriages in India, it occupied an enormous percentage. Roshan Lall has stated in a published article in January 2006 that the statistics of arranged marriages still dominated the Indian community; hence "an estimated 95 per cent of all Indian marriages are still arranged".²³

¹⁹ MAHINDRA, I. *The End Play*, p. 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 554 – 555.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²³ ROSHAN LALL, R. *Women In India: The Good News And The Bad*, p. 28.

Moreover, due to the high percentage of arranged marriages at an early age in India, a number of social problems emerged, such as divorce, domestic violence and uneducated women. In the *Atlantic Monthly*, social researchers state that “the more education and earning power a woman enjoys the more control she exercises in the family”.²⁴ Elderly head families arrange the marriage of their male sons to young and uneducated women; therefore, extended families in India applied this policy to assert the disempowerment of women from gaining control in the family. Furthermore, in relation to gender and literacy in India, it is found that early marriages in previous years affected the position of women in general and concluded in creating a late and middle age layer of uneducated women in India.²⁵ Overall, these statistics and the well-considered work of fiction represent the same realistic situation in relation to women’s ideological inferior position in the patriarchal community, a society that gave them civil rights of equality, but at the same time applied contradicting social practices.

Before discussing the development in Gungoo’s self-ideology towards marriage and domestic life, it is necessary to explore how Gungoo represented the effect of social change on women’s rights, in relation to independent working women in a society that said one thing and expressed another.

In relation to work, Gungoo occupied a job at a magazine called ‘Reflections’, a thing that seemed normal for a woman to do in modern India, but other family members expressed a different social ideology that depended on the stereotypical image of women in their patriarchal society. For Mamoo, who represented the circumstantial uncle that Nani-ma had adopted, for women to work is something unneeded” “Mamoo, you know I work for this magazine ... Yes, yes, I do. I know you are working. Why, I don’t understand ... I ignored his disapproval. Women as well as men work for this magazine. Men can be just friends too, you know.”²⁶ A second stereotypical image of working women’s behavior in society is when Gungoo tried to discover the immoral history of the Sahi family in obtaining their material fortune; Gungoo’s brother Karan expressed a social ideology that reflected his patriarchal beliefs: “Don’t worry your head about such things. That’s the trouble with you girls when you take up jobs.”²⁷ Women are not taken seriously because they do their job well and right. Therefore, women are blamed because they challenge the traditional role expected by males.

From another perspective, open-minded modern women who studied and worked hard were, from the perspective of the patriarchal society, members

²⁴ MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER. In *Atlantic Monthly* [online], p. 31.

²⁵ GHOSE, M. Gender, Literacy and Women’s Empowerment In India: Some Issues. In *Convergence*, p. 198.

²⁶ MAHINDRA, I. The End Play, p. 12.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

referred to as lesbian. The presumed common ideology about women is that they are only suitable for domestic imprisonment or sexual adventures with males. Gungoo's mother and father expressed that presumption in relation to Gungoo's best female friends Jeet and Kanta: "Like Papa had often insinuated that we three friends must be lesbians from the time we became glued to each other in school."²⁸

To reveal Gungoo's ideology and ideas towards domestic life and marriage in general, it is vital to review the social beliefs and events that affected her ideology during the portrayed social changes in the novel. The novel explores the prevalent implanted masculine ideology in the minds of her family members and society, the situation of domestic life in relation to arranged or early marriage, divorce, betrayal, in addition to the disturbance in her joint family in Bombay that resulted in exposing the secret sexual affairs and the bloody history of her father's family. All of these aspects placed Gungoo in a state of self-alienation; she had her own ideology believing in women's equal rights, but because society enforced an oppressing contradicting ideology, she found herself as an independent woman inside an illusion of the so-called social change, a change in form not essence. From that point, it is obvious why Gungoo chose sexual freedom as the only path to social freedom: "I decided I had to break free from the grip of the Sahi [family] by freeing myself sexually. Only then would I be compelled to keep going on a path of my choice."²⁹ Gungoo's choice is not a result of hate or revenge from her family; in fact, the sequence of events shows that she rejected Shiv Menon's proposals for marriage on different occasions, a man whom she was sexually involved with for some time. She just wanted to be a free woman. She did not need a man to define who she is. Gungoo chose to be against the roots of the patriarchal system.

Moreover, as she stated to her grandmother in the last debates about marriage in general assured Gungoo's ideology in the pursuit of social freedom; Gungoo said: "You know times have changed... I may never marry."³⁰ Furthermore, Gungoo expressed her ideology of the experienced social change of social freedom by stating that she is not going to marry, but rather wants to live as a free independent woman: "I don't want to marry and be tied down like a peg, like a scared cow. I want to be free, unburdened."³¹

In conclusion, this paper has reviewed the effects of social change on the ideologies of the three sequential female generations and other female or male

²⁸ Ibid., p. 149.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 183.

³¹ Ibid., p. 187.

characters, in addition to the effect of social change on the general social ideology in modern India. It is logical to state that although social change in India affected the social ideologies of society in general, it rather kept the first generation – Nani-ma and other individuals from the contemporary period – constrained to the social ideology of the masculine society, who considered women as inferior to men. Moreover, social change did not change much of these ideologies in the second or third generation, but rather varied in some cases. Nevertheless, in the situation of Gungoo, who chose to take advantage of all the social changes to be a free and independent woman, the issue depended on her free will, social change, and other personal motives that led to a development in her ideology to break free.

The contradicting ideology of society on one hand gave women civil rights in official papers of the state, but on the other hand practiced another masculine ideology not obviously represented, but rather hidden. As stated by Wendy Brown, “The multiple dimensions of socially constructed masculinity have historically shaped the multiple modes of power circulating through the domain called the state.”³² The novel’s characters and themes represented how social change gave women equal rights; however, did it improve the position of women in society within its social ideology regarding stereotypical image of women? If in principle it did, it is due to the new civil rights in work and property, a thing that one might refer to as changing economical ideologies. But from a social perspective, the novel also portrayed many domestic problems. Although it somehow changed a woman’s position and social status, it is not a social change in essence because it still did not affect the patriarchal ideology in modern India to a great extent.

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³² BROWN, W. Finding the Man in the State, p. 8.

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