Exploring Gendered Realities in The Short Fiction of Madhulika Liddle: A Study of Woman to Woman

Saira Siddiqui [1]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of English, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, M.P., India.

Dr. Soumya Tiwari [2]

[2] Supervisor, Department of English, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, M.P., India.

ABSTRACT

The short fiction of Madhulika Liddle offers a powerful exploration of contemporary social realities with a strong focus on women's experiences. This paper examines selected stories from her collection Woman to Woman, highlighting themes such as gender inequality, patriarchy, emotional trauma, and resilience. The stories present women from diverse social and economic backgrounds, revealing the multiple forms of oppression they face, including violence, marginalization, and societal expectations. At the same time, the narratives portray moments of strength and resistance, providing a realistic yet empowering perspective on women's lives. Through simple language and impactful storytelling, Liddle uncovers the hidden tensions within everyday life. The study argues that Woman to Woman reflects the complexities of modern society while questioning traditional norms, thereby establishing its significance in contemporary Indian English literature and feminist discourse.

Keywords: *Gender, Patriarchy, Realism, Identity, Society.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian English literature increasingly reflects the complexities of modern society, particularly through the exploration of gender, identity, and social realities. Among the significant contributors to this literary landscape, Madhulika Liddle emerges as a distinctive voice whose short fiction captures the subtle yet powerful dimensions of everyday life. Her writing focuses on ordinary individuals, especially women, whose experiences reveal deeper socio-cultural tensions. In a rapidly changing society where traditional values often collide with modern aspirations, Liddle presents narratives that remain grounded in realism while exposing the emotional and psychological struggles of her characters. Her stories are not merely personal accounts but serve as reflections of broader societal structures that shape human behavior and relationships.

The collection Woman to Woman occupies a central place in Liddle's short fiction, as it brings together a diverse range of female experiences across different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. The stories portray women who navigate complex realities marked by patriarchy, marginalization, and emotional conflict. At the same time, these narratives highlight resilience, resistance, and the search for identity. By presenting characters from varied contexts, Liddle demonstrates that women's experiences, though diverse, are often interconnected through shared struggles. The collection captures the everyday realities of women in contemporary India, revealing how deeply ingrained social norms continue to influence their lives. Through this, the author offers a nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics without resorting to overt moral judgment.

Liddle's narrative style plays a crucial role in enhancing the impact of her themes. She employs simple and direct language, allowing readers to engage easily with the stories while uncovering deeper meanings beneath the surface. Her use of realism ensures that the situations and characters appear authentic and relatable. At the same time, many of her stories incorporate unexpected twists that challenge the reader's assumptions and provoke critical reflection. This combination of simplicity and complexity makes her storytelling both accessible and intellectually engaging. The psychological depth of her characters further adds to the richness of her narratives, as they often grapple with internal conflicts and moral dilemmas that mirror real-life situations.

Another important aspect of Liddle's work is her focus on social issues that remain relevant in contemporary society. Themes such as gender-based violence, exploitation, loneliness, and emotional neglect are explored with sensitivity and insight. The stories do not present these issues in isolation but connect them to larger social structures and cultural expectations. In doing so, Liddle highlights the ways in which individuals are shaped by their environments while also possessing the agency to challenge and redefine their circumstances. Her portrayal of women, in particular, moves beyond victimhood to emphasize their strength and complexity, making her work significant within feminist literary discourse.

Thus, the short fiction of Madhulika Liddle, especially in Woman to Woman, serves as an important medium for examining contemporary realities. Her stories provide a mirror to society, reflecting both its constraints and possibilities. By combining realism with psychological insight, she creates narratives that are not only engaging but also socially meaningful. Her work continues to contribute to the evolving discourse of Indian English literature by foregrounding voices and experiences that demand attention and understanding.

II. MADHULIKA LIDDLE

Admitted to the world on January 8, 1973, Madhulika Liddle is a writer who hails from India. Muzaffar Jang was a Mughal investigator who lived during the 17th century. Her writings that explore Muzaffar Jang are the ones that have brought her the greatest fame. Among the two daughters that Andrew Verity Liddle and his wife Muriel Liddle had, Madhulika Liddle was the younger of the two. She was born in the town of Haflong, which is situated in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India.

Andrew Liddle was an officer in the Indian Police Service, which meant that he would be transferred to a new location about once every two to three years. This was the case because of the nature of his position. As a consequence of this, Madhulika spent the first twelve years of her life in a variety of locations that were spread out over the state of Assam.

Liddle was moved to New Delhi in the year 1985, while Madhulika finished her studies in the city of New Delhi. Both of these events took place in the same year. Her subsequent educational establishment was the Institute of Hotel Management, Catering and Nutrition (IHMCN) in New Delhi. She attended this institution for the purpose of furthering her studies.

III. GENDERED REALITIES IN MADHULIKA LIDDLE'S SHORT FICTION

Madhulika Liddle's short stories on gender show the subtle, sometimes unsaid ways that power, identity, and societal expectations affect women's lives in modern society. Her stories don't depend on overt feminist statements; instead, they show gendered realities via ordinary occurrences,

relationships, and internal struggles. By placing her characters in well-known social contexts like urban homes, workplaces, and middle-class neighbourhoods, Liddle shows how deeply gender stereotypes are ingrained in everyday life, affecting both personal decisions and relationships with others.

A key part of Liddle's representation of gendered reality is how she shows home areas. The house, generally seen as a place of warmth and belonging, is sometimes shown as a place where conventional gender roles are strengthened. In her tales, women are supposed to take care of others, keep the peace, and put their family's needs ahead of their own goals. But Liddle makes this story more complicated by talking about the emotional and psychological stress that comes with these kinds of expectations. Her female characters often endure a subtle sensation of discontent or constraint, indicating that domesticity, despite its societal esteem, may also serve as a constraining framework that restricts liberty.

Liddle looks at gendered power dynamics in both social and work settings, in addition to family roles. In many of her tales, women have to deal with situations where their skills are not recognised or their voices are not heard. Liddle doesn't show big fights; instead, she shows minor acts of disobedience, moments of self-awareness, or changes in point of view that give her characters back their feeling of agency. This subtle approach mirrors the intricacies of actual gender debates, where change often occurs gradually rather than via explicit defiance.

Another key part of Liddle's fiction about gendered reality is how she looks at identity and how people see themselves. Her characters struggle with the conflict between what society expects of them and what they want for themselves. They frequently question the roles they have been given. These internal conflicts are shown with subtlety, highlighting the psychological effects of gender standards. Liddle's essay implies that identity is not static but is continuously influenced by social interactions and cultural upbringing. She uses first-person narrative to show how women take in, fight against, and change the expectations that are put on them.

Moreover, Liddle's narratives often explore themes of marriage, autonomy, and emotional satisfaction, depicting them as intricately connected to gendered experiences. In her literature, relationships are not just personal; they are shaped by larger societal systems that determine what is acceptable behaviour for men and women. Liddle uses these interactions to show how power may be uneven even in partnerships that appear equal. She also shows times of empathy and understanding between the two people, which suggests that partnerships might be fairer.

IV. WRITINGS OF MADHULIKA LIDDLE

The Muzaffar Jang Series

Madhulika's best-known series of works are historical whodunnits featuring 17th century Mughal detective Muzaffar Jang. Muzaffar Jang first appeared in print in a short story, Murk of Art, in the anthology, 21 Under 40, published by Zubaan Books in 2007. The first full-length Muzaffar Jang novel was published by Hachette India in 2009 as The Englishman's Cameo. As of 2021, four books in the series have been published.

The Englishman's Cameo (2009)

The Englishman's Cameo introduces Muzaffar Jang, a twenty-five-year-old Mughal nobleman living in the Delhi of 1656 AD. Muzaffar ends up investigating a murder of which his friend, a jeweller's assistant, is accused. The book became a bestseller in India, and was published in French by Editions Philippe Picquier, as Le Camée Anglais.

Both editions received numerous favourable reviews, with Pradeep Sebastian of Business World writing: "Its intimate picture of life in Emperor Shahjahan's Dilli resembles a delicate Mughal miniature…" and Zac O'Yeah of Deccan Herald describing the book's "originality and freshness" as its strongest point. Gargi Gupta, for the Hindustan Times, wrote: "The Englishman's Cameo is a fast-paced yarn written in snappy prose. It also succeeds in evoking the Mughal era through its manners, fashions, jewels and architecture. There's blood, dead bodies every 50 pages or so, and even a love interest to keep readers hooked."

The Eighth Guest & Other Muzaffar Jang Mysteries (2011)

The Eighth Guest & Other Muzaffar Jang Mysteries is a collection of ten short mystery stories set in the latter half of 1656 AD, following Muzaffar Jang's successful solving of the case of The Englishman's Cameo. These stories are set against varying backdrops, including the Imperial Atelier, a traditional Mughal garden, the sarai built by the Princess Jahanara in Delhi, and the Royal Elephant Stables. Included in the collection was the first Muzaffar Jang short story (Murk of Art), reprinted in this collection as The Hand of an Artist.

Engraved in Stone (2012)

Engraved in Stone, the third book in the series, is set in Agra. When a wealthy and influential merchant named Mumtaz Hassan is murdered, the Diwan-e-Kul, Mir Jumla (who is in Agra, en route to the Deccan, where he's been sent on a campaign) assigns Muzaffar the task of finding the culprit. In the process, Muzaffar stumbles across another mystery which is as old as Muzaffar himself.

Crimson City (2015)

Crimson City, the fourth Muzaffar Jang book, is set in Delhi during early spring, 1657. The novel starts with recalling Mughal army's siege of Bidar in the Deccan, and introduces Muzaffar Jang as the brother-in-law of the Kotwal of Dilli. The novel weaves through historical landmarks of Mughal-era Dilli while showcasing the ability of Muzaffar Jang in solving a series of murders in his neighbourhood, as well as other unconnected crimes, including the abduction of a moneylender's infant son, and the death of a wealthy nobleman in the bath house he himself had built. Interestingly, the unconnected episode of abduction of the moneylender's infant son is used as a commentary upon the tense relations between Muslims and Hindus during the Mughal era (and, obliquely, in the contemporary times as well). In Chapter 8, the Hindu moneylender is shown as holding back from providing Muzaffar Jang, his hungry "saviour", a few morsels. The author comments: "it was odd, he (Muzaffar Jang) thought, that a man could be on the one hand praised to the skies, and on the other, not even considered human enough to share food with." What comes subsequently is interesting, to put it mildly. Jang wonders whether there could have been a compromise, had he asked for a meal? He/Author imagines that if at all there would have been such a compromise, then the moneylender would have only given Muzaffar company while he ate, and after Muzaffar's departure the dishes he

had eaten in would be thrown away and Gangu (the cook) would have bathed and gone to the temple to purify herself. Writing such an unconnected episode, it seems, was to complement existing narratives about the inhumane treatment of Dalits historically at the hands of the Hindus, and not just Brahmins. Jang feels relaxed that he didn't ask for a meal as a denial would have been "excruciatingly embarrassing". His wife Shireen tries to sum up what he is feeling: "It is a double-edged sword, is that what you mean to say? If we regard Hindus as different, they regard us as different, too. Too different to be even humane too." Jang responds that faith ought to be "a personal thing, something that should raise you above petty things like whether or not a man shares the same belief as you do. That is what I believe religion should be: a way of making ourselves better human beings."

Short Stories

Madhulika Liddle has written a wide range of short stories that reflect contemporary social realities, human relationships, and psychological complexities. Several of her stories have received critical recognition and awards. For instance, A Morning Swim won the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association Short Story Competition in 2003, highlighting her early literary achievement. Another significant story, Poppies in the Snow, gained international attention when it was longlisted for the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award in 2016. These stories demonstrate her ability to blend emotional depth with compelling narrative structures.

Her first major collection, My Lawfully Wedded Husband and Other Stories (2012), includes stories such as My Lawfully Wedded Husband, The Legacy, The Photograph, and The Other Woman. These narratives explore themes of marriage, betrayal, moral dilemmas, and the hidden tensions within domestic life. Through simple yet powerful storytelling, Liddle presents characters who grapple with ethical conflicts and personal struggles, making her work relatable and thought-provoking.

Another important collection, Woman to Woman (2017), further expands her exploration of women's experiences. This volume includes stories like Woman to Woman, The Girl Who Loved a Pirate, The Visit, and The Second Chance. The stories in this collection focus on diverse female perspectives, addressing issues such as identity, resilience, exploitation, and emotional survival in contemporary society. Together, these works establish Madhulika Liddle as a significant voice in modern Indian English short fiction.

V. THE WOMAN-TO-WOMAN IN LIDDLE'S FICTION

The Women and Their Stories

The women in these stories come from different social strata, regions and age groups, but are united by their role in patriarchy.

Paro is about bride trafficking. It says an estimated 10 lakh trafficked brides known as 'paros' or 'molkis' are believed to live in the states surrounding Delhi. Ambika, Mother Goddess addresses the ubiquitous story of a young girl who gets raped and the cacophony of the society that the victim shames. Mala, narrated through the eyes of a three-year-old, is about a young woman who falls in love with the son of her rich employer, only to pay the price.

Woman to Woman discusses the rather unlikely meeting between a prostitute and a nun. In Collector of Junk, a young girl finds herself looking on as her mother listens to the woes of the world, always offering a sympathetic ear while harbouring a bitter secret. The Letter is a heartbreaking tale about an old and lonely mother awaiting her son's arrival.

Two Doors and Wronged talk about different aspects of marital woes, while Maplewood chronicles the tale of an upper-middle-class woman who stays alone in a bungalow, raising some poignant questions on privileges.

Captive Spirit is about a woman's obsession with jewellery that had her soul resisting death while her body perished. The delightfully titled The Sari Satyagraha is a relatively light-hearted story that takes us to the pre-Independence era, marking the surprising rebellion of a submissive wife against her mansplainer of a husband.

Poppies in the Nnow, set in Kashmir, is the tale of love, betrayal and revenge that lays the hypocrisy and irrationality of gender stereotypes bare.

Structure and Theme

Short stories can be challenging to write. The author has done a commendable job within the constraints of the length of each story. Almost every story in the collection comes with a delicious twist that is most satisfying.

The initial stories are straightforward and told with simplicity, becoming more complex as we read on.

Death is a recurring theme. It makes its first appearance in 'Mala' with a cruel twist. It reappears in 'Maplewood' and 'Collector of Junk' and takes a macabre form in 'Captive Spirit', bringing comfort and closure in 'Poppies in the Snow'.

Woman to Woman tells the reader just how commonplace it is for women to be victims of violence, injustice and abuse, and how accepting our society is.

The stories of women are melancholic, which may be defeatist on the surface. Read 'Paro', 'Mala', 'The Sari Satyagraha' and 'Poppies in the Snow' closely and you see they do the opposite – by juxtaposing stories of loss and victory together, Liddle paints a real yet empowering picture.

These stories of women provide a glimpse into the lives of women across different segments of Indian society, and every woman will find value in them.

The writing is simple but impactful. The places and atmospheres feel authentic and the characters original, although the themes can get repetitive.

VI. CONCLUSION

The short fiction of Madhulika Liddle presents a compelling portrayal of contemporary realities, particularly through its focus on women's lives and experiences. Her collection Woman to Woman effectively captures the complexities of gender relations, social inequalities, and emotional struggles that define modern society. Through realistic narratives and well-developed characters, she highlights the challenges faced by women across different social backgrounds, while also emphasizing their resilience and inner strength. Liddle's writing stands out for its simplicity, psychological depth, and

ability to uncover hidden dimensions of everyday life. Her stories move beyond surface-level depiction to explore deeper issues such as patriarchy, marginalization, and identity. At the same time, the presence of subtle resistance and empowerment in her narratives adds a hopeful dimension to her work. In Madhulika Liddle's short fiction makes a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English literature. Her ability to blend realism with social critique not only reflects the lived experiences of women but also encourages readers to question established norms and recognize the need for change in society.

REFERENCES

1. Agwu, P. A., J. O. Acha, and D. A. Ashabua. "An Evaluation of Feminine Identity and Gender Stereotypes in Leïla Slimani's The Perfect Nanny." 2015.
2. Ajmal, M., K. Gull, and M. A. Lodhi. "Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in Children Literature 'Chotti Si Munni': An Application of Feminist Theory." International Journal of Childhood, Counselling & Special Education (CCSE), vol. 5, no. 2, 2023.
3. Bhatia, S. Indian Popular Fiction and the Question of Literary Value. Routledge India, 2019.
4. Bose, B. Contemporary Indian Women Writers in English: Feminist Perspectives. Oxford University Press, 2017.
5. Menon, R. "Mental Health Narratives in Indian Popular Fiction: A Reading of Preeti Shenoy's Life Is What You Make It." Journal of South Asian Literature and Culture, vol. 12, no. 3, 2014, pp. 45–59.
6. Nair, A. "Representations of Single Motherhood in Contemporary Indian Fiction." Indian Journal of Gender Studies, vol. 24, no. 2, 2017, pp. 201–218.
7. Nayar, P. K. Indian English Literature in the Twenty-First Century: Critical Perspectives. Routledge, 2018.
8. Rajan, R. "Gender, Marriage, and Agency in Indian Women's Writing." Asian Journal of Literature and Culture, vol. 9, no. 1, 2016, pp. 87–104.
9. Ramakrishnan, M. Women, Writing, and Representation in Postcolonial India. Orient Blackswan, 2015.
10. Subramanian, S. "Popular Fiction and Feminist Narratives: The Case of Preeti Shenoy." Literary Studies Review, vol. 8, no. 2, 2016, pp. 56–74.
11. Varghese, J. "Narratives of Resilience: Coping and Healing in Preeti Shenoy's Novels." Journal of Comparative Literature, vol. 19, no. 4, 2015, pp. 101–117.
12. Badjak, Miya, Bakhtiar Majid, and Sulmi Magfirah. "Hybridity in the Novel The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri." Jurnal Sinestesia, vol. 12, no. 2, 2022, pp. 627–636. https://doi.org/10.53696/27219283.223.