

“Gender trouble” in the new Hindi novel:

The ambiguous writing of womanhood in K.B. Vaid’s *Lila* and Mridula Garg’s *Kathgulab*

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Some recent studies aim at highlighting the way post-independence Indian literature can reveal the ambiguities linked to the representation of the “self”, whose “indianness” lay on both indigenous and exogenous sources, in a continuous dialogue with Western discourses (Marxism, psychoanalysis, and existentialism, for example). The gender issue remained nevertheless relatively excluded from these debates. It is undeniable that the development of Western feminist discourses and Gender Studies since the 1960’s, from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler, significantly modified the representation of woman and womanhood. In the field of social science, many studies indeed aim at deconstructing the mythic model of the docile and silent “Oriental” woman, represented by the figure of Sita, and at underlining, even stimulating her empowerment, thus radically opposing the passivity of Indian traditional women with a militant feminism nurtured by the ideal of gender equality and even gender indetermination.

Nevertheless, cultural forms, performances or productions can reveal porosities between these two opposed representations. By exploring two recent Hindi novels (K.B. Vaid’s *Lila*, 1990, and Mridula Garg’s *Kathgulab*, 1996), whose polyphonic structure allows the empowerment of women within the narrative space, this paper aims at underlining the way literary feminism can also lay on a composite and complex representation of womanhood which constantly re-negotiates its models and can also be nourished by traditional sources. The gender question and the fluidity of this notion are not only echoed, but also find their roots in an indigenous mythical ethos, whose paradigms cannot be reduced to an essential manhood and womanhood. This paper thus interrogates the cultural specificities of this “gender trouble” in the Indian context, showing that feminism in this particular background can lay on a re-interpretation of traditions rather than on a radical break with them.