

“BONDAGE”, “PATRIARCHY”, AND “FEMININE” IN ANITA DESAI’S NOVELS: A SILENT REVOLT

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ABSTRACT

Historically women have been silenced in history and literature. In the social sphere they have been “pressed”-oppressed, depressed and suppressed. With the setting in of the modern period, women began to snatch for themselves spaces for themselves. In India with the struggle against colonialism another silent struggle went on simultaneously. That was by women to bring themselves at par with men. This was visible even in the literary sphere. In the current paper we would trace the feminist way of portraying women in Anita Desai’s two most popular and widely acknowledged novels- CRY, the peacock and where shall we go this summer.

Here in this paper our concern is to look at how in post colonial period women English writers of India have dealt with the theme of “woman oppression”. Have she raised a loud voice or revolt or has silently taken way to some other way to escape this position. Taking queue from the broader sub-themes of today’s Seminar, the paper would look at the dynamics of Indian English women writers concern and feminist thoughts in the writings in post independent India. Looking at the time constraints, for the sake of convenience we would look at the famous characters characterized by the famous writer Anita Desai. Her famous woman characters, the heroine of “CRY, THE PEACOCK” and “WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER” has been taken up for this brief research.

Keywords: Feminine, Feminist, Patriarchy, Liberation, Post Colonial, Post Modernism

INTRODUCTION

“History scarcely mentions her.....Occasionally an individual woman is mentioned, an Elizabeth, or a Mary; a queen or a great lady. But by no possible means could middle class women with nothing but brains and character at their command have taken part in any one of the great movements which, brought together, constitute the historians view of the past. Nor shall we find her in any collection of anecdotes...”- Virginia Woolf:¹

Womenfolk, a lot which have been suppressed, oppressed, repressed, depressed and victimized in all spheres of life, not only in India but in most cultures throughout the globe. In the post modern critique we traditionally believe that this ruthlessness is present

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everywhere where the proselytizing effect of “modernity” has laid hands on. In short woman has succeeded to maintain her socio-economic position in the so called “primitive” societies. This is a large and never ending historical-sociological debate and time constraints does not permit us to elaborate in this paper. This essay focuses on some of the Indian fictional texts written by woman writers in English to study the portrayal of the changing images, positions, awareness levels and attitudes of Indian women since the post independent India. This has been discussed with reference to a few selected texts by Anita Desai.

Here in this very brief research, Anita Desai’s two famous woman characters in her three famous novels “CRY, THE PEACOCK” AND “WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER” and see what are the various forms of rebel feelings have guided the author while painting pen pictures of these women characters which are understandably her portrayal of a liberated of aspiring to be liberated women seething and silently groaning under the burden of “patriarchal bondage”. Born on 24th June, 1937 Mussourie, India of a German mother and Bengali father, she although regarded herself as a writer interested in women’s world, she has been particularly cautious of labels and refuses to see herself as a feminist. Mostly she portrays world of a dissatisfied woman who is a lonely protagonist. She challenges the prevalent version of Indian women stereotype by subverting their quest for fulfillment with an intense dissatisfaction with family system hence a resultant unsatisfied ego. Desai’s women are mostly in self search and in search of fulfillment of the emptiness which she feels even in ties between parents, siblings, friends and yet incomplete. Landscape becomes a resort to such dissatisfaction. The story, plot construction etc of the novels is not our concern here. This paper’s main concern is the dialogue of the verse which reflects the feminine aspect of the writers thinking. Her stories are not as complex as her woman protagonist characters. The latter concern us here. The essay’s focus here is to look at how subtly through are eccentric looking female protagonists, Desai has created a feminist discourse of literary writings showing signs of a seething discontentment, hatred for the patriarchal norms of “civilized” human existence, aspiration for liberation from societal and traditional family norms made compulsory for her acceptable existence in the mainstream male dominated society. Her female characters are mostly in search of self authenticity, independent of the identity that has been dumped on her. Desai however has a typical style of her own to register protest against patriarchal norms. These may not be to the liking of many. Any heart core feminist may be restless or even be dismissive of Desai’s writings citing that her characters are hopeless and helpless before male hegemony and conforming to the expectations of the mainstream or rather “male stream” norms laid for an “ideal woman”. Desai’s brainchild a “MAYA” or a “SITA” may be groaning and seething in discontentment against the bindings that forcefully binds her to the socially recognized duties expected of women. They end up registering revolt against these in there own way, one by taking recourse to self destruction and the other by escaping to the island of her desire. Unlike in the writings of the writers like Tasleema Nasreen , or Arundhati Roy, or Shobha De or Urvashi Bhutalia, Desai’s protagonists does not take recourse to explicit moves of self liberation. But her characters lodges their protests in their in their own way, in the typical style of Desai, by way of escapism of one way or the other. It cannot be denied that Anita Desai is one of them who has made has made way for a new type of genre where a new kind of encounter between the “female” and the world awaits. A voice of loud protests that writings post Desai launches.

“Maya” of Cry, the Peacock

Maya is seen to share a very affectionate relationship with her father and is at pain to leave her home at marriage. Her problem upbringing caused by her mother’s death makes her detached from the world outside. Thus she wrote:

“.....my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was pretty one”²

The expectations she had at marriage of her husband, who is much older than her are not fulfilled. Resultantly she becomes more stultifying. She found her husband Gautama as a man in whom “understanding was scant, love was meager”³ As one reads through the novel, the reader finds that both her father and her husband loves and cherishes her, but she is never taken seriously. This is because she is a woman. They identify her with “maya” according to Hindu consciousness. This is what repulses her; this is something that she objects to. As time elapses, she becomes more and more restless, brooding over her emptiness that she feels at heart.

“.....I had yearned for the contact that goes deeper than flesh- that of thought- and longed to transmit to him the laughter that gurgled up in my throat as I saw a goat nuzzle, secretly, a basket of sliced melons in the bazaar while the vendor’s back was turned, or the profound thrill that lit a bonfire in the pit of my stomach-when I saw the sun unfurl like a rose in the west, the west and farther west....,But those were the times when I admitted to the loneliness of the Human soul, and I would keep silent”⁴

Thus an extremely sensitive character, Maya is a portrayal of a woman who has failed to come to terms with hegemony of patriarchal order. Though she lives in the male’s world, surrounded by patriarchal order, she refuses to identify to it and revolts to it in her own way as the story unfolds to the reader. Seeking her lost mother in the natural landscapes and gardens, she is a strange blend of natural and cultural. She begins to seek solace in it. Birds and animals fill the emptiness at her heart, a space that human relationships fail to fill in Maya’s life. With the nature she feels secure, where her inert feelings, her deepest desires would not be rejected. She is an affluent housewife with the necessities of a comfortable city life easily fulfilled. Yet she is dissatisfied. She is certainly not the ideal “Bharatiya Nari” imagery, a content housewife who compromises her position suppressing her self identity and feminine desires in her heart till she is buried at death. The fear of being not understood by her father and her husband, she expresses herself by the way of writing. Unsatiated she becomes a psychological case.

A rebel woman Maya fails to identify herself with her husband Gautama’s world and finds herself being alienated from the affection she enjoyed from her father is taken away by her marriage. Resultantly she becomes a “nature’s child”. Desai’s brain child Maya is difficult to be identified with the stereotyped Indian woman. She is rebellious to this idea of “ideal housewife”. A post independence childless married woman with secure economic status, she is a total loner. Her total economic dependence on her husband rather makes her fell rather insecure and powerless and non effective, because she sees herself ineffective to her “protector’s” eyes. This is the image of a new woman, resisting patriarchy; a self gained image of “female” rebellious of the image of “feminine” “adarsh nari” expected and

accepted in the main stream. The readers find it difficult to fix her within the framework of an Indian stereotypical woman. There are other traits in Maya's character which transcends the idea of "femininity" inseparable from males. She is in search of a new vista for a woman's world- a space where she is at par with man. Desai writes "for woman ,about woman by woman"- a genre where woman is not depicted in two versions- one in the temporal consciousness where she is "weak, meek and submissive", ideally ABLA dependent on man related to her as her father or husband or son. The other image of her is in the religious and spiritual consciousness where she is depicted as "SHAKTI" with ten arms, power to destroy all evils. Desai is one of those founders of a literary genre where woman is not ideally meek and submissive. She is rebellious, dismissive of patriarchy. She is dismissive of the idea of a "four-wall bound Indian woman" a family where lies her primary duty, living a life as "to" to someone, daughter to, wife of and mother of where her independent self identity is non-existing and not accepted. But Desai's rebellious woman silently revolts but escaping into the nature's abode-a world of flowers, trees, water and mountains – a world of her own, a world where she can assert her independent "femaleness" "womaness" not bound to the familial ties to the subservient status in the "patriarchy" to conventions and traditions by threads of established norms , established by men for women, but in all respect against her, making her "femaleness" "feminine" which is identical to weakness, meekness and dependent. But she longs to be a "woman", independent from being a "wo-man". In this we find Desai's search for independent identify for the woman folk.

Apparently Maya's world is full with attachments, pleasure of affluence, of the smell and beauty of her garden's flowers. Yet there is this emptiness, a sense of meaninglessness, of a lack of belongingness, of being wanted as an independent being. This feeling of emptiness haunts her constantly. She dreads loneliness yet refuses to open up to the world in the fear of being not understood as an independent existential being- a "woman", a "female" essentially separate from a "male", without whom her existence is considered meaningless. This is a catchy situation for this is not an anguish of every woman, but of only those woman who feels alienated and suppressed by bondage , a burden of patriarchal norms, a woman's anguish who dreams of being liberated, with hatred for male domination of any king. Hence Desai's woman creates a private space of her own filled with the colours of flower and pained by the indifference of her husband Gautama to her world. She writes"

"Grey, grey, all was grey for Gautama, who lived so narrowly, so shallowly. And I felt sorry, infinitely sorry for him, for his slow, harmless, guideless being who walked the fresh grass and did not know he touched it"⁵

Her dilemma becomes identical with hysteria. But in reality that is Desai's way for portraying the confrontation hysteria and feminism, a determination to speak and act for women in the public world. Her fears are inarticulate but are not unfounded. Her failure to identify herself with her status as a "wife" and "daughter-in-law" makes her feels "houseless" amongst her material affluence. An ideal woman confined to womanhood in the patriarchal order, she is expected to reinstate and redefine herself. But here she precisely failed. Later even when she returns to her father's home after her husband Gautama's death she does not feel satiated and writes in despair:

“.....more like that of an expensive nursing home for convalescents. So quiet was it that the very clock in the library seemed to move its hands with deferential slowness, like a funeral priest gesturing with sticks of incense and bowls of ganges water”⁶

Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer:

Anita Desai's another woman protagonist "SITA" of "WHERE SHALL WE THIS SUMMER" is also projected as being caught in similar dilemma. She too is a rebellious, non-conformist woman, disgusted by and trying to liberate herself from the patriarchal norms. A new woman she too is seething in discontentment with her being enclosed within the "four walls" of her house with the expected behavior of an ideal "mother" and "wife". In protest she curves a niche of her own, escapes to her desired island of "MANORI" in search of an "independent female" status separated from the "male" liberated from patriarchal bondage, wanting to be a woman as an independent existential being. She is inadaptive in the house of her husband but that is not to say that she is financially challenged or is mal treated. But the feminist woman in her makes her dismissive of her status. When she was heavily pregnant by her fifth child, she was unhappy, apprehensive at the thought of losing its innocence in this world where nothing except "food, sex and money matters"⁷ Her escaping to "Manori" is identical to Maya's garden. Maya's hankering for her father's garden and Sita's return to the island are important significant gestures, not hysteric reactions of mad women but attempts to let out their pent up frustration, to restore their selves. With this fear firmly seated in her mind, she turns towards discovering an escape route in the island, to confer in her a kind of solace:

"She had come here in order to give birth...she was on the island, in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth, Wasn't this Manori, the island of miracles....She had four children with pride, with pleasure-sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure-with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition"⁸

The mythical ideal Indian woman of the epic "RAMAYANA", SITA and Desai's Sita are two characterization of ideal womanhood, femininity. The latter choose exile on her own accord. The former proves her chastity and loyalty after she was suspected of losing her chastity to Ravana. She was pregnant too like Desai's Sita. But the latter is a transversal of mythical Sita. Her exiling herself is an attempt to assert herself. In it she exile is an attempt. In it she seeks not a complete harmonious return but strength to envision a future. But she is a mother bound by her motherly responsibility. Since her children had no scope in the island of her desire, she could not hold herself permanently there. She is forced to return to her world obligation and duties. Though the magic of the island still enthralls her she soon realized the impossibility to revisit the past glory in the island in the present context:

"If it had ever existed-black, sparkling and glamorous as in her memory-it was now buried beneath the soft grey-green mildew of the monsoon, chilled and choked by it"⁹

CONCLUSION

In Desai's women we find a constant search of a landscape to accommodate their need for their "refusal" to their "refusal of the patrilineal society". Thus "garden" of Maya, "Manori" of Sita, "Kasauli" of Nanda and Raka are their respective resorts to solace their distraught beings. What strikes us in the nature to refusal to patriarchy and bondage by Desai's women

protagonists is that they are conscious of their victimhood and abjection and their inert desire to respond to the need for self-representation, independent of their identity being intricately associated with her male relatives.

The grant of equal status to woman with man by the constitution post independence, the women liberation movements of the 60s, post modern onslaught, western feminism all gave way to the creation of a new woman with her own desires and ambition, quest to break off the shackles of bondage that binds her to the patriarchal norms of subjection and abjection that de-value her. Thus novels and genres emerged which reflected, explicitly and implicitly such thoughts. Thus Amrita Pritam's "The revenue stamp", Nayantara Sahgal's "Storm in Chandigarh" etc are examples. Most of their woman protagonists are educated woman groaning under self conflict under circumstances of marriage, to their traditionally assigned roles. Even Arundhati Roy's "God of small things" shows three generations of women projecting silent suffering, revolting and finally making way to herself. Taslima Nasreen's works are another spectrum of expressive feminism. Post independence Indian woman novelist in English or even in regional genres show educated woman in the changed socio-economic conditions, revolting to their exploitation, skeptical to the traditional roles assigned to them, the inevitability of marriage, patriarchy and male-chauvinism. Post independent literary writings of Indian woman writers have redefined discourse on women. They have given a voice to the revolting consciousness of the womenfolk. The current case study Anita Desai has performed a significant function of instilling a positive "feminine" identity rather a female identity, role model women who deters the dependence on men. She has given a voice to the new Indian woman.

Like Virginia Woolf of western feminist literary paradigm, Desai has created woman characters through her novels who are no more symbolic "Shakti" mother Goddess, subverted and suppressed in the "andarmahal". They are human beings who seek liberation, move from bondage to freedom from meek indecision to self assertion from weakness to strength.

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