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Emancipation of Female Characters from the Shackles of Social Restraints:(With special reference to Anita Desai's 'Cry The Peacock')

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ABSTRACT

A backlash against women's rights is nothing new. Indeed, it's a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway towards equality, a seemingly inevitable early frost to the brief flowerings of feminism.

Susan Faludi

Today's India offers a lot of opportunities to women, with women having a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men.. However, even though India is moving away from the male dominated culture, discrimination is still highly visible in rural as well as in urban areas, throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has a limited effect, where patriarchal traditions prevail. The condition of women has gradually changed globally and the meek female has yielded place to the liberated woman. The status of women has been subject to many great changes over the past few centuries. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. The image of women in fiction has also undergone a change during the last four decades. The second generation of Indian Women Novelists has moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. Novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee have reacted to the changed psychological and emotional realities of Indian life. Being enlightened and exposed to the nuances of life in East and West, they are able to deal with the situation efficiently. Thus feminism, free sex, self-assertion, quest for identity is some of the major thematic concerns of these novelists. **Feminism** is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A **feminist** advocates or supports the rights and equality of women. This paper will extend light in particular to the works of the legendary writer, Anita Desai.

Keywords: Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

Today's India offers a lot of opportunities to women, with women having a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men.. However, even though India is moving away from the male dominated culture, discrimination is still highly visible in rural as well as in urban areas, throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has a limited effect, where patriarchal traditions prevail. The condition of women has gradually changed globally and the meek female has yielded place to the liberated woman. The status of women has been subject to many great changes over the past few centuries. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. The image of women in fiction has also undergone a change during the last four decades. The second generation of Indian Women Novelists has moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. Novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee have reacted to the changed psychological and emotional realities of Indian life. Being enlightened and exposed to the nuances of life in East and West, they are able to deal with the situation efficiently. Thus feminism, free sex, self-

assertion, quest for identity is some of the major thematic concerns of these novelists. **Feminism** is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A **feminist** advocates or supports the rights and equality of women. This paper will extend light in particular to the works of the legendary writer, Anita Desai.

Anita Desai is one of the most eminent and distinguished Indian English writers writing today. Her dual heritage, both racial and cultural has had a strong impact on her life and has also influenced her writing at the thematic as well as stylistic level. Most of Desai's works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai's first novel, chronicles the morbid dread, descent into madness, and suicide of Maya, a young Delhi housewife who is trapped in a loveless, arranged marriage to the much older Gautama, a misogynistic lawyer. The novel foreshadows several of the major recurring themes in Desai's works—the problems of independence and communication, the influence of the West, and the tensions between religious and domestic interaction. Set in the late 1950s, *Voices in the City* depicts Indian society still in transition more than a decade after India's independence from British rule. The novel is broken into four sections—the first three are named after a trio of young adult siblings from a Himalayan village who, separately and for different reasons, have moved to Calcutta. As the narrative follows each sibling individually, Desai illuminates the myriad ways that their respective social class defines their self-identities.

She is considered the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf to India. Included in this, is her pioneer status of writing of feminist issues. While many people today would not classify her work as feminist, she believes this is due to changing times: "The feminist movement in India is very new and a younger generation of readers in India tends to be rather impatient of my books and to think of them as books about completely helpless women, hopeless women. They find it somewhat unreal that the women don't fight back, but they don't seem to realize how very new this movement is" (Jussawalla).

Also, she says, her writing is realistic: "Women think I am doing a disservice to the feminist movement by writing about women who have no control over their lives. But I was trying, as every writer tries to do, even in fiction, to get at the truth, write the truth. It would have been really fanciful if I had made [for example, in *Clear Light of Day*] Bim and Tara modern-day feminists" (in Griffiths).

Desai considers *Clear Light of Day*, her most autobiographical book, because she was writing about her neighborhood in Delhi, although the characters are not based on her brothers and sisters. What she was exploring in this novel, she has said, was the importance of childhood and memories as the source of a life. She had wanted to start the book at the end and move backwards, into the characters' childhood and further, into the childhood of their parents etc., but in the end: "When I had gone as far back as their infancy the book just ground to a halt; it lost its momentum. It told me that this was done, that I couldn't carry it further. But I still have a sense of disappointment about that book, because the intention had been different" (Jussawalla). The character of Raja is identified with her in the sense that he is so immersed in all different types of literature and culture, and is so concerned with protecting the multicultural heritage of India. His worries about the Muslim neighbor family is not just about them particularly, but rather worry about the loss of all that the Muslim culture and literature contributes to India.

"Maya" of *Cry, the Peacock*

".....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"

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:

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"

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”

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. Unsatisfied 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 feel 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”

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 feel “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”

The world of Anita Desai’s novels is an ambivalent one; it is a world where the central harmony is aspired to but not arrived at, and the desire to love and live clashes – at times violently ... in conditions of solitude which is presented in its varying shades and meanings.

Another character in the novel is Maya’s friend Leila who has married a tubercular man against the wishes of her parents. She married a man knowing his disease. Her attitude towards life is fatalistic. The novel ends with the death of Maya. The mental retrogression suggests that Maya has not been able to adjust herself in the world of reality and after killing her husband, she mentally goes back of her protected and pampered childhood. Thus in the character of Maya, Anita Desai has presented the feminine psyche of both a girl and a woman. The issues of female, a popular subject in feminism, is handled by Anita Desai with sensitivity. N. R. Gopal has correctly pointed out in this connection:

Anita Desai not only explores and portrays the feminine psyche of a common woman but also of the subnormal bordering on abnormal women. These are the women who because of various factors are under so much of mental stress that they cannot be called insane but then certainly they are not. She is unable to face the ordinary realities.

CONCLUSION

Through novels, Anita Desai & other Indian writers try to depict feminine sensibility. In general life women like male counters want to liberation in all its approaches & recognition. They struggle for Equality for women rights historically & politically. They emphasize on the value of women in the society. Maya, the protagonist in *Cry the Peacock*, suffers from a type of Oedipus complex idolizes her father but becomes miserable as her search for a father substitute in her husband does not measure up to her anticipation. Her barrenness coupled with an albino fortune teller’s prediction of impending demise of one of the partners after her marriage agitates her mind, occupies her wakeful thoughts and precipitously pushes her towards her insanity. *Cry, the peacock* is a story of a female whose own world collides with her husband’s practical world thus making her feel dejected, lonely and demoralized. The psychoanalytic growth of the character and the catastrophe where the character relates her own sufferings with that of the peacock and the part where she finally throws her husband from the parapet akin to the peacock that kills their mate after mating aptly justifies the title. The very concept that women need something more than just food, clothes and accommodation is aptly illustrated in this novel. The hyper sensitive mind of the women is illustrated by Desai in the most tender way where the atmosphere of tension is set ideally against the backdrop of a sultry Indian summer. The nonviolence story, in the *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai finally leaves it on to the readers to complete the story. The oppression and depression, the anxiety and fear, the frustration and foiling of the female protagonist set against a typical Indian scenario brings out the very best of the writer in a coherent way.

FUTURE SCOPE

Feminist theory & perspectives are for global interest. Here is a lot of area for the research. As feminist there is need to develop new & related issues like forced desertion by women, sex determination, amniocentesis, wife beating, violence against older women in the family, marital gaps, abuses-so on kept emerging. Its global challenges how to overcome.

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