



ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS: A REFLECTION OF CULTURAL BARRIER FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

In modern India, it appears that the status of Indian women is in better position but even today she is not treated at par with men in the social and family life, she is confused and lacks the courage to act with conviction in pursuit of the emancipation she rightfully deserves. Education has made them economically independent, but they still lack the needed self-confidence and independence.

The need for women empowerment themes run strongly through all the literature, policy documents, planned initiatives etc. of the third world countries. Therefore a case study method of the protagonists' involving critical analysis of the selected novels "Cry, the Peacock" and "Voices in the City" of Anita Desai has been deployed. The reader's response will determine the new development strategies in the Indian social polity. Some of the socio-cultural factors contribute to the multi-level vulnerabilities that women face based on their gender. Desai is concerned not only with the marginalization of women but with their psychological aspects too. Gender inequality and the deeply rooted cultural taboos are powerfully brought out by her in the above mentioned novels. In order to really bring women empowerment in the Indian society, it needs to understand and eliminate the main cause of the ill practices against women which are patriarchy and male dominance in the society.

Keywords: Gender inequality, feminism, cultural taboos, women empowerment and psychological aspects.

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INTRODUCTION

Women Empowerment is a universal burning issue. The advancement of information technology and feministic movement has voiced the women's suppression and expression freely and flawlessly. But the most important thing for her is the urge to be accepted as an individual, a person in her own right and strong wish to enjoy the equal status as man has always enjoyed. India is a country known across the globe for its cultural heritage, traditions,

civilization, religion and geographical features from the ancient time. Women in India play a distinctive role in the development of the nation by representing themselves as a unit of human capital with their contribution to the economy of the nation.

Although the Indian women today may enjoy greater economic independence she is yet under the spell of the various social evils like the female feticide, dowry killing, domestic violence and sexual

assault etc. which still persists in the society. In modern India, it appears that the status of Indian women is in better position but even today she is not treated at par with men in the social and family life, she is confused and lacks the courage to act with conviction in pursuit of the emancipation she rightfully deserves. Education has made them economically independent, but they still lack the needed self-confidence and independence. The main reason for this is the old cultural atmosphere in which they have been brought up, has restrained them and till date they have not been able to shake off the influence even after the acquisition of modern education. Culture is a part of the fabric of every society, including our own. It shapes the way the things are done and our understanding of why this should be so.

For some culture is a social behavior. For others, it is not at all behavior but an abstraction from behavior. Raymond Williams states that culture "includes the organization of production, the structure of family and of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate" (Williams 1958). The roles that men and women play in society are not biologically determined. They are socially determined, changing and changeable. Roles are performed according to social norms, shared rules that guide people's behaviour in specific situations. Social norms determine the privileges and responsibilities a status possesses. Females and males, mothers and fathers, and daughters and sons are all statuses with different normative role requirements attached to them. The status of mother calls for expected roles involving love, nurturing, self-sacrifice, home-making, and availability. The status of father calls for expected roles of breadwinner, disciplinarian, home technology expert, and ultimate decision maker in the household.

And these roles are justified as being required by culture or religion, by locality and evolve over time. The role of women in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage is significant both as bearer or transmitter of traditions and identity values in their relation with families and communities. But it is also true that the participation in cultural life often reflects the

inequalities faced by the society itself, and the gender inequalities in the access to culture can also be found in these expressions. Society allows for a degree of flexibility in acting out roles, but in times of rapid social change, acceptable role limits are often in a state of flux, producing uncertainty about what appropriate role behaviour should be. Cultural norms are modified whenever social interaction occurs because people bring their own definitions about appropriate behaviour to the interaction.

PROBLEM

Gender inequality is the major factor for the set back of women in India. Gender inequality is a deep rooted malice practiced in India in many forms from yester years. Addressing the malice of gender discrimination, women empowerment in India is a long drawn battle against the powerful structural forces of the society which are against women's growth and development. This burning issue is being aggravated by the socio - economic, psychological and other factors most of which are age-old and deep rooted in our society. Inequalities between men and women in society generate lot of problems which become an obstruction in the way to the progress of the nation. The need for women empowerment arouses because of gender discrimination and male domination in the Indian society since ancient time. Women empowerment has the power to change many things in the society. The woman is now an important instrument of social change. When women contribute equally along with men for the benefit of society, the world should be surely a better place for her to live.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women empowerment refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can take decisions of their own for their personal benefits as well as for the society. It also refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women to ensure equal rights to women and to make them confident enough to claim their rights. Women empowerment can be defined in very simple words that it is making women powerful so that they can take their own decisions regarding their lives and well-being of their family and society at large. The process of women empowerment is conceptualized in terms of personal assertions, self-esteem and confidence,

ability to protect themselves as women attaining socio-political participation and economic independence, ownership of productive assets and provide leadership in women. Only respecting or honoring women cannot fulfill the need of development in the nation. It needs the empowerment of the women in every walk of life. Wrong and old practices for the women in the society from ancient time have taken the form of well-developed customs, culture and traditions. Women empowerment would result in better and more developed society.

Feminism is an active movement resurfaced in the 1960's which assures about the empowerment of women. Feminism has shown various opportunities for women to strengthen themselves in various fields. Feminism is an ideology which seeks to understand the world as well as to change it for the empowerment of women. Feminist see literary text as a battleground where actual power relations between men and women are played out. The feminist criticize a second and other place of women in society and suggest that gender inequality does not have a biological basis or origin; it originates in the cultural constructions of gender difference.

The need for women canon writing as women texts suggests an alternative picture of conditions, desire and psychology of the woman whereas the writing of patriarchal society puts a patriarchal ideology. Feminism does not seek a place for women in literary texts but it seeks a place in society by creating self-awareness, arousing the feminist consciousness in woman which transfer their hidden, individual fears into security and independence, thus empowering themselves.

METHODOLOGY

Literary texts, apart from providing aesthetic pleasure, are also storehouses of ideological contestation. A feminist analysis of these conflicts and contradictions provides insights into the realities and representations of gender differences and power hierarchy in society. It is the voice of the writer which becomes the voice of the nation, stimulates energy to vent out the invisible realities and creates a medium for the discourses of the socio-cultural economic class of the nation. I

personally feel that people who read literature develop a greater empathy for other people. They are also better able to view situations from others perspectives. The women empowerment themes run strongly through all the literature, policy documents, planned initiatives etc. of the third world countries. Therefore a case study method of the protagonists' involving critical analysis of the selected novels *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* of Anita Desai has been deployed. The reader's response will determine the new development strategies in the Indian social polity.

DISCUSSION

Anita Desai expresses the truth of the inner and the outer selves of her protagonists who are victimized by the unjust traditional practices and cultural discrimination against them. She highlights the discriminatory practices towards women, the complexity of the man-woman relationship and their confused philosophy of life and the struggle of the Indian women for self-identity. Anita Desai penetrates deep into the feminine psyche and displays the suffering of the women caused by the cultural taboos. In her novels her protagonists are confronted with the burden of socio-cultural environment and their struggle for making a modernistic approach of 'quest for identity'.

The concepts of identity surrounding both culture and gender cannot be interpreted or understood individually without the recognition of the other, as culture is a part of gendered dynamics and gender is a part of socio-cultural experience. Some of the socio-cultural factors contribute to the multi-level vulnerabilities that women face based on their gender. Desai is concerned not only with the marginalization of women but with their psychological aspects too. Her novels are the reflections of social realities from psychological perspective. Gender inequality and the deeply rooted cultural taboos are powerfully brought out by her in the above mentioned novels.

CASE STUDY I

In her first novel "*Cry, the Peacock*" is Maya's cry for her lover, her husband Gautama. Maya is in need of human friend and companion. Maya, the protagonist of the novel is a daughter of a renowned and wealthy lawyer. She is a motherless child but

her upbringing by her father is very loving, caring, protective and very much as per the culture of the Indian (male) society. Maya, who is an obedient, hyper-sensitive, dutiful and respectful girl loves life sensuously. She loves and respects her father very much. She believes that no one can love her like her father and has a strong faith in her father with whom she feels protective. She lived a very luxurious life like a princess. Maya is married to Gautama, chosen by her father who is double her age. Raisahab is greatly impressed by Gautama who often visited Raisahab for his work as a lawyer.

Maya's emotional, aesthetic and romantic needs are met by Gautama's insensitive, practical and rational behavior. Maya's sensuous needs are left unfulfilled by her elderly husband who is very detached, rational and disconnected person from the worldly pleasures. Unable to express her feelings freely she is suffers from loneliness and emotional insecurity, turning her into a neurotic person. In this loneliness she is haunted by the albino's prophecy that in the fourth year of their married life either of the partners will die. The paranoiac condition of Indian women even though they are liberated, is an important trait of post modernity. This condition occurs in India due to the cultural burden which do not permit Indian women to express sexual feelings freely to her family members and even to her husband. Culturally a woman is considered strong and pure who is able to control sensuous feelings, a kind of suppression of the male dominating society. Maya who lived with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law still felt lonely is the fact that discussion about the sexual needs with the same gender too is culturally not acceptable in India. She is also unable to share her feeling of fear and hallucinations of the albino's prophecy, as superstitions are deeply rooted in the Indian culture. With the fear of resentment for her in the family she is mentally tortured by the prophecy.

"It was not an easy confession. Gautama was not a man to whom confessions of the heart could easily be made – of the mind, yes, readily, as soon as the idea had formed, sifted and settled in coherence. But the heart – no, it was of no use" (164)

She thinks Gautama would never be by her side and had hardly any love for her or either his life because he always spoke of the detachment philosophy of Bhagvad Gita. With increasing disintegration of her psyche, the values and contexts attached to ordinary objects get entangled to her personal world. The prophecy relentlessly and fatally competes with her and Maya thus loses her hold over her senses. So she thinks that it is Gautama's life in peril according to the albino's prophecy. In the final scene Maya sees no norms or values of the society and 'thrusts her arm towards him, into him and sees him fall through the immensity of air, down to the very bottom'. (173)

Due to the age-difference between Maya and Gautama, his cold intellectuality could not find physical, emotional and sexual satisfaction for Maya. Gautama's analytical mind and his attitude to sex push Maya into disappointment and loneliness. Maya is caught between the clutches of traditions and the feelings of modernism like quest for self-identity. Hence, she is being a girl (an Indian cultural fix) unable to revolt like her brother Arjuna who dislikes the claims and the standards of his family of an upper middle-class life. He spends his time in the slum with the lower class people and makes friendship with their dhobi's son, Hari. He does all this because he finds life meaningless as lived by his father who follows all the social norms without any questioning. Maya even though born in the post independent India her rearing is undertaken very much in accordance to the culture and morality of India where female child is considered to be the esteem of the dynasty, a typical and rigid middle-class morality. Even the slightest deviation from the set of ethical values may damage heavily the grace of the dynasty and so a lot of restrictions and superstitions are accompanied with utmost care.

CASE STUDY II

"*Voices in the City*" is the voice of the city of Calcutta with a unique society of self-obsessed people and the perpetual cry of all people to end annihilation. The novel has touched upon the questions of the character's delineation of the psychic conflicts and their inability to transcend the social conditioning pre-defined by the chauvinistic concept of behavior. The novel is divided into four

sections: I - Nirode, II - Monisha, III - Amla and IV - Mother. In section one a detail analysis of Nirode's behavior is brought to light who feels that he is not treated equally as his brother Arun who is adored and encouraged by his parents and sisters to become an accomplished sportsperson and is sent to London to study medicine.

Nirode's mother, a sophisticated, accomplished and beautiful lady has a useless drunkard husband who marries her for financial considerations. Consequently, the husband turns malicious towards his wife and the wife seeks an escape and contentment flowers and garden. For women, the sense of alienation is more pronounced. Nirode is a traditional male chauvinist, who cannot tolerate his mother's individuality outside the socially defined relationships. The traditional Indian concept of motherhood easily translates into a willing tolerance of a life of sacrifice, suffering and exploitation. Traditions encourage especially the widow mothers to possess archetypal fortitude and follow an intensively rigid moral pattern of life. The possibility of individual choices is not discussed even theoretically. Nirode's attitude towards his mother is the product of this social conditioning. He does not have much regard for his father, yet cannot sympathize his mother's friendship with Major Chadha. He is mesmerized by his mother's grace and refinement, but wants to relate her only in a traditional manner. His rejection of happiness and life itself has resulted from blurred vision by traditional gender bias and centuries indoctrination about relating to women within pre-decided relationships only. Once he is able to overcome blinkered mind-set, negate his prejudices about motherhood and perceive the independent status of his mother as a person, he will be able to live in a positive mode.

Monisha, Nirode's elder sister married to a wealthy zamindar family is a victim of ill-matched marriage and the traditional mindset of her in-laws. She is an intellectual woman and fond of reading, but nobody in her family including her husband appreciates her, neither has she got privacy. Monisha loses her education's worth in the so called aristocratic house of the Zamindar Babu of North Calcutta, which is more representative of the 'Babu

culture'. Monisha's husband, Jiban is a part of the traditional culture who shows disinterest in the artistic creativity and sensitivity of Monisha. His constant silence asserts his family's view that modernity in women should be defined and chastised by tradition.

Her independence is in contradiction with the way the family defines femininity. His family believes that men work in respectable offices and women stay back home –to cut vegetables, to massage the legs of the elders, to brush the young girls' hair and to criticize about womb, ovaries and fallopian tubes of other females. The seamless and incessant chatter of the women fears Monisha as she too silent for this kind of talks. Even ordinary communication and understanding which is generally available to most human beings is missing in her relationship with Jiban. When in her own house she is accused by her in-laws of stealing her husband's money; her rightful expectations of support and moral help is shattered by the heartbreaking sentence of her husband "that she should have told before she took it". Even when she tells Jiban that the money was taken to clear Nirode's medical bills, he simply suggests that his prior permission should have been taken. She is looked upon as an outsider, not as a wife, who can exercise any authority in money matters. Monisha's incapacity to become mother further victimizes her as traditionally maternity is enough to crown a woman's life. This collective insensitivity and the indifference of her husband lead her to an untimely death. Thus, we find the behavioral systems of male dominance are ultimately responsible for Monisha's death. Her innate creativity and sensitivity which could have been an asset to any man have a constricting influence on her inner buoyancy, as the traditional society wants its women to lead life in accordance with rules codified for men's convenience.

Monisha's younger sister Amla is fascinated by Dharma, thinking him to be an ideal artist, and a man capable of understanding not only the conscious physical and spiritual needs of a woman, but also reads the subconscious layer of mind. Amla is mercilessly shattered when she comes to know

that Dharma has sent his daughter out of the house for having done something which he thinks to be unnatural and shameful. While turning his daughter out of the house, he does not even give a thought to his wife's feelings and the suffering it would cause her.

Voices in the City describe the typical masculine response to the women's preference to lead a life of their choice and wants women – in different relationships within marriage and outside that to live a vassal situation.

CONCLUSION

All the cultural biases entrench the impediment for the women empowerment. To conclude both the characters Maya and Monisha fell prey to the so-called cultural traits of gender distinction of the society. Cultural alienation is the world phenomena today. When a person leaves his old culture and enters another (modernity), his old values come into conflict with the new ones. The characters of the novels are caught in the cross-currents of changing social values. The story reflects a bright picture of India's social shift- a phase in which the older elements are not altogether dead; and the sprouting ones are not fully evolved.

Both Horney and Maslow agree that specific social and cultural conditions help in generating neurotic trends. Maslow terms neurosis as a deficiency disease and Horney classifies it a deviation from normal pattern of social behavior. Karen Horney makes it clear that childhood experiences determine conditions for neurosis but they cannot be the only cause of later troubles. Later the child's particular system develops under the influence of external factors, such as familial atmosphere, social and cultural exigencies. In this manner the internal necessities to feel whole and the external pressures, moulds the adult character of a woman.

Anita Desai's fiction inextricably fuses the tension between tradition and modernity, individualism and social unity, convention and innovation and determines the dimensions and direction for the emerging 'New Woman' of India. Women's liberation ideology is the characteristic theme throughout the novels. In the traditional male dominating society, woman has many a time to

take recourse of putting an end to her life. By these novels Anita Desai renders to picture the battle for equality, women's rights and the esteem of females. She has evoked the feminist consciousness against the unjust traditional practices and the burden of the cultural discrimination that exploited women in the Indian society.

Women empowerment is not possible unless violence against women is eradicated from the society. The real change will be only visible when social attitudes and cultural norms change. Also it cannot take place unless women come together and decide to empower themselves, free themselves from the shackles of femininity. A woman can never be liberated till she frees herself from emotional dependence on man. In order to really bring women empowerment in the Indian society, it needs to understand and eliminate the main cause of the ill practices against women which are patriarchy and male dominance in the society. But with a strong determination, commitment and involvement of people and organization with philanthropic motive and a rational outlook, this problem can be solved. It needs one to be open-minded and change the old mind set against women together with the constitutional and other legal provisions.

Legal theorists and especially feminist scholars need to recognize that law by itself cannot bring about social change. What is required is constant challenging of the premises, the ideology and strategies which reinforce the subordination of women, along with the conscious formulation of a positive ideology and practices for the reconstruction of equality. The family is a microcosm of a large culture. It is the foundation unit in any society that upholds its beliefs, customs and traditions, hence the vision of each family member towards the issue of women empowerment should be serious, broaden and the older concepts of culture should be eroded with a modern outlook. Men too with women need to engage in all social and cultural norms to encourage combined participation as well as create equitable environment at home, office and community.

Therefore, the concept of women empowerment should not only focus on giving strength and skills to rise above from their miserable

situation but at the same time should stress on to educate men regarding women issues, their psychological needs and inculcate a sense of respect and duty towards women as equals. Women empowerment needs to improve the social, economic, political, educational, equal gender rights, psychological and spiritual strength of the women all over the world. Social, economic and political empowerment is the need of the present days, as it is one only surest way of making women "equal partners". Also, the modern society needs to bring psychological empowerment among women to address the social and gender discrimination processes in the society. Women empowerment may solve lots of social issues as well as bring growth and development of the nation on the right track.

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