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## A CHALLENGE TO PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURE OF INDIAN SOCIETAL HIERARCHY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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### Abstract

Women have been oppressed, depressed and suppressed in social sphere. But with changing of socio-cultural scenario women began to snatch their deserved spaces for themselves which has been denied by the patriarchy for ages. It is notable that in India with the freedom struggle against colonialism another silent struggle went on simultaneously struggle of women for equal status. This is very well reflected in the literature of Post independent period, especially in the works of women writers. Patriarchal structure is a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females. There are clearly defined sex roles, while various taboos ensure conformity with specified gender roles (Aina:1998:6). In this paper I have tried to show how Anita Desai created a feminist discourse of literary writings for rejecting the patriarchal norms of so called traditional civilized human existence She focused on women's desire for liberation from societal and traditional family norms made by mainstream male dominated society. The story of Cinderella promotes love and marriage. And the same Cinderella story for a man symbolizes marrying a perfect girl of his choice whom he loves. But reality is different as observed by Fulghum (1997: 19), Love is three-quarters dream and one-quarter reality but problems arise when you fall in love with the dream and not the reality. Especially, Indian society imparts great significance to it. This is the central focus in Anita Desai's novels.

**Keywords:** Anita Desai, Cry, The Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Indian English Fiction, Women, Feminism, Psychological, Patriarchy.

### Introduction

#### Objective of the Study

Women started going beyond the Laxmanrekha designed for them by patriarchy. This study intends to analyze the multifaceted problems of female life in Indian society at home and outside that causes anger and trauma caused by suffocating marriage in the light of the selected novels of Anita Desai.

#### Research Methodology:

The methodology adopted for this study is Feminist criticism which received a major stimulus from the civil rights movement of America in the 1960s and has differed somewhat in its concerns from its counterparts in France and India notwithstanding the undoubted impact of earlier figures such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. A seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was authored by Betty Friedan which expressed the fundamental grievance of middle-class women, their entrapment within private, domestic life and their liability and their inability to pursue public careers. Other important feminist texts were focusing the gender rather than the class and notable among them were Mary Ellman's *Thinking about Women* (1968), Kat Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). Millet's influential book concerned female sexuality and the representation of women in literature and argued that patriarchy was a political institution which relied on subordinated roles for women. British feminism which began with Virginia Woolf, integrated the insights of Marxism and Psychoanalysis as focused in Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974). This feminist criticism is closely tied to the modernist nature of some fiction written by Indian female writers and their novels expressed the broad philosophical and feminist dispositions underlying the plot and theme. The novels under review in this paper are modernist in their complexity of characterization, as some internal psychology is given to interact with the external world. Thus, the novels of Anita Desai can be approached from at least two series of perspectives, those of modernism and feminism.

### Main Paper

Feminism is a complex issue and historically freedom of the mind for women was pioneered by Aphra Behn who earned for women the right to speak their minds (Room ,65) In his polemical text *The Subjugation of Women* (1869), Stuart Mill observed how difficult it would be for women to free themselves from the constraints and influences of the male literary tradition (Habib, 691). Elaine Showalter too suggests that female subculture was uniquely divided against itself by ties to the dominant culture as



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women writers were united by their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, and by legal and economic constraints on their mobility. Following partially the Western Feminist criticism, Anita Desai tried to create a deliberate female aesthetic which countered the feminine code of self-sacrifice. The depiction of the trauma of women becomes significant when laws of identity in the society divided up the world according to the binary oppositions which coercively establish the Aristotelian view that one is man or a male , someone who does not have a soul. Anita Desai brings out the gender discriminations and double marginalization with touching is the way in which these women struggle to break free from exploitation and life of humiliation. Cry the Peacock is the first published novel of Anita Desai in which she reveals the story of a married woman named Maya. It studies such predicaments which lead the woman to astray. Maya is born of an upper middle class Brahmin family. Maya is a pampered child of her father Rai Sahib and has a very affectionate relationship with her father. The death of her mother makes her detached from the world outside. She is married to a practical, unsympathetic, rational, down to earth man Gautama. She suffers from incompatibility in her married life and tries to escape into a world of imagination and fantasy. Maya is extremely sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous. On the other hand, her husband is materialistic, practical, pragmatic and unresponsive. Anita Desai defines the uniqueness of feminine sensibility through the reactions and responses of the heroine to the events and situation in the novel. Maya is thus an extremely sensitive character, a portrayal of woman who has failed to come to terms with Hegemony and patriarchal order. Maya is a victim of emotional as well as physical depression.

### She says

...Telling me go to sleep while he worked at his paper, he did not give another thought to me, to either soft willing body or the lonely waiting mind that waited near the bed... (14)

The expectations she had at marriage of her husband, who is much older than her are not fulfilled. She expresses her trauma in married life by following statement:

Had there been a bond between us, he would have felt its pull, I thought of him so deeply there was no bond, no love- hardly any love. And I could not bear to think of that. (93)

Anita Desai defines the uniqueness of feminine sensibility through the reactions and responses of Maya to the events and situations in the novel. Maya has obsessive love for life and she is perfectly normal and healthy woman. Her only problem is that she is sensitive, imaginative, passionate and sensuous and it is not a sin rather she represents the disturbed psyche of modern Indian woman. she feels herself in mental crisis being deprived of the king of love she desires in life. Her anger is the outcome of a psychological predicament but Desai beautifully focuses on the general feminist position. She shows the oppression of a woman in capitalist society by linking Maya's passivity to the intimate connections between economic oppression and the role of familial and domestic ideology as well as the changing from of the family organization during and since the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In *Women Oppression Today* (1960), Michele Barrett also talked about the two most significant elements, then of the oppression of women under capitalism the economic organization of households and its accompanying familial ideology, the division of labour and relations of production, the educational system and the operations of the state, (WT, 40-41). Thus, the novel explores the inner world of the main protagonist, Maya, and demonstrates her fear, insecurity and strange behavior. Through her, she depicts a world of alienation, loneliness and suffering. Maya is described as a hysterical character whose impending tragedy is suggestively foreshadowed, time and again. Desai succeeds in portraying the psyche of a woman on the verge of insanity and the factors responsible for that. These factors create a vast history of phallogentric tradition., an enormous machine that has been operating and turning out its truth for centuries (Laugh of Medusa ,283). Helen Cixous suggests rightly that more than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body. Whereas Simone de Beauvoir had viewed the rootedness of woman's experience in bodily functions as a kind of imprisonment within immanence, Cixous regards woman's greater attainment to bodily needs and drives as potentially liberating. (Habib 704)

The use of superstition is also linked to the social connotation more than to the psychological

... It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of sacred iron with which out of the prettiest superstition, we could not bear to part... (40)

Maya's trauma and anger are not understood by Gautam like the mysterious dance of the peacock. Love is mad and love of life is destroyed in the fear of death. Here Desai draws our attention to a great concept, the idea of the New Woman. Maya is not the New Woman but she with her anger and trauma gradually succeeds in becoming the new icon of protest and it is now easy to discard the old notions that women are neurotic in their passivity. It is time Cixous writes ...to liberate the New Woman from the Old, to break with male written history and to write a new history (LM, 282).



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Trauma created by the eagerness to establish self-identity is also the reason for all anger in a woman and this is so beautifully explored by Desai in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* It is a famous novel by Anita Desai dealing with the story of an oppressed mind of a woman. It depicts an identity crisis of the protagonist, Sita. She is a very sensitive woman at her early forties who finds herself alienated from her family. Their marriage bond is proved to be unions of incompatibility. Living with a very practical-minded husband whole surrounding appeared very dull and unhappy. Her hyper-sensibility is well reflected in her habit of smoking, rebuking her children and in her rude behavior to the servants. She is fed up with her life and could not tolerate the violence she sees in daily life. She then decides foolishly not to give birth to the fifth child in a world of violence and hatred and goes to Manori, the island of her childhood. She comes to Manori is to achieve the miracle of keeping her baby unborn. She herself says to her husband-

I think, what I'm doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again. (32)

Sita always prefers to live alone with her husband away from his friends and relatives. She finds fault with everyone around her including her family people. For her Children only mean anxiety, concern-pessimism. Not happiness. (134) She lives in fancy. She feels that the world around her is not moving according to her whims and fancies and can no more offer security to her... When she tells her husband that she does not want to give birth to her child, Raman says You should have thought of it earlier. It's too late now . One can't have an abortion at this stage. Sita with burning eyes asks him- What do you mean- abortion? ...Mad! You're quite mad. Kill the baby? It's all I want. I want to keep it, don't you understand? (31) Sita went to the island on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn (28)

Anita Desai presents the inner tension, frustration, disappointment, mental discord and disharmony of the inner consciousness of a house wife Sita who tries to isolate herself from her daily activities as a homemaker. Sita and Raman differ in their attitudes of life. One is practical and the other highly emotional in nature. Sita, suffers mental agony like Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* and the anger and trauma are the natural outcome in Sita. Anita Desai tries to show the anxiety of Sita who suffers because of her biased attitude towards life. After marriage, she feels the void and expects more love and care from her husband Raman. Sita feels that her husband don t know that she was bored, dull, unhappy, frantic. She could hardly believe that although they lived so close together, he did not even know this basic fact of her existence. (132)

Anita Desai has portrayed Sita's character in such a way that it represents the predicament of a modern married woman in the society. She initially escapes from reality and later reconciles to the circumstances. Maya and Sita are the representatives of repressed female community. They also represented the complex and multilayered personality structure of modern India. In *Where Shall I Go This Summer?* Desai depicts the portraiture of an Indian woman who rebels against the conventional life style of Indian society.

### Conclusion

Protagonists of both Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal are depicted always as victims and sufferers in the society and the reflections on marriage and family become predominant themes always in their novels. On the one hand we see that women are trying to bear the sufferings and pressure of the male patriarchy, on the other hand, they want to prove themselves as strong human beings engaged in the struggle for self-assertion and for establishing self-identity. The analysis of anger and trauma are to be analysed from these two basic propositions. With women's education and changing social structures women have now come to realize themselves as individuals and characters likes Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* by Anita Desai, Simrit, Desai's women protagonists can be divided into essentially two types: One type possesses a neurotic, hypersensitive, artistic sensibility; the other is cynical, tough, and acerbic. Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita, Tara, and Matteo belong to the first category, while Nirode, Amla, Dev, Nanda, Bim, and Sophie belong to the second. In addition to these are two types of supporting characters: the old, ugly, sterile crone, who has been a failure, and the mysterious, insulated character, intriguing but ultimately inscrutable. The best example of the former is Ila Das of *Fire on the Mountain*; of the latter, Dharma of *Voices in the City*. The rest of the characters are the common crowd against whom the protagonist defines him- or herself: They have given up trying to make their lives meaningful and have accepted the full mediocrity of a futile existence.

In Indian society, a girl child becomes enslaved forever in the name of tradition and culture as soon as she is born. Culture and tradition are part and parcel of our lifeline but, torture in the name of tradition can't be acceptable. A woman is no way inferior to a man. She is called Dharitri-one who has the capacity to conceive. For a woman, who can bear the pain of childbirth so proudly, nothing is impossible for her. But it is shameful that in Indian society where the idol of woman is worshiped as goddess, every day many girls become the victim rape. Worshipping Goddess, Indian patriarchal society though indirectly believes the women power, but



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directly they never allow them even as their equal. The status of women also has been developed. They are no longer confined within the four walls of their homes

It is interesting that in going to advocate the emancipation of women Anita Desai goes deeper into the female psyche in her novels. She describes in her novels how woman is exploited even during the modern times both by the individuals and the society. She portrays the sensibility of woman by showing how a woman looks out at herself and her problems as she has shown it in Cry the Peacock. As a writer of feminist perspective, she projects her heroines struggle for freedom and self-realization in her fiction. Her heroines always try to realize their self-hood either unconsciously or consciously and deliberately with possession of the spirit of self-respect and individualism.: The content and form of a phantasy, explains Freud, are unique to a given individual. A phantasy is intimately related to the three dimensions of time: it is linked, firstly, to some provoking occasion in the present which arouses one of the major wishes of a person, this triggers the memory of an earlier experience, usually in childhood, in which the wish was fulfilled, the mind then imagines a situation in the future where the wish is fulfilled. (Habib: 580). This psycho-analysis of female character is unique in the depiction of Maya's character. A wall of circumfusion is created. Human subjectivity that makes mind most important is here given a new dimension through perception of paradigms related to feminist criticism. The notion of betweenness is developed and as no certain conclusion is arrived at, the dance of the peacock like the Nataraj Dance destroys everything at the end. Preconceptions about women and phallic centrality are simply kept in suspension and Desai creates a new consciousness altogether. Readers of the novels of Desai are engaged in a process of self-realization and self-observation simultaneously. In Cry the Peacock Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there has been an increasing recognition that for example, man and woman are not fixed categories but represent our ways of conceiving the world, gender is at least in part a social and historical construct than is embodied in the concepts expressed by language. man and woman are not fixed categories but represent our ways of conceiving the world, gender is at least in part a social and historical construct than is embodied in the concepts expressed by language The analysis of language has been central to the work feminists all over the world, because they have seen it embodying male modes of thought and oppression and as potentially transformable to express feminine experience. The psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan effectively rewrote much Feudian theory in linguistic terms, and held that the unconscious was linguistic in its structure and operation. For Jacques Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, there was no possible externality to language, nothing beyond the textual nature of all phenomena. For much reader response theory, the language and meaning of a text were dialogic in their very nature arising from an interaction of authorial and readerly registers. Woman then does not somehow designate a reality, it is rather a sign existing in complex and multifold interaction with other signs, as a part of a system of perception.

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