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Question of Woman Identity in the Characters of Anita Desai with a Special Emphasis on In Custody

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Abstract

Patriarchy is the name of a global effect of domination made possible by a myriad of power relations at the micro-level of society. With this knowledge in mind Anita Desai seems to have adopted a skeptical stance towards the modern discourses on emancipation that have claim to universal truth and to represent the Archimedean leverage point from which the society can be moved. Rather she has made an attempt at focusing on the power relations at the micro-level of society without giving privilege to a general theory and a single locus of resistance to Patriarchy. In her fiction she has resurrected the subjugated knowledge's she, like a genealogist, has located many discontinuous individual women's struggles against different forms of power in different patriarchal societies. These struggles are mainly organized from two post-colonial strategic positions: appropriation and abrogation. As a corollary of this, her female protagonists, equipped with oppositional consciousness and sometimes endowed with a vision of an alternative world, are found to selectively either appropriate or abrogate different social institutions and cultural practices to serve their personal ends.

Keywords: Patriarchy, domination, skeptical, discourse, appropriation, abrogation.

Introduction: The background of the author

Anita Desai, a major post-colonial woman novelist by any standard, was born in Mussoorie in the year 1937. She was born to a German mother and a Bengali father. She grew up speaking German at home and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English at school and in her locality. Mrs. Desai emerged as a novelist with the publication of the first novel *Cry, The Peacock* in 1963 when in the West the second wave of feminism was coming to the fore with its vociferous slogan – “personal is political” – and when in post-independent India nationalist ideology, which was built around false essentialisms of home/world, spiritual/material, East/West, masculine/feminine, refused to make the woman question an issue of political negotiation with the West (Chatterjee, 1995).¹ Anita Desai, situating herself in “discursive practices”, which for Foucault “are rules, systems and procedures which constitute and are constituted by, our will to knowledge” (Bouchar, 1977),² took up her mighty pen with a view to putting her knowledge of women's victimization by men into practice with a vision of liberating the women from the patriarchal power structures that marginalize them.

Patriarchy: The global effect of domination

Patriarchy is the name of a global effect of domination made possible by a myriad of power relations at the micro-level of society. With this knowledge in mind Anita Desai seems to have adopted a skeptical stance towards the modern discourses on emancipation that have claim to universal truth and to represent the Archimedean leverage point from which the society can be moved. Rather she has made an attempt at focusing on the power relations at the micro-level of society without giving privilege to a general theory and a single locus of resistance to Patriarchy. In her fiction she, like a genealogist, has located many discontinuous individual women's struggles against different forms of power in different patriarchal societies.

Anita Desai in her so far written twelve novels delves deep into the inner recesses of the minds of her characters; her interpersonal relations have been dealt with in terms of husband-wife, parents-children, brothers-sisters and individual society relations. In the course of exploring power relations between her female protagonists who have a heightened physical and emotional sensitivity and their male partners who tend to be comparatively stolid, practical and matter-of-fact persons, hardly able to share or even appreciate the world of their female counterparts.

In Patriarchy, marriage institution is observed to be the most problematic of all patriarchal institutions. In religious discourse marriage is considered to be highly sacred institution which helps to bring about union of two souls. But in practice, as the radical feminists observe, it turns into a trap, an institution of oppression and affliction for women.

Hindu culture: A socio-religious tool for subjugation

In Hindu society, widows are ill-treated. Their movements are constricted and they are denied any normal space in society. Anita Desai is not myopic about it. She has drawn three widows such as Otima in *Voices in the City*, Mira Masi in *Clear Light of Day* and Mira Masi in *Fasting, Feasting* with a view to showing that widowhood also is not an essence but a social construct. But her widows are not compliant ones. Otima does not observe any religious taboos relating to widowhood. According to Hindu ideology, a widow must be self-abnegating, dependent and passive. But she maintains and leads her life quite opposite to this ideology. She feels herself liberated by the death of her husband, who she thinks married her for her property. Independent and sensual even in her middle age she consorts with Major Chanda. Not only that, she maintains distance from her children with towering personality and independence associating herself with the mountain Kanchenjunga. But in *Clear Light of Day* Mira Masi is represented as a wretched creature. At the age of twelve she was married and a virgin when she was widowed. Her young student husband, having left to study in England immediately after her wedding, caught cold in the train in one winter night and died. But the in-laws accused her horoscope for the death of her husband. So, she was coerced into slaving to perform all chores in a continuous form: scrubbing, washing, cooking, nursing, massaging and sewing. On being failed to enjoy sex with her, her brothers-in-law robbed her of all her ornaments and saris and threw her out as a cracked pot, torn rag and picked bone.

Dowry System: A machinery for monetary extortion

In *Fasting, Feasting* Desai cannot but raise her voice against ominous dowry practice constructing the discourse of Uma's dowry-cheat. In *Dislocating Cultures* (1997) Uma Narayan argues that in the traditional institution of dowry, dowry had to be given in three forms: dowry as gift, dowry as compensation and dowry as premortem inheritance. The first form meant for conversion of material wealth into spiritual

wealth. The second form would economically compensate the groom's family for taking over the economic burden of a wife whose contribution to the family was negligible or religiously should compensate a man and his family for marrying a creature to which Scriptures have assigned less intrinsic value. The third form provided the daughter with a share of parental property and household items, while it simultaneously forecloses her right to immovable property. But Desai shows that the traditional institution of dowry has undergone a number of changes. Dowry practice has been commercialized in the capitalistic society. Demands for gold ornaments, gifts and cash have been escalated due to bargaining. If the woman is unattractive, more dowries are demanded. The age-old one-shoot deal then turns into dowry on installment plan. Even after marriage demands for cash and kind continue for several years. The wife's harassment compels her to put pressure on her parents to submit to further demands by her husband and in-laws. If the demands are not fulfilled, the woman's utility is reduced, making it expeditious to murder.

Desai's preference of East over West

In respect of the encounter between West and East, Desai takes sides with Indian spirituality over material West. In *Journey to Ithaca* Desai first by the logic of modern discourse of liberalism grants Egyptian Muslim woman autonomy of choosing her way of life and then empowers her by interpellating her as Kali, Durga, Parvati as the incarnation of female power in collusion with the discourse of Hindu traditional religion. Laila, the Muslim girl is converted into universal Mother. But when she is made to stand in opposition to Sophie, a Western married woman, Desai valorizes Indian spiritual power over the material West. Desai does not allow Sophie to have any sway over her husband's subjectivity which has already been molded by the Mother's discourse of spirituality. Through Sophie's experience of married life with Matteo, Desai focuses on the fact that in patriarchal society the wives are always required to wait upon and wait for their husbands when the latter would show no concern for their wives.

In Custody: An analysis

In *In Custody* Desai, from a Third World feminist position, not only explores the status of the marginalized Muslim people in post-independence India but also the status of the female artist in patriarchal art domain as well as the status of Hindu housewife in patriarchal Hindu family. The novel opens with a picture of Mirpore, projecting a conflicting image of post-independence India as Chandrapore in Foster's *A Passage to India* gives us a picture of colonial India in miniature. In Foster's novel Aziz asked the colonizer to go: Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. India shall be a nation. No foreigners of any sort! (Desai, 1984)³

But Desai would have observed that Aziz's vision has remained unfulfilled in post-independence India. The dilapidated historical marble mosques need repairing, but the Muslims of the locality are not financially sound enough to repair them. Besides this, she also focuses on the marginalized status of Urdu language in post-independence India. Desai has narrativized what Indra Nath Chaudhuri observes about Indian national language policy:

While formulating the language policy of the Congress, Nehru reiterated that the common language should be Hindustani... (Chaudhuri, 2007).⁴

However, Anita Desai identifies herself with Deven Sharma to express her love for Urdu language and literature and makes him raise his voice for the revival of the past glory of the Urdu language and literature. But, in Nur's house Deven who wants to be the custodian of Nur's art and talent comes into clash with Imtias Begum, Nur's second wife. The latter shatters his dream occupying the center stage in her birthday

ceremony. Deven finds Nur is pushed to the margin. His male ego is exacerbated and refuses to accept her as an artist. Rather he labels her as a female mafia or a prostitute. Denying her the status of an artist he elevates his guru Nur to the status of a great poet. In line with Deven, Nur also accuses her of having betraying him by capturing his house, his audience and his friends. But Imtias Begum is no compliant woman to stomach that humiliation. She silences him with counter accusation:

You could not bear the sight of someone else regaling with poetry – the same poetry you used to mouth (Desai, 1984).

Here Desai shifts her position. Instead of supporting male parochialism, she makes Imtias Begum raise her voice against phallic power, showing her sisterhood with the marginalized female artist.

Desai is aware as much of the difference between male and female as between woman and woman. The quarrel between Nur's two wives is a case in point. While Imtias Begum is fighting against gender discrimination, Nur's first wife Sufia Begum colludes with Deven who is against giving recognition to female creativity. Sufia's fight is for a share of the maximum time with Nur. But she should have understood that in Muslim patriarchy a man can have four wives at a time if he is able to treat all of them equally. But Nur has violated that patriarchal ideology. So, she should have fought against Nur who is playing double standard with them. Instead of doing that, she has embroiled herself with Deven in respect of spoiling one woman's fight for equality with men. It is not far to seek the reason why a woman fights with another woman. There are many factors such as racial, cultural, religious and sexual that divide women but unite some women with some men. In addition to this, Kamala Bhasin argues:

This generally happens when the women considered men the sun and themselves the satellites, without the light of their own. (Bhasin, 1993).⁵

Anita Desai seems to suggest that the women like Sufia think so. In collusion with Sufia, Deven interviews Nur. But his interview session ends in fiasco due to many factors: the defective tape-recorder, lack of proper programming, inexpert technician and above all Nur's irrelevant fumbling. Through recording session Desai proves that Nur has lost his coherence, creativity due to lack of patronization and that Deven is ineffectual, limited and impractical; the former is a failure as an artist and the latter as a programmer. In delineating them so in opposition to Imtias Begum who is already proved to be worthy as an artist on the stage, the novelist subverts the patriarchal binary thought that always equates male with victory and female with defeat.

After failure in his record session, Deven is again made to face Imtias Begum at discursive level. He opens Imtias's letter lying unopened on the table at his home. In that letter she has requested him to recognize her as an artist and be the custodian of her art. Perhaps through Imtias, Desai wants to emphasize that validity and existence of a work of art is contingent on the comments of the critics. A work of art comes to life when it is commented upon. As Foucault argues:

Commentary which is the first circulatory mechanisms in discursive structures keeps certain discourses in existence. (Mills, 1997).⁶

On this assumption Desai makes Imtias Begum request Deven to judge her work as woman's work, instead of dismissing it by the norms of patriarchal poetics. In refusing to recognize her as an artist Deven serves his certain selfish andocentric ends. In patriarchal society he saves himself from being called 'sissy' and asserts his position as a male critic showing his uppity towards female artist and her art. Deven's acts of tearing her poems and throwing away the torn pieces of paper on the floor in front of his wife bear

testimony to his uppity. His wife comments:

You are dropping rubbish all over the floor I have just swept (Desai, 1984)

However, the torn pieces of poems on the floor, from feminist standpoint, can be associated with Sibyl's leaves of which Gilbert and Gubar observe:

The leaves haunt us with the possibility that if we can piece together their fragments, the parts will form a whole that tells the story of the career of a single woman artist... (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979)⁷

Adapting Gilbert and Gubar's observation it may be said that the women like Sarala who do not have the knowledge of the exclusionary practice of the phallic critics would dismiss the dismembered female artist's work as 'rubbish'. But the feminist writers who are well aware of it and the gender discrimination will try to piece together the fragments of the dismembered female art to form a whole of her art career.

Sarala, a female character, before marriage, dreamt a magazine dream of marriage. The aspiration of becoming a new housewife got developed in her by the discursive pressure of the discourses of commercial companies and media which appropriated the discourses of the new woman or new housewife with a view to augmenting the sales of companies' products like refrigerators, television, phone, mixers etc. She cherished in her subjectivity the following dream:

Herself stepping out of car with plastic shopping bag full of groceries and filling them in to gleaming refrigerator (Desai, 1984)

But as she was chosen by Deven's mother aunt as new bride finding her suitable in every way: plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic (Desai, 1984), she did not have any control over her identity. Choices made by them constructed her as new bride in Deven's family. But day-to-day activities of family life make her realize that real world is different from virtual world. By marrying into the academic profession and moving into a small town outside the capital, none of her magazine dreams gets fulfilled. She has to take the role of a tired and shabby-looking housewife. With deep sympathy towards her Desai comments:

At least Deven had poetry; she had nothing and there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look (Desai, 1984).

Sarala finds herself transformed from the new housewife of companies' discourses into a tired shabby-looking housewife because of her husband's poor income and uneven distribution system of capitalism.

Clear Light of Day: A glimpse

On this assumption it may be said that Anita Desai has empowered her female protagonists by granting them the right to narrate their marginalized lives in different patriarchal societies. In the course of different narratives, she has allowed them to create their selves, represent their lives, question the conventions and customs, and expose the contradictions and gaps of the cultures they inhabit. While intervening in the discourses of Hindu patriarchal culture she tends to be westernized by allowing her female protagonist Maya to subvert 'pativrata' ideology, wife's fidelity to husband by killing her husband, by allowing Sita and Bim to smoke cigarette, by allowing Lila to question the power of Indian spirituality over poverty, but she retains her postcolonial Indian sexual purity by disallowing her female protagonists any extra-marital sex. In *Clear Light of Day*, the description of Bim's incestuous feelings for her retarded brother is a case in point:

She felt an immense, almost irresistible yearning to lie down beside him on the bed,

stretched out limb to limb, silent and immobile together. (Desai, 1980)⁸

Interestingly, though Desai emphasizes the cultural exchange between East and West in *Bye Bye Blackbird* and *Fasting, Feasting*, she never valorizes Christian values over Indian values. She has a firm belief in modern Western civilization which is based on enlightened philosophical principles. But she has not allowed any Western character to make an onslaught on Indian pantheism and its spiritual values, though she does not falter to attack Indian superstitions. But in the novels of Sahgal and Markandaya Christian values are deployed to attack Hinduism and the Western characters are allowed to act as agents of transformation in women's lives.

Conclusion

Desai is different from other Indian women novelists is the use of divorce as a potent weapon against patriarchal oppression and repression. Desai does not show any interest in leading any of her female characters to rebel against male oppression through divorce. Her female protagonists are led either to return to parent's house, or to commit suicide or fight for individual power and position within the institutions of marriage and family or live with independent profession. From this it appears that Desai has created new female selfhood drawing sustenance from deep-rooted Indian tradition and tried at invoking women's subculture through the bond between the mother and daughter in opposition to selfish, divisive, competitive patriarchal culture in late capitalist world thus emerging as a post-colonial woman novelist of high artistic and critical caliber.

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