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SOCIO-DOMESTIC STRUGGLE OF WOMEN AS AN OUTCAST IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: A FEMINISTIC APPROACH TO ANITA DESAI, SHASHI DESHPANDE AND GIRISH KARNAD'S SELECT WORKS

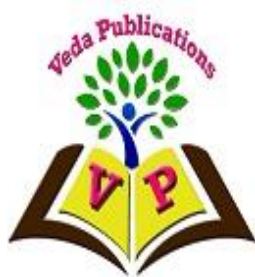
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ABSTRACT



The present paper is a feministic and womanistic study to the images of Indian women in Indian English fiction. It is concerned with the theory of Feminism. Feminism is an ideology against oppression and exploitation of women in patriarchal system. The paper discusses in detail the works of three writers: Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Girish Karnad in a feministic angle. In their fiction these novelists have portrayed women's issues realistically both psychologically and physically. They broke the literary and social norms of the past. They studied deep into psyche of their characters and projected various images of women and their status in society in a varied cultural perspective. In fiction, some women characters have attitude of rejection and negation of life while others have an affirmation and acceptance of life with a compromising attitude leading to deep sense of fulfillment.

Keywords: *Domestic struggle, Physical-psychic struggle, acceptance, compromise, suppression and oppression*

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The prevalent belief in Indian society is that men are superior and have the power and cultural hegemony in the society. One such rooted feature in the Indian society is that men defend maleness and consider women not manly. Women are marginalized not only through cultural institutions and religious rituals but also at socio-domestic levels. The proposed paper attempts to focus on different images of women in Indian English fiction with special reference to the select novels of Anita Desai's, *Cry the Peacock*, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, and Girish Karnad's *Naga Mandala*. In these works, women are the victims of the social and domestic forces. All the established norms and defined traditions are a practice of women but not for men. These are very well portrayed in these works. As a result they are the prime victims of the socio-domestic consequences. These writers through the chief characters Maya, Jaya and Rani laid a firm foundation in the realm of female study in Indian Literature in English.

This poignant focus on female characters with respect to their behavior that is largely governed and established by socio (cultural and religious) and domestic (mostly marital) strands. Girish Karnad, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande have made an extensive work out in this dimension. They depicted their female protagonist as the victims of social force that are fundamentally patriarch and in particular to

matrimonial hegemony hence these works are contributed in mainstreaming the gender, rather voicing the weaker sex's voice raising some basic and fundamental issues. To discuss, *Naga-Mandala* (Play with Cobra, 1990) is an amalgamation of a folktale and a myth. It is based on two stories. The works are particularly concerned with marital problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by the modern Indian men and women in their different social and domestic situations. *Cry the Peacock* is all about venting of loneliness of an Indian woman who suffered alienation in her marital life. *That Long Silence* is about suppression of the female character's existential self where she finds herself as an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer.

The female characters in this paper be it Rani, Maya and Jaya belong to the different stratum of the society. The bond they share is their suffering caused by the socio-domestic force led by the patriarchal hegemony. The domestic struggle which is at large dominated by the marital life and this is the cause of misery in the life of women in India which is beautifully expressed in the writings of Girish Karnad, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande

In *Naga-mandala*, Karnad the problem of woman suffering, her sacrifices, her longings and desires are poignantly elucidated. The protagonist Rani pines for the love of her husband and when she is not able to get it she



yearns for the company of her parents. She is at the suffering end at the hands of her cruel husband without any fault. It is not the story of Rani only, but of every woman in her marriage life. The sexual politics of patriarchal society situates man as the sovereign subject while a woman is required to find her total fulfillment in submissive drudgery. In fact, patriarchy has conditioned women to such an extent that they have come to accept their subordinate position to men. Male bias in Indian society is widely predominant in our culture to such an extent that women never have a chance to see themselves through their own eyes at least as humans.

Socio-domestic struggles seem to be suffused in every vein of the story. The story tells the tale of a common woman named Rani (Queen of her parents' house) based on a myth of cobra, a snake. Appanna, literally means 'any man' (which proves to be the relationship of Rani at the end) marries Rani only to lock her in. He comes only for lunch and he remains there for a while without any conversation. He doesn't allow Rani to ask any question. He says, "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (Karnad 28). But he as superior gender of the society he gives himself full freedom to go to a concubine to enjoy himself.

Rani reflects the image of a common woman who comes to her husband's house with sweet dreams and desires of happy domestic

life. But the imminent thing is she has to face another side of reality. For Appanna, there is no social, moral or traditional taboo. He is free and devoid from all socio-precincts and his actions are unquestionable. Karnad very subtly raises the issue that our conventional society and social laws demand fidelity and devotion from a wife even to an unfaithful and callous husband. The adverse part is that the village elders demand proof of her innocence from Rani and not from Appanna whereas it is quite obvious that he goes to his mistress locking his wife in the house. Such gender biased outlook in our social norms comes as a customary demonstrating women as a secondary being. It is Rani, who has to suffer and go through 'Cobra trail' in spite of her innocence.

Rani's thought about mixing a root in her husband's share of food and consequent reaction to it shows the traditional upbringing of a girl in a family. Domestic norms also teaches a woman to be submissive to her husband and the in-laws as well and she forced that this patriarchal hegemonic society. So was Rani, from her very childhood not only by words but by actions also that a husband is a 'god' for a wife, though in reality he may be a devil in handling his wife. After this thought comes into her mind she spilt the curry in an ant-hill where a cobra lived. The Cobra drinks it and in turn becomes her lover. Cobra lover starts visiting Rani at night and making love to her in the



shape of Appanna. She finds a lot of difference between two visitors--mid-day Appanna and night Appanna. Appanna (Naga) at night is loving, caring, understanding and passionate whereas Appanna at day time becomes harsh, cruel. Rani speaks at one point:

“Yes, I shall. Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you. No, I won’t ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you.” (Karnad 51)

Her problems begin with her pregnancy. Appanna becomes furious when he comes to know of her pregnancy. He maltreats her and even kicks her. She is very confused during her trial and asks for help from everybody but in vain. At last, she puts her hand in the ant-hill and takes out Cobra and speaks. “I haven’t touched any male in my life, except my husband and this cobra.” Cobra doesn’t bite her and makes an umbrella with his hood over her head. Her oath proves her innocence. She is designated as the incarnation of goddess and her husband Appanna accepts her and her child. Though she accepts and compromises with her life but she cannot bear too much reality and suffers physically as well as psychologically in her domestic domain.

Rani suffers not only from her husband but of society also. Social force acts on her extensively. It is the village elders who decide to put her into ‘Fire Trial’ or ‘Cobra-Trial’. And ironically she gets relief, love and passion from a reptile-turned-human (Naga) who helps her to attain the status of goddess. Human beings are not capable enough to help their own race rather a crawling creature provides happiness to them.

The socio-domestic milieu is bound to find artistic interventions in a writer’s texts as an indirect commentary on the behavioral ethics at that time and place and beyond its immediate contexts. And this is clear in the writings of Anita Desai. Her novels are read in such a social context or in such a transitional state of Indian feminism. Considered as a whole, her novels reveal a progression in the psychic awareness of women about their position in a society. Anita Desai’s novels belong to this generation of women as daughters and wives in the Indian society of late 80s and early 90s and of the twentieth century. The drudgery of daily chores, of catering to the needs of husbands and children often led women to feel depressed, isolated and bored. Repression of desires and a breakdown of communication within the family often drove women to commit suicide or made them suffer from neurotic disorders from time to time.



In *Cry the Peacock* Maya is pushed beyond endurance to insanity because of her husband's inability to relate to her. This leads Maya to turn insane. Such events are not uncommon in Indian middle class households. Maya's characters as Rani's become claustrophobic confines of loneliness. But here though the domestic situation varies to both the characters they just wants to be emancipated from their psychic struggle and the result is different. Like Rani the married life of Maya and Gautama is mutually opposed. Maya is full of life and wants to enjoy life to the utmost. To her, sexual satisfaction is a necessity and the total denial of it may give mental disturbance. She is interested in all the good things of life – nature, birds and animals, poetry and dance. Here regarding the chances Rani has no chance of her choice. Maya loses herself in the enjoyment of beautiful sights and sounds. The cries of birds evoke a sympathetic chord in her. She is presented in the novel as a woman who longs for pleasures of life. Gautama is a friend of Maya's father, prosperous middle-aged lawyer, very much older than Maya and married her (socio conditions accepts male much older to female). He always accused his wife as Rani was accused by Appanna. Like Rani, Maya also longs for love and affection, her husband Gautama is incapable of understanding her genuine feelings and emotions. In this position both

Rani and Maya share the same situation of marital incompatibility. Much to the sufferings of Maya the Albino astrologer had once told her that either she or her husband would die within four years of her marriage. The anxiety caused by this prophecy had diminished her happiness and led to the cause of her marital breakdown. She is obsessed by this prophecy of disaster that prevents her from leading a normal life

After marriage Maya has to leave her father. That was probably the time when Maya first began to reveal signs of her neurosis, and her father's awareness of it made him even more attached to her. This pampering spoils Maya and makes her crave for attention all the time. After marriage she expects her husband to play as father with her. Maya does not grow up mentally which results in suffering. Gautama expects Maya to behave like a mature person. Such conditions turn Maya's sense of insecurity further leading to mental imbalance and acute psychic tension.

In social institution like marriage, flaws of the bride are not made known as the father's fear of the loss of marital status to their daughters. This sort of apprehension by the bride's parents is leading to the breakdown of the marriages. One such instance is Maya's father who wished to keep this a secret not only from Gautama but from others as well, because such a revelation might have reduced his



daughter's chances of marriage for who would willingly marry a psychic case. She therefore, looks upon him as an antagonist and her psychic problem becomes an existential one. The trouble with Maya is that she fails to realize that each one is a different individual – who necessarily thinks, act and behaves in a different manner from others.

All through the novel she longs for the companionship like that of Radha and Krishna. It is a communication that she seeks – the true marriage in which body, mind and soul unite – the sort which the peacock seeks when it shrieks out its inside in its shrill intense mating calls. The cries of peacocks in the novel represent her cries of love, which simultaneously invite their death. Like her, they are creatures of exotic wild and will not rest till they have danced the dance of death. She describes how they danced and produced a remarkable impact on her mind:

In the shadows I saw peacocks dancing,..... Death. I heard their thirst and they gazed at the rain clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates. With them, I trembled and panted and paced the burning rocks. Agony, agony, the moral agony of their cry lover and for death." (96)

Maya is often found disturbed mentally more than Rani: "Am I gone insane? Father; Brother; Husband. Who is my saviour? I am in

need of one. I am dying. (98). She relaxes her tension by pondering unconsciously on how "Peacock breaks their bodies" in order to receive their own pain. Here comes the sense of violence, the feeling of killing or get killed which engulfs Maya. The violent desire of killing her husband awakening from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impressiveness and indifferences weaves the story *Cry, the Peacock*. The very concept that woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation, is aptly illustrated in this novel.

This indifferent behavior of the husband's family also increases her sense of loneliness which gradually develops into an actual sense of alienation. The solitude and silence of the house prey upon Maya. Also, the death of her pet dog starts a chain of reminiscence and reverie. She exhibits her reverence for death of her dog Toto, though it is only her dog that died. To him the death of Toto is a natural happening, but to her, it is some greater calamity. Maya's loneliness is, due to her too much of attachment.

The novel portrays the emotional status of Maya who is the victim of city life. She feels estranged from her husband's world and feels rejected and utterly lonely in the house. Though Gautama and Maya are married, the compatibility between them is a sheer absence. Similar to that of Appanna and Rani who hardly communicate and it is Appanna who avoids communicating with her. In Maya's life, she feels



the absence of her husband in the house for long hours. Whenever he comes, he gets busy with his clients or discusses politics and philosophy which do not interest her. In a state of utter loneliness she remarks, "Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment – these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain." (88) Maya in her view is driven to emotional instability, insanity and even murder under the pressures of marital discord disharmony. It is clear from the following statement regarding the marriage: 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)

She realizes that she wants Gautama's physical presence, his love and a normal life. She is capable of empathy which enables her to experience what the peacock and peahen are experiencing but this makes her feel all the more intensely that though there is an emotional arousal, there is no physical fulfillment which is the cause of her agony. Maya pushes Gautama off the parapet of their house. Thus, she murders her husband in a fit of insane fury and commits suicide.

"*Cry, the Peacock*" is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of an alienated person. Anita Desai looks into the reasons for marital discord in a domestic claustrophobic and illustrates how such discord

affects the family. The matrimonial bonds that bind the two were very fragile and tenuous. Lack of communion was the chief cause of intricacies in the life of Maya and Gautama. Maya suffered due to alienation and the wide gap between Maya's father and Gautama.

These two female protagonists (Maya and Rani) are generally caught in a web of painful circumstances, their struggle and the outcome of which is usually the basis of the novel. The struggle, one can readily see is not without purpose and the aim is to achieve the sort of harmony. The major concerns of the writers are loveliness, depression and solitude. Karnad also wants to point out a social reality with this incident--who is to ask Appanna to prove his innocence? Is there no moral code of conduct for males? Why is it that a woman has to face all these problems? All these questions remain unanswered or rather there is no answer to these queries. Society and family structure echoes and establishes more responsibilities for woman rather than to a man. Here through the characters of Maya, Rani & Jaya we can decipher that woman as a wife is a mere object or a purpose for house hold chores and voicing for her rights is a taboo and those if permits raises their voice will be called and addressed with names.

Jaya in '*That Long Silence*' fails to communicate and assert one's own self. This silence refers to the reticence of Jaya but in the



later part of the novel there is a belated rebellion of Jaya after seventeen years of her married life. During her solitude, Jaya undertakes a sojourn towards her own self. She seeks her individual identity, which seems to be lost somewhere during such a long years of marriage. This search for identity is similar to that of Maya and Rani. Though Jaya has a happy home with her well earning husband and two children Rati and Rahul and material comforts, she feels fed up with the monotony and fixed pattern of her life. In her attempt to rediscover her 'true self', she finds herself as an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. It is there in the small Dadar flat that Jaya starts discovering herself. She reflects upon her life and finds out that the life she had been living so far did not belong to her but to someone else:

I'm wrong, I thought; it isn't frightening meeting the ghost of your past self; it's awkward, like having a stranger thrusting herself on you, claiming a relationship you're unwilling to allow. And just as I got rid of that house-proud woman who had been me, it came to me that the woman had had a name as well. Suhasini. (TLS 14)

Jaya, a name given to her by her father since her birth, was changed to Suhashini after her marriage. Though she remains silent, she does not use the name Suhasini, she remains Jaya, the name given to her by her father,

meaning victory. *That Long Silence* delicately presents this facet of feminine life and intensely enlightens how the existence of a woman is confined within domesticity and how all forms of coercion perpetuated on her are convincingly rationalized generating a closed-minds syndrome. Jaya's narrative, the silent wait of Mohan's mother takes on diabolic features, "the woman crouching in front of the dying fire, sitting blank and motionless, the huddled bundles of sleeping children on the floor, the utter silence, and the loud knock at the door ..." (TLS 35)

There are times when Mohan gets angry at not having fresh chutney to eat. He picks up the heavy brass plate, throws it at the wall and moves out of the house. Silently, she picks the plate, cleans the wall and the floor-soiled food and sends her son next door to borrow some chilies.

Uncomplainingly she prepares fresh chutney, lights the fire, cooks the meal once more and starts to wait. When her children, who had woken up by the clanging sound of the plate, finally drift off to sleep again, "she was still sitting there in front of the fire, silent, motionless" (TLS 36) and "This long silence of Jaya is an expression of the silence of the modern housewife. In Indian patriarchal society, there is no self – identity for a woman. What is the matter of concern is not only the cruelty of a husband, but also the insensitivity of a son,



which displays the continued discrimination against women of all ages?

The sustained adulation of self-effacing norms creates a milieu which pressurizes a woman to accept or at least not to resist them, be it Rani, Maya or Jaya. For Jaya, her childhood experience had conditioned her to find social and psychological justification in her marriage. She wants to fashion herself according to the dreams of her husband, limiting the life pattern of women in orthodox families, as that way "lay, well, if not happiness, at least the consciousness of doing right, freedom from guilt." (TLS 84). He even accepts her new name after marriage and wants to remain a typical traditional Indian mother ready to sacrifice her individual choice and preference for the sake of a happy family. But her innate sensitivity revolts against these attempts to cram herself into the ideological mold of a conventional wife. Jaya's frustrations and fears surface and culminate in her having a physical breakdown, which triggers off the difficult process of an unrelenting self-analysis. What Jaya finds when she searches through herself is "the woman who had once lived here. Mohan's wife, Rahul's and Rati's Mother. Not myself." (TLS 69)

When Jaya is on the road of her success and about to be recognized as a creative writer of merit, her husband Mohan expresses his uneasiness about her story writing. She thinks, "looking at his stricken face, I had been

convinced I had done him wrong, and I had stopped writing after that" (TLS 144). Here Shashi Deshpande figures out subservience of woman in Indian society. It accentuates male domination constantly relegating woman to a secondary position in Indian society of patriarchy. Thus she deceives the reality or truth and suppresses her inner conscience to avoid endangering her marriage. Actually here reveals the fear of every Indian woman of jeopardy her own marriage. In Indian society even a well-educated, progressive female feels the intense tugs of tradition and family expectations.

In this respect there is a subtle difference between Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai. As Anita Desai's primary concern is the exploration of the psyche of the woman in her search for the self and the consequent identity in the face of the multitude of the problems and situations that she faces in her day-to-day life with regard to her relationship with in the family and the society around her, Deshpande concentrates mainly on portraying the man-woman highlighting the marital bond.

The tragic predicament of these woman is the outcome of male domination in a patriarchal culture. Their silent suffering is socio-domestic and marital incompatibility. In their quest for identity, the protagonist moves from despair to hope, from self-negation to self-assertion but in their own realm. Their struggle throughout is to



attain wholeness, completeness and an authentic selfhood.

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