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Quest for Identity and Feminine Sensibility in Anita Desai's Voices in the City and Manju Kapur's A Married Woman

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ABSTRACT:

The struggle for identity and autonomy has remained a significant theme in postcolonial Indian English fiction, especially in the works of women writers who foreground feminine sensibility and the challenges of patriarchy. Anita Desai and Manju Kapur, through their novels *Voices in the City* and *A Married Woman* respectively, project the conflict of women negotiating between tradition and modernity. Their protagonists—Monisha and Astha—embody the suppressed voices of women who aspire for individuality, self-expression and liberation from patriarchal norms. This paper analyses the portrayal of women's psychological trauma, their revolt against social conditioning and their search for identity. Both Desai and Kapur deconstruct the patriarchal myth of a woman's destiny being confined to marriage and domesticity and instead project women as agents of resistance who, despite failures, articulate a feminist consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Identity, Patriarchy, Feminine Sensibility, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Women's Autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's lives at the end of the previous century started changing dramatically on various fronts, more visibly so for daughters of middle and upper classes. Female education and secondary school system grew rapidly. Going to college was a badge of class privilege and for some women it was also a badge of aspiration signifying goals beyond the ordinary horizons of most women. Acquisition of higher education signified that a woman was indulged in worldly affairs rather than household chores. Women secured their formidable place in the previously male possessed domains of business and professions. These 'new women' represented to self and to society a kind of vanguard of social usefulness and personal autonomy an independent womanhood. You are now quite consciously aware of the fact that you are required to deplete your own resources, even if in most sectors you have no illusions about the existing lower standing of your sex.

In this regard, Anita Desai and Manju kapur's 'new wife' are quite similar to her masculine counterparts who, for the sake of his wife and family, may tolerate, remain indifferent, rebel, but never change their core identity. Basically, the woman protagonists of Desai's fiction aim at spiritual fulfilment which may be analysed through various metaphors such as that of barrenness and violence etc. Also, her heroines enter the domain of speculative philosophy thereby exploding the myth that it is only the preserve of the male. An insight into the consciousness of Desai's and



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Kapur's women characters reveals that they seem to be toying with the idea as to whether it is possible to reconstruct the social order based on the psyche of woman. In this regard, her novels are in themselves a metaphor of deconstruction, for in deconstruction reconstruction is inherent.

Manju Kapur has joined the increasing list of contemporary Indian authors who have played an important role in the development of Indian literature. Kapur is a post-colonial writer that instinctively detects and addresses the women's issues in a patriarchal culture. Her romances portray women's lengthy effort to create an identity. She wanted to build a place for women in household interactions. Kapur points out, "The connection between mother and daughter is merely one of the numerous demonstrations of the role of Indian women. She is a wife, a mother, a lady, in fact, a woman's life has many things." The ladies of the 1940s were vividly portrayed by Manju Kapur and events are based on the Indian Independence. Emancipation of women may well have a high point, but the struggle for autonomy and freedom was a conflict in its early days in the pre-independence period. So the lady trying to succeed in her struggle has to be considered, since she has tried, albeit she has failed. It not only appreciates knowledge and the better things of life, but also the darker sides of existence. The countless changes in life turn her into a mature lady. They smash and defy the patriarchal constraints and expectations to affirm their individuality and attain their self-fulfillment and auto satisfaction in their lives.

2. FEMININE SENSIBILITY

The term Feminism was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas, the younger, in 1872 in a pamphlet "L'Homme femme" to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. Feminism is sometimes dubbed an anti-masculinity women's movement to defend their individual rights, after Aphra Behn, a feminist and political activist from the 17th century. While defining the nature of feminism a noted author Dr. S.P. Swain in *Roots and Shadow-A Feminist Study* has rightly observed:

Feminism recognizes the inadequacy of male-created ideologies and struggles for the spiritual, economic, social and racial equality of women sexually colonized and biologically subjugated. An expression of the mute and stifled female voice denied an equal freedom of self-expression, feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalization of women.¹

2.1 A Married Woman

The next novel taken for study is *A Married Woman*. In its connection to the idea of marriage, feminism in India is understandable. Marriage is an Indian tradition that combines a woman and a husband to live as a wife. Marriage is a piece of peace, flourishing across India from the start of civilisation and culture. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir writes about marriage in *The Second Sex*: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered by society" (445). Western critics regard marriage as a bondage and according to them, there is no role of emotional



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attachment or psychological bindings. In this regard, Simon De Beauvoir remarks in *The Second Sex*:

There is an unanimous agreement that getting a husband or in some cases a 'protector' -is for her(woman) the most important of undertakings. She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold; she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master.

In India, the institution of marriage has provided for the society's needs for love, security and children. It has been shown that for human civilization marriage is absolutely vital, since its legality and religiosity infuse moral ideals into society.

2.2 Voices in the City

First published in 1965 the novel is the second novel of Anita Desai. This novel presents the plight and trauma of two women doomed and circumscribed in the claustrophobic space of Calcutta, which is described as a "City of death". The story is based exclusively on the life middle class intellectuals, caught in the vortex of changing social values.

Monisha, Amla Nirode, Jiban, Anita, Arun, David, Auntlila, Jit Dharma and Prof, Bose, are the main characters woven to exhibit the compelling urge for a way of living which would respond to the innermost yearnings of women for freedom and self-dignity. Both the sisters Monisha and Amla seek solace, love and dignity in a rigid, codified society and both are disillusioned in the end. As a result, Monisha commits suicide as she finally accepts the fact that the parameters of the choice for a woman are almost always predetermined while Amla realises the stark truth that the world outside and the transient love of Dharma is like a mirage and no escape into permanent happiness.

3. REVOLT AGAINST PATRIARCHY AND SOCIAL NORMS

Patriarchy is a social structure that plays a prominent role as male principal authority. It refers to the system in which women, children and property are authorised by males. Patriarchy depends on women's subjugation as a system of masculine control and privilege. Historically, it was expressed in many civilizations' social, juridical, political and economic structures. Patriarchy has also strongly influenced the civilisation of moderns, despite the fact that over the last century many nations have progressed toward a more equitable social system¹⁷. The name 'Patriarchy' originally referred to autocratic authority by the male head of a family, literally meaning the 'rule of fathers,'¹⁸. In mediaeval times, however, this applies more widely to the social institutions in which adult males have authority in particular.

3.1 A Married Woman

Autonomy, is the most essential aspect a woman cherishes. Self-realization leads to the quest for self-fulfillment. The awakening of feminist consciousness in a woman who leads her life as an obedient daughter, dutiful mother and a virtuous wife changes her discourse to attain her



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personhood. Kapur's protagonists have chosen their own ways to attain their personal autonomy. Their desire for individual freedom and liberation from the pangs of orthodoxy forces them to step into the forbidden territory. Their suffocation in the marital home and their frustrations pushes them to choose the road not taken in order to satiate their suppressed desires as in involving in illicit affairs, lesbianism and infidelity. They shed off their sexual frigidity and go about fulfilling their self in spite of their obligations as mother, wife and daughter. They redefine their individuality by embracing the pleasure principle and exercising their body as a site for sexual liberation. Their crusading stance on their newfound individuality and their question for identity tosses them in the chaotic rhetorics of Indian patriarchal society. Their destined migration to marital life gives the sense of incompleteness which embarks their journey towards evolving as New women in asserting their identity.

3.2 Voices in the City

As a woman's liberation movement feminist ideology is committed to destabilize the institutionalized structure of the patriarchal paradigm and unfetter women from the shackles of sexist images and from subjugation and silencing by the male dominated society. Concurrently Feminism also aims at the all-round emancipation of women. Underscoring on the "all-round liberation" In her book *Patriarchy Creation* Gerda Lerner said that, "It (feminist) is not necessarily a movement, since the movement may be a degree of awareness, an attitude and a base for organised action". Almost in the same vein, Sushila Singh in her piece of writing "Recent Trend in Feminist Thought: A Tour de Horizon" observes that "As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep - seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of 'raising of the consciousness' of an entire culture". This consciousness of being subjugated and marginalized by the patriarchal social order and of challenging the false identity which render women to a state of invisibility is the feminist consciousness.

4. STRUGGLE OF IDENTITY

Identity allows a person feel secure and complete whether it is social identification as a person from his co- beings or cultural identity by a society including one in once culture or place or even acknowledgement from his own family which allows a person feel unique or particular. Without identity one may feel insecure and lost. Therefore, a person is constantly looking for recognition at first of his family, then of society and struggling to make his entire life improper and indefinite ways and realises, at least, that the real success is not an external identity, but rather a fulfilment of self-confidence and happiness.

Man in his life efforts for many things like to earn his livelihood or to possess material objects but along with that he struggles for one more purpose that is for social identity; He does not like to live unnoticed in the society. He strives for identification as a person from his co beings to feel complete. In the contemporary world man, obsessed with material possessions, remains



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hollow internally and the desire of people around him for external identity and people also recognise him with external pseudo qualities, fame and prosperity but not with inner abilities which are important for the human being to be called a human being. Today, every human being has worldly successes and, instead of aiming for significant acts, he involves himself in wrong priorities. He falls at every turn forcing him into trauma and depression, but realises the truth at some point in his life, that life is not only to attain exterior financial successes, but also to acquire inner happiness in a happy existence.

In Indian fiction also the female characters often go through hardships and anguish due to the fact that they are women. In other words, growing up with the acceptance of a secondary place in relation to the male is conducive for satisfactory adjustment to the social set up. Envy of the male position by females is tolerated as long as it does not actually disturb the status quo. The identity of the adolescent girl includes her awareness of this reality.

Rural Indian girls do not think of their personal identity. They experience puberty and the related physical and physiological changes without necessarily being burdened with the issue of identity achievement. This is because their identity is wholly defined by their relationship to others, specially to the members of their family. Irrespective of a girl's individual needs and potential she is expected to inculcate culturally designated virtues of womanhood. Submission and docility in conduct as well as skill and grace in performing household tasks are cherished values. Individualism is not valued or tolerated.

4.1 A Married Woman

In A Married Woman, Kapur deals with the longing for individuality of Astha, the heroine. Astha's deep wish for liberty carries her far away from her family obligations. She wants to write poetry, make sketches and participate in Ayodhya Movement. In this way, the novel is the story of a married woman, who wants to become an artist and her desires for her carrier and then her extra marital relations and the challenges of middle-class existence.

The novel revolves around Astha, the protagonist of the novel and other female characters. A keen study of the each of the female characters allows a reader to classify them in different headings as "feminist woman", "the domestic or patriarchal women" and "rebellious women". "Feminist woman" is a woman who raises her voice against the suppression of women and demands for the equality with men, but with gradual change in society's perception of women. "The domestic or patriarchal women" are who are found willing to live in the conditions made forthem within patriarchal society. "Rebellious women" are who are desperate for the subversion and rebel against society and the victims who do not want to live in the patriarchal society and hate the customs and norms made especially for women but are helpless to raise their voice. First, we start with Astha. The very stating lines say:



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As a lady would have done, Astha was brought up correctly with a lot of terror. One misstep alone may leave her defenceless and exposed. She was not specific in the many ways she might be damaged, but Astha was absorbing it via her skin and was pulled to safety and safety.

4.2 Voices in the City

The roles of men and women were clearly defined in the ancient times. Subjects such as social, political and economic were the domain of men and women learnt early in life not to intrude, “there is a tradition, perhaps not only in India, that women should not be worried, that the best way to ensure this is to keep them as far as possible in ignorance.” Women were confined to “unproductive labour” i.e. doing household chores and rearing up children. It was only in the twentieth century, when several women writers started dealing with the cause of women. By bringing to fore the pathetic condition of their women, these writers, in fact, try to give liberty to women. The cosmic nothingness, continuous solitude and unfathomable despair of Anita Desai are shown by a pin into the mystical crusts of the psyche of her heroines. Desai's characters for women are not ideally modest and dull, but naturally combative and patriarchal. They are confining women to the four walls of the home and their main job is to their family. They silently rebel and take recourse to nature a world of their own, a world where they can affirm their independence, femininity and womanliness unobstructed by familial bonds.

The female protagonists of Desai are quite docile and tolerant but they loathe to compromise with their identity. Being unable to strike a balance between the external world and their inner self, they suffer from intense isolation. Many of her novels depict the mental agony of her middle-class women. Being a woman, Anita Desai succeeds in giving a literary expression to her femininity as well as her personal experiences. This transformation is reflected in her fervent search for identity, which leads to self-exploration. The impassioned pursuit emboldens a woman and refrains her from the restraining stereotypes of the patriarchal society.

In her second novel, *Voices in the City* (1965) also, Mrs. Desai offers a similar kind of confessional discourse, this time on the part of its heroine, Monisha. The novel is divided into four parts and like the previous one, except Part-11, all other sections are in third-person narration. In Part-11, Nevertheless, Monisha uses the topic position to develop her subordinated knowledge of patriarchal tyranny. In the guise of a personal journal, she gives her authority to portray herself as a resilient woman via the development of a confessional discussion. It is, in fact, in her personal diary that she is privileged to enjoy power and autonomy, which she has been denied in her in-laws' house.

5. CONCLUSION:

The comparative study of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* reveals that both novelists have explored women's identity crisis and their resistance to patriarchal domination. Monisha's silent suffering, ending in self-destruction, highlights the destructive



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consequences of societal rigidity, while Amla reflects the futility of transient love in her quest for fulfillment. On the other hand, Kapur's Astha rebels against orthodox conventions, seeks emotional and artistic liberation and redefines her individuality through unconventional relationships. Both Desai and Kapur emphasize that marriage, often glorified as a woman's ultimate destiny, can also become a site of oppression and disillusionment. Their women characters oscillate between conformity and rebellion, yet gradually develop a feminist consciousness that destabilizes patriarchal authority. While Desai focuses more on the inner psychological landscape of her protagonists, Kapur situates her heroine within the socio-political fabric of postcolonial India, highlighting her struggle for autonomy.

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