

The Female Voice and Modes of Emancipation in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

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Abstract:

Society at large determines specific roles to girls and boys that leads to gender differentiation. On the basis of this differentiation society set certain behavioural norms for girls and boys, men and women. A society determines appropriate gender roles on the basis of its beliefs and customs related to the differences between the sexes. The gender difference theorists hold the view that the differences between men and women should not be a cause of discrimination. In order to acknowledge women's work, their distinctive contributions at home as well as in the workplace must be appreciated. Though Anita Desai herself ignores her link with the western feminist trend of writing, her novels are studied from feminist point of view as they deal with the problems faced by women in different fields and the possible modes of women empowerment through education and economic independence. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the female voice and modes of emancipation in *Clear Light of Day*, one of the major novels of Anita Desai. The methodology applied in the paper is analytical method. For the present study, both primary and secondary sources have been used along with various library resources and internet materials.

Keywords: Gender, Emancipation, Discrimination, Feminist, Education

Introduction:

Society at large determines specific roles to girls and boys that leads to gender differentiation. On the basis of this differentiation society set certain behavioural norms for girls and boys, men and women. Gender influences the perceptions of human beings and plays an important role in distribution of power and resources in society. The interactions between individuals and environment lead to gender roles and individuals receive hints about appropriate behavior suitable for both men and women. A society determines appropriate gender roles on the basis of its beliefs and customs related to the differences between the sexes. The gender difference theorists hold the view that the differences between men and women should not be a cause of discrimination. In order to acknowledge women's work, their distinctive contributions at home as well as in the workplace must be appreciated. Though Anita Desai herself ignores her link with the western feminist trend of writing, her novels are studied from feminist point of view as they deal with the problems faced by women in different fields and the possible modes of women empowerment through education and economic independence. The traditional patriarchal set-up at domestic as well as social level crushes the very selfhood of woman. The emancipation of women is not possible until they are aware of their own potentialities. Proper education and economic independence can pave the way for a new horizon where woman can lead a meaningful life. The female protagonist in *Clear Light of Day* empowers herself through education and economic independence, she is aware of her individual selfhood and rebels against the traditional patriarchal social system.

Objective and Methodology:

The present paper is an attempt to discuss the female voice and modes of emancipation in *Clear Light of Day*, one of the major novels of Anita Desai. The methodology applied in the paper is analytical method. For the present study, both primary and secondary sources have been used along with various library resources and internet materials.

Discussion:

The women characters of Anita Desai's novels dare to go against the current flow of life and question the so-called conventions of society that entrap them. They represent the voice of thousands of women who lose their voice in the shackles of femininity. Simone de Beauvoir puts forward her arguments in the book, *The Second Sex*:

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Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being...she is simply what man decrees ... she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her: she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute-she is the other. (Beauvoir 18)

Though women had been treated as second class citizen through history and across culture, no physical or psychological reason can explain woman's inferiority to man. The impact of existential philosophy is perceptible on the thoughts of Beauvoir. According to her, every individual is responsible for his/her self-development. Beauvoir considers marriage to be an oppressive force that causes sexual inequality and woman's confinement to domesticity. With the philosophical concepts of 'transcendence' and 'immanence', she argues that the fulfillment of human potential must be examined in terms of liberty. The female emancipation is possible through her release from her bodily identification. Woman must try to rise above her base desires and pursue her full intellectual and emotional potential. Beauvoir envisions the emancipation of woman with the help of technology and forms the image of 'modern woman'. She imagines that this modern woman would be progressive in her thoughts and actions and instead of accepting inferiority as predestined, she would seek an equal position with her male counterpart. In order to empower herself in the true sense, woman must liberate herself from the orthodox values and prejudices prevalent in society. The women writers have utilized Beauvoir's concept of 'woman emancipation' to represent woman's search for identity and her growing awareness regarding her position in family and society. According to American literary critic, Elaine Showalter,

The first task of a gynocentric criticism must be to plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity and to describe the forces that intersect an individual woman writer's cultural field. (Showalter 325)

With the expansion of modern education, woman has learnt to critically analyze her inner self and she voices her dissent to be stifled under oppressive restrictions. Regarding the emancipation of woman, Promila Kapur gives her opinion,

Woman's education, her rights of citizenship and other legal rights and above all her gainful employment and economic independence have tremendously influenced her outlook on conjugal relationship and attitude towards marriage. (Kapur 194)

Women now try to assert their identity by challenging the injustices meted out to them by their male partners as well as the family. Education plays an important role in fulfilling woman's dream of emancipation. Bimla in *Clear Light of Day*, emancipates herself through education and economic independence.

The term 'emancipation' is closely associated with the liberal rights tradition in feminism famously articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. (Andermahr et al. 75)

The educational and legal basis of emancipation formulated by Wollstonecraft characterized 18th and 19th century first-wave feminism. The second wave feminism highlighted the limitations of the legislative approaches to emancipation of women. Socialist feminist referred to the debates over capitalist patriarchy as underpinning women's oppression and urged fundamental changes in socio-economic organization. The traditional norms of society has set up the social division according to which usually the male member of the family takes up the household responsibility. But in Bimla's case, her brother, Raja runs away from responsibilities leaving his mentally retarded brother, Baba in her custody. It is a kind of challenge to Bimla, but she stoically accepts the challenge. She is well-equipped with high education and knows her potentialities better. So, she is able to cope with any kind of obstacle that comes on her way. The seed of independence is sown in her psyche in her very childhood. Her self-determination paves the way for making a room of her own in a patriarchal society. Unlike her sister, Tara and the two Misra girls in her neighbourhood, she does not allow to determine the course of her life by the conventional norms of society. She is not worried for a single moment about her future

prospects because she is confident of her potentialities. In a traditional society in which a woman is positioned as the economic dependent of her father or husband, the ideology of dependency has shaped the relationship between family and economy. In the 1970s feminist critique concentrated on how economic dependence, enshrined in the family household system limited women's autonomy and space for emancipation. From her very childhood, Bimla carries out her responsibilities by fulfilling the needs of the family. As the parents are preoccupied with the world of club and parties, they do not have time to look after the children. The sense of independence grows in her mind and she chooses not to be dependent on others in future too. She is not dependent on a male partner, instead it is she who takes up the responsibility of her mentally retarded brother, Baba. Bimla accepts education as an instrument of independence. After the death of her parents, she plays the role of guardian to her siblings. In Pramod K. Nayar's words,

It is the 'modern' Bimla who becomes the moral and physical guardian of the Das home-space. (Nayar 125)

She criticizes the two Misra girls of their neighbourhood for getting married without proper education:

"But they're not educated yet," Bimla said sharply. "They haven't any degrees. They should go to college," she insisted "because they might find marriage isn't enough to last them the whole of their lives".... "I won't marry.... I shall work-I shall do things", She went on, "I shall earn my living.. and be independent." (Desai 140)

She successfully carries out her independent attitude throughout her life. She considered Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc as her idols who left behind memorable traces for all with their exceptional courage and indomitable will-power. By seeking an equal position with her brother, Raja she wants to demolish the discrepancy between male and female values. She remembers, as a child Raja's ambition was to become a hero and she also proudly asserted her position by saying that she would become a heroine.

The gender role identities of the children are again reinforced through the books they read. The gender difference is highlighted with the public/private spaces represented by the boys and the girls as they grow up. Bimla's brother Raja loved to spend his time outside the domestic periphery, on the other hand, Bimla and her sister, Tara were confined to the four walls of the house and went to a nearby school. She realizes that his masculinity forces him to withdraw from the cocoon-like existence of his sisters and aunt. Her brother's biased attitude agitates Bimla. The dominant gender ideology in society leads to assume that physiological differences between male and female manifest differences in their character, behavior and ability. Raja used to read adventure stories like *Robin Hood and Beau Geste* and imagined himself with a heroic role in a splendid battle. On the other hand, the girls used to read romances like *Gone With the Wind* and *Lorna Doone*. Bimla prefers history books and she hopes that through proper education she will be able to assert her identity. Bimla's awareness of male-female discrepancy is further noticed when she tries to behave like a man wearing Raja's trousers. She feels that the contrast in man's and woman's clothing shows the difference between an exterior world and an interior one.

Bimla has the desire to establish an identity outside the domestic periphery, so she is involved in social work from her school days. Her voice is heard when she expresses her anger regarding her father's indifference towards her education. Bimla's rebellion against male authority is further seen when she expresses her anger regarding her father's indifference towards her education. Her education does not teach her to cope with the outside world of business. But her longing for independence is so strong that she could make her own way. She feels the importance of education in the lives of her nieces and her students in order to empower themselves and to stand firmly against any type of oppression. She is well aware of the shortcomings of her own education and she makes up her mind to influence her students with her liberal ideologies:

"I'm always trying to teach them, train them to be different from what we were at their age-to be a new kind of woman from you or me-and if they knew how badly handicapped I still am." (Desai 155)

Bimla wants her teenage nieces to be independent. She feels that they should have proper education instead of getting engaged in an early marriage. She criticizes her brother-in-law who wants to introduce his daughters to other young people in New Delhi so that he can marry them off as soon as they can arrange it. She considers her mother to be a traditional woman who is submissive, reticent, decorative without any high ideals to set for her children. She does not have a voice of her own who calmly follows her husband like a dutiful wife.

Bimla's courage is further established with her decision to stay unmarried. The observations of the passive, dependent lives of her mother, her sister and her aunt lead her to take this decision voluntarily. She becomes a heroine like figure by challenging the traditional values of society and being a self-sufficient woman. Marriage is an essential part of social system and it is considered that only marriage can provide economic and social security to women. But Bimla chooses to remain single in order to keep her self intact. Her going against the current sends message to those women who become victim of domestic violence and silent sufferers of any type of oppression in society.

Conclusion:

Though social changes have come, the social taboos regarding woman's status and position are still prevalent. Nobody can bring a change if women themselves are not conscious of their own rights. So long a section of women in society have been floating in the conventional stream of life without thinking about their own choices and likings. Though they have an inner mind, they never dare to reveal it as social oppression in the form of parental as well as male authority suppress their voices. Their inner selves die and they lead a life of imposed 'selfhood'. But the change is hinted at by Anita Desai through some of her female characters like Bimla with their heroic spirit to go against the current. Within patriarchal cultures women are marginalized by a range of practices and discourses. Feminist theory focuses on the power relationships and inequalities between men and women. Desai shows that if women are economically independent, they will have the freedom to determine the course of their own lives. Women must utilize their capability for judging right and wrong. It requires courage on their part to point out the follies of prevalent social system and possible effort to reform it. Last but not the least, in order to be empowered in real sense, woman must liberate herself from her own mental chains. It is not that she has only to liberate herself from patriarchal system but also from her own psychological fears and enslavement.

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