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Anger and Angst in the Fiction of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande

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The focus of this study is the theme of anger and angst in the selected works of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai. The definition of angst has gone further than Kierkegaard's definition of Dread or Fear: Sartre's existential angst would be closer to the literary idea of the term Angst that is experienced by the protagonists in the fiction of these two authors. In the works studied an analysis of the lives of the female protagonists shows a deep resentment of patriarchal society, as well as role resentment in their personal lives. Gender roles are essential in patriarchal society. As will be seen, gender roles can create conflict, anger and helplessness in women, with its ensuing consequence: angst.

The term *angst* has been coined by the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Angst implies Dread, derived from the Danish *angest* and has much to do with the freedom of choice that lies before each person. Although Kierkegaard's work lies within the framework of Christian theology and is much concerned with original sin, he is considered the father of existentialism and greatly influenced later existentialists. Having free will and having to bear the responsibility of one's actions contributes to angst. The unfocussed fear is present throughout life: a dread of existence and the freedom of choice but moral responsibility: "Repentance is a recollection of guilt"¹ or "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom."²

Kierkegaard likened angst to the dizziness experienced by a person at the edge of a cliff. There is a conscious fear of falling and at the same time, a fascination with the possibility of falling off the edge of the cliff. An individual can be confronted with the choice of falling over the cliff or not. This fear of freedom of choice when confronted with personal freedom gives rise to angst. The paradox of choice that lies before an individual is that one has to take responsibility for one's actions, and it is often a moral responsibility, according to Kierkegaard.

Existentialists like Sartre, Heidegger or Nietzsche applied Kierkegaard's angst in a different manner. For these philosophers existence was meaningless, and the meaning to existence was applied by the individual himself. The existentialist concept of angst was thus a meaningless existence which subsequently leads to despair.

The sentiment of helplessness in the throes of female frustration and in the face of societal norms is twofold: it enables some individuals to work towards a personal sense of worth and self-identity, or it is totally destructive and they have to pay the price of their rage against destiny.

Traditional society in India is patriarchal with enormous societal pressure on the woman who is the crux of the household. Societal pressure wrecks immense damage. The hierarchy of women which constitutes a household has its own relationship and divides. The lack of freedom of choice is fundamental. Depending on the individual family and its own relationship to tradition, this lack of freedom of choice could extend to marriage, choice of the number and birth of children, social frequentation etc. The presence of an unmarried woman in a household is significant. It symbolizes more than martial choice or the lack of suitors. It often denotes the sacrificed child, a child who takes on the task of looking after aged parents

or ancestral property - Bim in *Clear Light of Day*³, Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*⁴ are clear examples of the sacrificed child who had to take on responsibilities and is subsequently tied to the household.

The inner turmoil of women who are housebound and often subject to repression ultimately leads to despair. Interestingly, the utterness of despair and the strength with which women have to cope with abuse, domination or situations without any issue is often looked upon as strength. Mohan, in *That Long Silence*⁵, relates several traumatic incidents from his childhood and the unknown obscure part of his father: his violence towards his sleeping son (aiming a kick at him while he slept on the mat) as well as his wife, as related in the incident when he threw his plate against the wall in the night because there was no fresh chutney

“He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender.”⁶

Jaya’s perception of her mother in law’s submission to her husband’s violent reaction to a minor detail is different from Mohan’s:

“God, he said, after he told me this, ‘she was tough. Women in those days were tough.’”⁷

Mohan’s remark denotes a total lack of understanding of the despair of his mother.

“I’m a woman and I can understand her better. He’s a man and he can’t.”⁸

He saw strength where there was silence and pain. He was admiring a woman who could not and did not fight back against the annihilating circumstances in which she found herself, trapped by successive births, a dominating husband and her body that had to bear pregnancy after pregnancy. He mistook her silence, the silence of a woman in a patriarchal society who is not supposed to fight against male domination in the household, as strength. He is as much a victim of cultural taboos as the his mother because his value system is askew.

The offspin of the societal attitude to women thus denotes a lack of choice but a certain permanent place for women in the household even in the case of widowhood or divorce. The Maasi in *Clear Light of Day* who is a widow and an alcoholic thus stays with the family and plays a role in family affairs. The Maasi in *Fasting, Feasting* who spends her life in pilgrimage is another relatively minor character but part of the household dynamics.

When the question of repression is touched upon does one mean the stifling of any choice or individual instinct or the very limited freedom of choice? In *Cry the Peacock*⁹, Maya, the indulged child, has been given adequate liberty and the boundary between her whims and liberty has not been defined for her by her father. She is capable of using oranges instead of shuttlecocks with the laughing consent of her father. Thus one cannot speak about repression or lack of freedom of choice when one describes her character. She has been utterly spoilt by her father. Her husband, Gautama cannot live up to the standards set by her indulgent father. At this stage, one can say that she is forced to quell her natural instincts of affection and communication as in her marriage; there is only a cold intellectual coldness. Her rage against this situation in which she feels totally trapped cannot be wholly responsible for her folly: her father’s leaving to go abroad is lived by her a kind of abandonment. She is unable to master her spaces, psychological or societal. She is immature and totally spoilt but the fault hardly lies with her. She was treated as a child, and not given the keys to a mature womanhood in her hand it is hardly surprising that her marital relationship would be doomed. Bim, on the other

hand, in spite of being trapped with household responsibilities, is able to cope with the anger and resentment and find a certain serenity in her situation upto the point she is able to even think of a reconciliation with her brother Raja, who left the house and the family to fend for themselves much to her anger and resentment.

The currents of repressed anger are evident and influence the character's inner turmoil. When Maya compares her life as a married woman to the life she led in her father's house, she feels the frustration within her grow. Similarly, when Sita, trapped by her fifth pregnancy, feels the anger and resentment within her grow, she blames the routine of her life as a housewife and the claustrophobia of city for her anger. The need to escape is paramount. She has to get away, to escape from her surroundings and she does so, a foolhardy decision in her condition.

The sensation of being trapped is depicted in the lives of several of the major or minor characters. Nanda Kaul, after a lifetime of keeping up a social facade, cannot bear it any longer, but it is her great granddaughter Raka who plays the role of the catalyst. Anamika, in *Fasting, Feasting*, the victim of domestic violence, unable to escape, immolates herself. Maya, trapped in a marriage with a husband who does not participate in her fantasy world, gives in to the demons of madness and her life ends in tragic violence.

The capacity of a woman to bear utmost suffering without any complaint is looked upon as a sign of strength and forbearance. It is part of the societal role imposed upon women, one of silence and submission.

The limitations of the martial space are clearly stated by Jaya in *That Long Silence*:

“A pair of bullocks yoked together...that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here...there was for that one infinitesimal moment a pause in my being, and I, detached from myself, saw this...a pair of bullocks yoked together.”¹⁰

Jaya, feels the submission powerfully, a “trodden worm”. Her life has been a facade. “The illusion of happiness – yes, I had to let it go”. When Mohan has to go away for a while because of his involvement in corrupt office practices, Jaya's life comes to a stop. It is at this crucial moment in their lives where Mohan is almost apologetic and Jaya finds the strength in her to come to terms with herself and a life that she has detested.

“I had learnt to control my anger, hold it onto a leash. Terrified of his disapproval, I had learnt other things too, though more slowly, less painfully. I had found out all the things that I could and couldn't do all the things that were womanly and unwomanly.”¹¹

The submission is not only conforming to societal roles, but the utter submission also implies the role playing woman to wear the mask of basic contentment, not to show anger or disapproval. The repression of emotion leads to a build-up of tension that culminates in the conclusions of the novels as one will see.

Phallogentricism has its own effects on the female psyche. The repression of anger and the subordinate position of some of the females in the household do not necessarily mean all the women in the household are devoid of power. The spatial position with regard to the father - daughter tandem is also quite particular; but it comes more in the realm of psychoanalytic theory. Ultimately it leads in the same direction: angst or anguish for the woman narrator or protagonist. This detail has been skilfully narrated in *Cry the Peacock* as well as *Where Shall We Go This Summer*¹². Both Maya and Sita are hypersensitive young women, imaginative and unrealistic. Whereas Maya has been overindulged as a young child, her every wish and desire

satiated, she is unable to communicate in her marital relationship with Gautam, her unemotional husband. Her imagination and her insanity are gradually drawn out. Unhappiness at not being constantly approved of and her loneliness drive her to the brink. In reality, the seeds of insanity must have been sown right from her childhood.

The spatial location of a woman has been much discussed: it is not only a real societal space, and metaphorical, but it is also geographical as postcolonial studies have shown. A home as a suffocating space could mean different issues depending on whether it is being addressed by a comfortable middle class woman or a subaltern one. There are women who would long to have the security of a home and a household. There is a total lack of coherence in Sita's impulsion to stop time so that the baby remains unborn. It is an almost immature reaction to long to go back to the scene of her childhood, to stop time and leave the baby unborn, an impossible wish. The inevitability of birth is not delved into in Sita's character and as to why she thought it was possible to stop the hands of time just by taking refuge in her island home.

"I won't have the baby,' she said at first faintly, then defiantly.

"You're mad,' he said, simply."¹³

'She was mad,' Moses, the fisherman, explained. Got angry, too, just like that, for nothing, So angry always, all the time. ..So angry always. Angry with me, angry with Miriam, angry because it rained, angry because there was no food - *always* angry. Mad people are like that."¹⁴

The acute alienation of Sita is thus explained by Moses, the fisherman concisely: it was the anger in Sita that made her mad. His simplicity sees the situation in a manner that is far removed from intellectual probing into existentialism.. Mad and angry is his view of Sita. Like her mythological counterpart, she also goes into exile, but she is not drawn into the Earth's, or rather the Sea's womb. She comes back to the city, having to compromise. Her flight into freedom was transitory. She had thought she could exercise choices even as to keeping her baby unborn.

'Had not her married years, her dulled years, been the false life, the life of pretence and performance...Which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which was false? All she knew that there were two periods in her life, each in direct opposition to the other... life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere."¹⁵

The social façade that Nanda Kaul had maintained over the years as she watched her children grow up, and submit to the social obligations of a Vice-Chancellor's wife also led to her to a stillness, a dignity that was not really her; it was rage that had been stifled for a lifetime, a loneliness that made her imitate death "like a lizard", a stillness that was like a death.

Saru, who fights through her mother's bitterness at her brother's death, undergoes severe psychological trauma as well in the sexual violence inflicted within her marriage. When Saru tries to clarify the feelings of guilt and anger within she concludes:

They came to her then, all those selves she had rejected so resolutely at first, and so passionately embraced later. The guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife...persons spiked with guilts. Yes, she was all of them; she could not deny that now. She had to accept these selves to become whole again. But if she was all of them, they were not all of her. She was all of these and so much more.¹⁶

In conclusion, in the fiction of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, the female protagonists seek, question, analyse their lives and families and with immense strength reach their destiny's final act. As women they have to fight against the constrictions and obstacle that are imposed on them by birth. They seek identity, freedom and quite simple, a certain kind of happiness. They seek to be themselves, women, not by birth but by choice. As Simone de Beauvoir stated in *The Second Sex*:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”¹⁷

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² ibid

³Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*, Delhi: Random House, 2007

⁴Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*, Delhi, Random House: 2008

⁵Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989

⁶Ibid, 36

⁷Ibid, 36

⁸Ibid, 37

⁹Deshpande., Shashi. *Cry the Peacock*. Delhi:OrientPaperbacks, 1980

¹⁰Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989

¹¹Ibid, 83

¹²Desai, Anita. *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Delhi, Orient Paperbacks

¹³ Ibid,50

¹⁴Ibid, 142

¹⁵Ibid, 140

¹⁶Deshpande. Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990, page 220

¹⁷Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier ,Vintage books, 2011