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## Feminine Consciousness in Andre Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*

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### **Abstract:**

'Feminine consciousness' as a term is referred as an organization of perceptions of women that included an awareness or self-consciousness of this organization. Women are portrayed by feminists as struggling for autonomy in life situations. Andre Brink is considered as one of the most prominent feminists in South African literary tradition. He skillfully presents his female characters' point of view to reveal their feminine consciousness. The present paper intends to focus on his concern of feminine consciousness, which he presents through his female protagonist's point of view in the novel *An Instant in the Wind*. He presents the assertion of consciousness of a female protagonist as invariably different from male characters. The heroine, Elisabeth goes through traumatic experiences, suffering and oppression. She demands equal rights, opportunities and freedom. Brink brings her out of her traumatic experiences by making her assert herself.

**Keywords: Andre Brink, feminism, apartheid, feminine consciousness, traumatic experience etc.**

Feminism is more than a philosophy or an ideology. It is a 'vocabulary of motives' maintained by strong group support. Becoming a feminist leads to a transformation of consciousness and an alteration in the perception and interpretation of everyday life. 'Feminine consciousness' as a term is referred as an organization of perceptions of women that included an awareness or self-consciousness of this organization. Psychologically speaking 'consciousness' is often defined as a sense of one's personal or collective identity, including the attitudes, beliefs, and sensitivities held by or considered characteristic of an individual or group. Therefore, 'female consciousness' usually refers to the way women relate to themselves and to what it means to be a female. Feminine consciousness emerged as a recognizable and distinct process. Simone de Beauvoir states: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine." (89) Feminists are more likely to use a feminist vocabulary of motives, introduce the general theme of sexism or specific feminist themes such as job

discrimination. Women are portrayed by feminists as struggling for autonomy in life situations but are not perceived as having control over their lives in traditional and ambiguous settings.

South African politics in history and literature has been cofounded by questions about race, gender and power. Much of the literary works in the country have attempted to give answers to those questions. Many writers have successfully attempted to answer these questions. Monica Bungaro points that, "Some male writers have nonetheless managed to focus on the female character's self- her life, her interior battles, her doubts and emotions, and, of course, her responses to the pressure of contemporary societal constraints and power- structures (whether of race, biology or class)." (256) Andre Brink is considered as one of these feminist writers, who have focused on the female character's self in their works. He has always been a literary rebel and innovator. In this connection, Willie Burger and Karina Szczurek states in an introduction to *Contrary: Critical Responses to the Novels of Andre Brink*:

Brink is a polarizing figure. On the one hand, he has been held as a rouge experimentalist, one of the most influential anti-apartheid activist writers, a vociferous opponent of censorship, a leading feminist, or a guiding light in the vast and varied literary and social landscape of the South Africa. On the other, he has garnered criticism as an opportunist, amisogynist and a racist. (11)

Brink skillfully presents his female characters' point of view to reveal their feminine consciousness. In his assessment of things, like any other contemporary female novelists, he judges things whole-heartedly and without any prejudiced bias. Feminine consciousness allows women to assert their own values, to explore their own consciousness, and to develop new forms of expression corresponding to their values and consciousness. Women in Andre Brink's novels present themselves as competent and powerful political activists. The present paper intends to focus on Brink's concern of feminine consciousness, which he presents through his female protagonist's point of view in the novel, *An Instant in the Wind*.

In the novel, Brink presents the assertion of consciousness of a female protagonist as invariably different from that of male characters. The novel's most outstanding feature is the extent to which he makes it a woman's novel. The ideas and actions originate with his heroine, Elisabeth. He gives the novel a feminine ambience by infusing it with female images. Elisabeth goes through traumatic experiences, suffering and oppression. She demands equal rights, opportunities and freedom. Brink brings her out of her traumatic experiences by making her assert herself. The novel is about a very passionate love story of a white woman and an escaped slave who were lost in the African hinterland. Throughout the novel, we can see an unexpected development of love between them. The story unfolds in a realistic manner to give us glimpses of development of feminine consciousness.

Elisabeth marries a Swedish naturalist, adventurer named Erik Larsson. She accompanies him on an expedition to the South African interior. Their guides, the Hottentots, desert them on their journey inland. They steal their possessions and finally, Erik also disappears leaving

Elisabeth bereft. Adam, a runaway slave, finds Elisabeth and saves her from a certain death. Their proximity leads to an intimate relationship. But, the path of safety ahead of them is unclear, long and equally dangerous. They are left with no option but to support one another. Both are equally revolted, suspicious and terrified of each other. As the story develops, they come together to struggle and survive. Gradually they learn to live alongside and then depend upon one another. In this regard, Isidore Diala observes:

“It [the novel] chronicles the human journey from the wilderness to civilization, with the startling revelation that while the wilderness fosters and nurtures human communion, civilization, in moral terms presented as a state of nature, blights love and impoverishes life.” (196)

From the very beginning of the novel, Brink suggests that Elisabeth is a character which highlights his vision of feminine consciousness. The first incident occurs when we come across her feministic views, when Adam finds her alone at a wagon and tries to help her. Instead of accepting his help, she tries to overpower him, to be a mistress of a slave. His refusal to become her slave generates feeling of inferiority in her mind and she rebels: “I don’t want you here, I can manage perfectly on my own.” (14) She considers his presence as “a threat to her independence, her silence; a threat to her. Yet if he hadn’t been there, like this, tonight, she would surely have died of fear.” (16) She suspects him that he would try to catch her off her guard. She warns him, “You’re waiting for a chance. But I warn you, I’m watching you. And if ever you dare... Even if I have to kill myself... You have no right. I’m pregnant. And you’re just a slave.” (21) Adam is so furious to listen. He simply asks her to mind her own business. So she snaps at him in rage: “You think a slave is nothing but a woman!” (20) and sits by thinking “a woman no more than a slave.” (20)

Elisabeth thinks that her husband may return to the camp and he might be in need of her help. So she doesn’t want to leave the camp and to proceed further to the Cape. But, Adam knows that it’s Elisabeth who needs help and not her husband. He wonders: “Who... is in whose hands? Who needs whom?” (29) Though, she pretends to be waiting for Erik all over there, actually she wants him away from her forever. She gets relief when she notices that Adam has arrived and Erik has not. She feels ashamed of admitting it to herself. But it’s true that she gets “unbearable relief that it isn’t Erik Alexis Larsson coming up that slope.” (32) She skips into past. She remembers her first meeting with Erik. She tells him that all the girls in the Cape are accomplished pianists; they also sing and dance. According to her they have to learn this only for time pass “What else should they do to pass the time?” (33) She thinks that people are landscapes to be explored as Erik explores real landscapes; he may also learn to explore people and win their minds. Brink presents the difference between female and male characters' point of views. In this connection, Pradnya Ghorpade observes: “Woman’s approach to life invariably differs from that of man. She differs from man in sensibility and sensitivity. That’s why woman’s point of view is often considered as the outcome of her feminine consciousness.” (132)

When Elisabeth announces that she wants to marry Erik, her parents strongly opposes her decision because of his profession. Denouncing their opposition, she declares that after marriage, she proposes to go with Erik in the African hinterland. So her mother orders her husband to use his authority to stop their daughter from taking rebellious decision. She asks: "What will our friends think of it? A woman in the interior!" (37) Elisabeth furiously asks her parents:

What's wrong with a woman in the interior? What's wrong with a woman anyway? Is it something to be ashamed of? You make it sound like a crime to be born a woman. If a man can go on an expedition, why shouldn't I? (37)

When Catharina, Elisabeth's mother, opposes her, it's her father, Marcus, who takes side of their daughter. He quietly reminds his wife of her own decision to marry him even after her parents' opposition. Finally, Elisabeth succeeds in persuading her parents for her marriage with Erik. She is mad enough for expedition into the interior that she marries a man whom she doesn't love. She tells her parents, "I've made up my mind. I want to get married and go with him. I'll go with him as far as he wants to go." (39) Brink suggests that it's not an easy task for a woman to dare to see a dream and wish to fulfill it. To follow her dream she has to sacrifice even most important things in her life. Elisabeth dares to dream of an expedition in an African interior, which is an extraordinary thing in the country like South Africa in 18<sup>th</sup> century. She struggles to follow her dream and finds the reality of human nature in African wilderness. She finds a true companion of her life, who can understand and respects her feelings. She discovers that it's Adam and not Erik, who is meant to be her husband. As Godfrey Meintjes comments:

It is only in the natural environment of an African interior, totally isolated from civilization of the Cape, that Elisabeth and Adam can manage to transcend white supremacist and male chauvinist norms and rules and escape from the 'disoriented social structures' which are referred to in one of the mottoes of the text. (46-47)

Elisabeth prepares her mind to go back to the Cape with Adam. She is pregnant and carrying Erik's child. She accepts his disappearance and tries to be practical. "He's gone. He isn't dead, he has simply disappeared... I'm free of him now. But there is still the child. For his sake I must get back to the Cape." (42) Adam respects her feelings. Though he wants to break into her, he doesn't do anything without her wish. He is aware of her pregnancy and doesn't want to harm her or her baby. At this point he thinks of his mother and her colour and her position as a slave woman; "Would anyone have spared my mother for the sake of the child in her womb?" (50) Besides Elisabeth rebels:

For a woman. Never to be able to do what you really want, because you're a woman; never to be allowed to become what you desire, because you're a woman... But this once I refuse to obey them, I shall break free. This once I'll trek into my own wilderness. (64-65)

In this regard Kossewopines,

Like Adam, who has escaped from imprisonment on Robben Island, she refuses to be imprisoned by her status as a slave / woman... and it is in the 'wilderness without end' where she is 'alone' that she can, with Adam, find her true self away from the pressures of society's imposed marginality. (54)

She can't imagine herself as a possession of Erik. She thinks that it's easier to be possessed because possessions needn't worry about eating or drinking, about tomorrow, or feelings like happiness, or love, or faith.

Even a slave is given all he requires, food and stripes at the appointed times. So why couldn't I yield myself? What is there in me which refuses to be possessed by another?... A skeleton is what one should be allowed to be, clean and bare, bones. Discovering it in the veld you can't even tell whether it was man or woman. It's pure bone-being; human thing. No wonder Eve was created from a rib. There's more bone to us, we are more indestructible. He is all bloody, dust into dust.(65)

Through the description of Elisabeth's emotions and of her conflicted feelings about herself and others, who are directly or indirectly related to her, Brink reveals the constant struggle of a woman who tries to live a happy marriage life with a black man in an apartheid society.

Elisabeth's mother always blames her for not being a boy. So she thinks: "to be a boy is everything. To be a girl like me is the worst that can happen to one." (163) She is told every moment what to do and what not to do, to be careful, to take care of her dress as well as her face, hair and overall to maintain herself as a pretty girl. "After all that was the final aim: to be attractive to a man. No matter what you want, your whole life is determined by someone else."(164)When Adam ironically makes an argument that women can manipulate men, she retorts angrily: "I could get anything provided I did not presume to think for myself. For that lay beyond a woman's scope...Can you understand what happens inside one when you grow up to discover you will never be allowed to be anything in your own right? Don't you think it is enough to drive one mad?" (164) She admits that she marries Erik to escape from the pretty prejudices of the Cape. She thinks that being a famous scientist and an explorer; he "would transcend the pretty prejudices of the Cape..." (164) But it was all futile. He was like an ordinary man of the Cape who expect too much from women. She tells Adam that she wanted to marry a man who would respect her womanhood.

If I had to accept a woman after all, if I really had to resign myself to the role I'd been brought up for, then, at least, I wanted to be a woman to I could respect. He had to be a man, a full human being. If I could be nothing but a woman, then he had to convince me that being a woman was important enough to live for. (177)

Brink is deeply involved in the presentation of growth in Elisabeth's feminine consciousness as she struggles to assert herself and to challenge male-oriented structures of power in South African society.

Elisabeth remembers the eve of her marriage. She plays chess with her father and tries to confess her feelings about marriage. But, there is something that prevents her from accepting the truth of gender disparities in the society. She loves her father very much and doesn't want to go far away from him after marriage. "Is it [marriage] really worth so much that one wants to sacrifice everything else in the world for it?" (271) She has many doubts regarding marriage. Her father wants her to be happy with her life, so he supports her at her every decision. Looking at her confused condition, he worries that whether she is happy with this marriage or not. But, Elisabeth herself is not aware of the reason of her own confusion. Her feministic views cause an upheaval in her mind on the eve of her marriage. When her father asks her to do something beautiful, something worthwhile, she regrets:

But is this the way to do it? To get married. To become one flesh. What will be left of myself? ... I can't allow anyone else to dictate to me. I'm not just a woman, I'm a person. I want to mean something. I don't want to die one day knowing everything has been in vain. (273)

Brink portrays Elisabeth's character struggling for autonomy in real life situations but she is not perceived as having control over her life in traditional settings.

In the later part of the novel, when Adam and Elisabeth are at final lap of their journey towards the Cape, they enter a farm of a white man. Elisabeth manages to get entry at the farmer's house for both of them by using her whiteness. The white farmer misconders Adam as her slave. He gives them food and shelter. But during night he tries to molest her. She cries with anger "If I'd been a man you would have shown me hospitality. You would have given me a place to sleep. Now, because I'm a woman..." (249) She calls Adam for help. When he comes to help her, the farmer orders him to get out. Elisabeth furiously tells him that he is her husband. The farmer seems to be speechless. He can't believe a black man as a husband to a white woman. He calls her a whore, "No descent woman would come here like this. A goddamned whore, that's what you are." (250) Here, Brink raises a question that when the farmer tries to molest a woman before his own wife, can he be considered as a descent man? Surely he must not be considered as a descent one. The man having no moral has no right to ask questions about others' character. But, in a male dominated patriarchal society woman's character is always judged by others, by both man and woman, ignoring their own characters.

Thus, the novel develops feminist concerns as a central code. As Meintjes observes, "Elisabeth's life of oppression, from a feminist perspective, demonstrates how the personal is inevitably political and the novel occupies a central position in South African feminist literature." (46) Elisabeth rebels against gender and racial apartheid by struggling to live her off rooted dreams and to find her true life partner who would have respected her womanhood. She transforms herself from an object of possession and desire into an agent of

her own destiny. She chooses Adam as her life partner and struggles to maintain this extraordinary relationship in the 18<sup>th</sup> century South African society, where utmost relations between a black woman and a white man are accepted but those between a black man and a white woman are considered as a severe attack on its socio-cultural system. The socio-cultural norms that pervade male-dominated society are far stronger than the love Adam and Elisabeth nurture for each other. Such purity of relations cannot be allowed to flourish in an apartheid state. Elisabeth's departure to the Cape and Adam's long-lasting awaiting for her expresses the social implications inherent in Brink's vision of the disapproval of male domination and of apartheid as well.

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